

Heinrich Ludwig among the “Deutsch-Römer”: A Sceptic’s Perspective on the Institutionaliza- tion of Art History

Martin Gaier
**Heinrich Ludwig und die „ästheti-
schen Ketzler“: Kunstpolitik, Kul-
turkritik und Wissenschaftsver-
ständnis bei den Deutsch-Römern.**

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Martin Gaier’s habilitation *Heinrich Ludwig und die „ästhetischen Ketzler“* is one of those impressive tomes that will likely be the one and only study of its subject written for some time: the late-nineteenth century art-writer, or “Kunstschriftsteller,” Heinrich Ludwig (1829–1897; *fig. 1*), remembered by art history – if at all – for his curious artistic experiments with petroleum, his writings on the history and practice of oil painting, as well as his edition of Leonardo’s writings on art. But Gaier reveals Ludwig to have been a central player in other episodes of the Italo-German art world after 1870, a vital if often misunderstood voice among the group of *Deutsch-Römer* artists and cultural critics who threw suspicious glances both at the period’s institutionalization of art history and the German Kaiserreich’s conceptions of national patrimony. A landscape painter as well as a writer (though this is not the focus of Gaier’s study, which gathers but does not much analyze Ludwig’s rather unaccomplished semi-Böcklinian art), Ludwig appears as a failed polymath of sorts whose oeuvre did not jell with the nascent discipline of *Kunstgeschichte*. By emphasizing Ludwig’s focus on artistic practice and the means of representation as significant elements in an artwork’s exegesis, as

opposed to the more stylistically, biographically and iconographically oriented early German art history, Gaier elevates Ludwig to the status of an inadvertent hero of twenty-first century scholarship and its manifold object-focused “material” and “technical” turns. As in so much current art history, “making” and “medium” here rival “idea” and “signification.”

AGAINST THE GRAIN

Heinrich Ludwig und die „ästhetischen Ketzler“ is a perfect example of a post-monographic monograph. Weaving two objectives into one text, Gaier’s study is both an intellectual biography of one neglected outlier and an intricate sketch of the long-forgotten cultural debates in which he took part, what Gaier calls Ludwig’s “Leitfigur”-status (12) for an account of the 1870s and 1880s imperial art world, including its wide reach within and from Berlin. Through close readings of Ludwig’s texts and correspondence, firmly embedded in the aesthetic discourses of their moment, Gaier makes us believe that the generalized disinterest in Ludwig during his lifetime, and since his death, was undeserved. The material evidence the author marshals to make his case is impressive to the point of overwhelming. A clear and distinctive picture of Ludwig’s mind at work and professional ego under threat emerges as his many texts and letters – most, I venture to guess, not having been read for well over a century – are placed before the reader with expert explanation and contextualization. No page on which the name Heinrich Ludwig appears seems to have been left unturned. The result is a book chockablock with new information about old debates, demonstrating if nothing else just how little we know (and care to recall) of nineteenth-century thought.

What makes Gaier’s Ludwig study such an excellent example of its genre is that it has a specific



Fig. 1 Paul Baron De Granges, Heinrich Ludwig, ca. 1890. Photo (Gaier 2013, fig. 1)

emerges as a remarkable document of the birth-pains of professional art history, precisely for its counter-disciplinary focus and anti-scientific bias. But more than that, Ludwig and his cohort offer a context for (perhaps even an influence on) the polemical postures toward the scientification of culture famously articulated by Friedrich Nietzsche around the same time (17, 31, 201).

Heinrich Ludwig und die „ästhetischen Ketzer“ is a book that reads such processes of disciplinary formation against their grain, asking what counter-official and resistant accounts to emerging norms can add to a more rounded picture of the origins of art history. Moreover, Gaier's study offers an important chapter in the histories of the

axe to grind with the history of art history. Too exclusively focused to date on its own institutional and disciplinary origins, Gaier claims, art history has turned a blind eye toward the more "anti"-scientific and "extra"-scientific discourses („ausserwissenschaftliche und besonders antiwissenschaftliche Diskurse," 12) that proliferated within the generation of artists and intellectuals centered in Rome and refusing to be pulled squarely into the new German Kaiserreich's aesthetic politics. Besides Ludwig, they included the better-known Hans von Marées, Adolf von Hildebrand, Karl Hillebrand and Conrad Fiedler, among others. Ludwig's polemical cultural critique – both then and now whiffing a bit of dilettantism, Gaier notes – was inassimilable to the nascent discipline of art history, and deliberately so. Indeed, Ludwig's thought

often fractured relationship between art and science in bourgeois capitalist and imperialist culture as we still live it today. Ludwig's role in such a history, according to Gaier, should be named precisely for what it was: not a voice central to the foundation of the discipline called Art History, but a crucial "epistemological hindrance" (a notion Gaier takes from Gaston Bachelard, 18) it confronted and snubbed, just as its own rules, presuppositions and logocentrism solidified into a *Wissenschaft* in the late nineteenth century.

INTERROGATING ART HISTORIOGRAPHY

From the first sentence, Gaier enables a close-up look at his subject, and the introduction starts with a five page analysis of the few photos of Ludwig that have come down to us and the ways in which he

styled himself for the camera (by precisely *not* styling himself; see *fig. 1*). The following seven pages entitled “Goals of the Study” (12–18) are in many ways the brief heart of the book, a condensed synopsis of the main argument and its implications summarized above, making the reader wish that Gaier had looked up from his documents a bit more often and adopted this more synthetic and sweeping approach at strategic recurring moments throughout the book, which – alas – he did not.

The book is divided into four large chapters. Chapter I is the most biographical of the entire study, introducing in detail Heinrich Ludwig’s life, education, circle, travels, and eventual settling in Italy where he lived until his death in 1897. As mentioned above, what makes this chapter an especially illuminating form of biography is its comparative framing. In the earlier section of the chapter, Heinrich Ludwig’s life is placed next to that of his more successful brother, the psychophysicist Carl Ludwig, inventor of the kymograph and central figure in the German Empire’s scientific establishment that also included Hermann von Helmholtz, Emil du Bois-Reymond, and others. Such a comparison between the two brothers’ academic “careers” works well in this case, because a “successful” and a “failed” academic vocation occurred within the same family. Carl’s professional ethos and status stood in clear contrast to Ludwig’s, a difference both brothers were well aware of themselves. In the second part of the chapter, Gaier outlines Heinrich Ludwig’s wider circle of family, friends, and patrons, showing just how well connected Ludwig was within the group of *Deutsch-Römer* artists, writers and their clientele, which reached far beyond the three figures usually proclaimed to have formed its “center,” Marées, Hildebrand and Fiedler.

Chapter II deals with Ludwig’s academic and patrimonial ambitions: his involvement with the formation of a German art academy in Rome and the conservation and transfer to Berlin of the Nazarene frescoes in the Casa Bartholdy. In both instances, Ludwig proved himself an able agent of Italo-German relations and his own career objectives, even if ultimately the position he had imagined for

himself within the academy failed to materialize. Many of the details of both these crucial developments in the artistic politics of the German Kaiserreich will be new and revelatory to readers. This includes the fact that Ludwig thematized early on (in 1874–75) the proper relationship the “state” should attain with “art,” as well as the import a German academy in Rome would have on the development of the nation’s artistic talent. Thanks to Gaier’s research, these crucial texts in the early history of the German Academy in Rome, which Ludwig published anonymously, can now be firmly attributed to him. The second part of the chapter details the Casa Bartholdy “intrigue,” during which several high-ranking Berlin officials and museum directors including Max Jordan invented a whole set of urgent crises – such as other potential foreign buyers for the frescoes – in order to provoke the state into authorizing the relocation of this important Nazarene art to the capital. It is again thanks to Gaier’s meticulous research that this important episode in the cultural politics of the Empire has now been revised.

Chapter III is in many ways the book’s conceptual heart, since it is here that Gaier outlines in detail Ludwig’s polemic aesthetics and cultural critique. The chapter turns on various writings by Ludwig, some published during his lifetime, others only posthumously (like his *On the Education of Artistic Practice and Pleasure* of 1874, published only in 1907), a text on par with Karl Hillebrand’s polemic manifesto over state-sponsored art education and the diminished role art plays in modern industrialized nations, *Twelve Letters by an Aesthetic Heretic* of 1874. In the chapter, Gaier contextualizes Ludwig’s positions within the debates among Hillebrand, Vischer, Fiedler, and others, over the nature of perception, the value of interpretation, the proper “content” of art, as well as the role of the museum in artistic education. In these writings, Ludwig’s true objections against the growing professionalization and scientification of art history, which sacrificed a deeper understanding of the making of art, come through most clearly. Indeed



Fig. 2 Heinrich Ludwig, *Blick auf das Tiberdelta*, 1854. Washed pen drawing on paper, 38 x 56 cm. Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett (Gaier 2013, fig. 11)

Gaier proves that Hillebrand and Ludwig should be seen, next to Nietzsche, as the earliest proponents of a critical attitude toward the modern instrumentalization of scientific knowledge.

Chapter IV outlines the forms of “science” that Ludwig actually stood behind when it came to the practice and interpretation of art. It starts by detailing Ludwig’s attempts at writing a comprehensive study and history of oil painting’s technical challenges, which sought to make color and material manipulation the key to art’s illusionism and physiological effects. Gaier explains clearly that such a materialistic version of art flew especially in the face of a neo-Kantian like Fiedler who tried above all to proclaim art as an independent category of consciousness. The chapter continues with Ludwig’s attempts at establishing petroleum-based paints as the best medium for painting, both in his writings as well as in his commercial endeavors (which eventually failed, as petroleum did not quite live up to its promise and others beat Ludwig to the wider distribution of such paints). The final parts of the chapter specify Ludwig’s edition of Leonardo’s writings on art,

which he saw as the crucial precursor of an “applied” and “pictorial” science of painting (“*bildnerische Wissenschaftlichkeit*,” 13).

The following thick coda of about 100 pages includes a set of thirty-one black-and-white illustrations (given that this book is largely about Ludwig’s writings and not his art, the minimal images suffice; *fig. 2* and *3*), followed by lists of Ludwig’s paintings and drawings, as well as a comprehensive bibliography of his published and unpublished writings. The book also includes a selection of Ludwig’s extensive correspondence (Ludwig was one of the few *Deutsch-Römer* whose archive survived largely intact) with Graf von Schack and François Wille, his closest interlocutor throughout his life. With few exceptions, these intriguing letters had heretofore been unedited and unknown.

The uptick of Gaier’s close-to-the-sources approach is that his subjects seem to speak nearly as much as he does throughout his book, providing the reader with a vivid sense of late nineteenth-century



Fig. 3 Ludwig, *Im Park der Villa Chigi in Ariccia, before 1859*. Oil on canvas over cardboard, 74 x 98 cm. Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle (Gaier 2013, fig. 15)

ideas and rhetoric. But this strategy also has a few drawbacks. At times, the citations that Gaier has selected are very long, sometimes close to a page (65, 143). This can interrupt the flow of Gaier's narrative, especially since not all of the information in the long citations is pertinent, nor especially well analyzed or contextualized by Gaier, leaving the reader to log through big chunks of not always relevant material. Perhaps a two-volume set would have been the better approach here: a documentary volume with an edition of Ludwig's correspondence and most important texts, accompanied by an analytic volume by Gaier with less quotations. This might have freed the author from some of the other features that can accompany this kind of "documentary" art history. For one, there might have been more room for Gaier himself at crucial moments, like a longer and more thorough introduction; proper endings to chapters (many of them just end in a long quote without any further concluding remarks); as well as a proper epilog to the book itself which simply ends with chapter IV,

leaving the author little opportunity for a final summing-up of the main findings and arguments. Moreover, Gaier writes at times in the same slightly hard-to-follow nineteenth-century prose as do his subjects, Ludwig especially, showing that the distance between Gaier and Ludwig drew ever closer in the process of analysis.

SOME FINAL REMARKS

Gaier's book is a set of very close readings of texts and historical narratives, dense with little known facts and information. As interesting and absorbing as this approach is, the reader may yearn for the "bigger" picture once in a while. Even though Gaier has drawn a fairly large circle around Ludwig and his cohort, certain features of the period do not come into clearer focus at any moment in the book. This concerns especially Ludwig's "nemesi," the professionalizing field of art history. For instance, Gaier articulates only implicitly what precisely the difference between a *Kunstschriftsteller*, a *Kunstwissenschaftler* and a *Kunsthistoriker* was in the

period. He also takes it more or less for granted that the reader knows what exactly “professional” and “scientific” art history meant in the 1870s and 1880s, and does not elaborate, or sum up in broad strokes, this early institutional history and its manifold developments and concerns. Many of the key personalities make an appearance here and there, such as Rudolf Eitelberger von Edelberg, Jacob Burckhardt, Adolph Bayersdorfer, and Albert von Zahn, but they appear more as brief individual characters on the scene than typical representatives of the ideologies of a new discipline.

Gaier’s book is impressive because it shows so clearly the nineteenth-century origins of cultural critique and a polemical take on the *Verwissenschaftlichung* of the study of art. Gaier seems well aware of the fact that this history extends many tentacles into the present, but he leaves such connections unexplored, perhaps even a bit cryptic. Indeed he refrains throughout from making the lessons he has learned from Ludwig too programmatic for today’s art history: “Denn trotz der anscheinend geringen Nachwirkungen der Stimme eines Einzelnen oder einer ‘ketzerischen’ Gruppierung künden sich bis heute virulente Probleme der Institutionen und Symptome der kulturellen und akademischen Entwicklung hier bereits an, haben hier vielleicht sogar ihre Wurzeln” (17, see also 261sq.). To not spell out the connections between now and then more directly was perhaps a wise choice, except for the fact that some features of today’s cultural-studies inflected history of art might have provided some further impulses for interpretation.

To that regard, it struck this reader especially how little symptomatic reading Gaier’s text includes – a reading, that goes below the surfaces of what is said and enquires into language’s assumptions and exclusions. When it comes to the ideologies of the nation state, Gaier is quite perceptive to such tenors, but when it comes to others, especially questions of gender and sexuality, he is not. At no time in the book are any of the curious cross-gender denominations or non-normative family arrangements and partnerships interrogated as perhaps having contributed to Ludwig’s outsider

position. Yet, the book is full of them: Ludwig never married, but lived with his foster-child Amalietta who seems to have been both a substitute daughter and servant; was friends with Augusta von Eichthal who lived with the female painter Wilhelmine von Stein; and signed an 1873 letter with “HLudwig called the male petroleuse” (“die männliche Petroleuse,” 285, 361); while Hildebrand wrote to him in 1875, asking “Willst Du mir einen Gefallen thun u. sehn ob ich in Rom einen kräftigen Kerl von 20–25 Jahren zum Modell bekommen kann. Aber was extras, hier bekomme ich nichts Gutes.” (83) This might just be typical nineteenth-century patriarchal speech, but its frequency seems charged and to read over it as meaningless a lost opportunity.

Even though Ludwig was in this instance the underdog and the “subaltern” to art history’s emerging mainstream, there may have been certain aspects of his lifestyle that added further to his marginality. Despite Gaier’s best efforts at comprehensiveness and detail – and *Heinrich Ludwig und die „ästhetischen Ketzer“* is a highly laudable book – certain things have been left unaddressed and simply called “private sorrows” (“private Nöte,” 66), “identity crisis” (“Identitätskrise,” 331), artists’ “delicate” characters (“labile Charaktere der Maler,” 96), or “unfulfilled manliness” (“unbefriedigte Männlichkeit,” 92), terms that signal an author eager to move on to other matters.

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