

The German Baroque-mania: Visual Arts, Historiography, and National Identity

Ute Engel

**Stil und Nation: Barockforschung
und deutsche Kunstgeschichte
(ca. 1830–1933).** Paderborn,
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Art historians or art lovers unfamiliar with German art and visiting a museum in the German-speaking world for the first time are often surprised by what seems to be a chronological incongruity in relation to terms usually applied elsewhere in European art: in Germany and around it, the galleries dedicated to the Baroque comprise almost exclusively artefacts from the late 17th and from the 18th century. The sequence taught in textbooks and surveys as we know them from other “Western” cultures – Baroque more or less immediately after 1600, then Rococo, then Neo-classicism – seems displaced, as if German art was always catching up a century later with pan-European trends. This phenomenon is often explained by the ravages of the Thirty Years’ War, from which German territories only started to emerge after the mid-17th century.

The German Baroque, in this sense, is a world apart. Reading Ute Engel’s comprehensive survey not of the artistic period itself but of its later, German-language historiography, one is once again surprised: a style, and an artistic period, that most would readily associate first and foremost with Italy, perhaps (thanks to Rubens) with the Spanish Netherlands, and, more and more these days, with Iberic America, has been, for most German art historians in the 19th century and until the end of the

Second World War, a quintessential German phenomenon.

The premise of Engel’s monumental study is precisely the German obsession with the Baroque and the appropriation of that stylistic term for a newly defined national art. The Baroque, in that crucial period of the crystallization of German national identity, has been a screen on which the ambitions, pretensions and anxieties involved in the German national endeavour were constantly projected. Just like the art historians she is reading and analyzing, Engel’s own interest seems to oscillate between a genuine, specific interest in the German Baroque – its historical reality and then, more importantly, its posterior construction – and a much more general cluster of questions for which the Baroque could almost be deemed an arbitrary case study, one option among many others: how were the modern nationalisms of the 19th and 20th centuries referring to and using past artworks? How is style constructed and used in the context of “nation building”? Similar studies could also be written (and have already been written) on the role of Gothic art, or of Romanticism, in a moment in which national cohesion was felt as cruelly lacking in what we now call “Germany”. A recent, comparable study in English on the politics of art history in Central Europe is Matthew Rampley’s *The Vienna School of Art History. Scholarship and the Politics of Empire, 1847–1918* (University Park, PA 2013; see the review in *Kunstchronik* 68/11, 2015, 540–544), but it is limited to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, while dedicating a chapter to the Baroque, is not exclusively interested in the historiography of that period.

The Gothic and Romanticism are, indeed, co-protagonists of Engel’s book. Both had a comparable role in the invention of the German nation and both were, sometimes counter-intuitively, associated, even identified, with the Baroque. A surprisingly

common notion, for instance, was that of “the secret Gothic” (“*geheime Gotik*”), a clandestine undercurrent present in German regions all through the apparent victory of anti-Gothic, classical styles like the foreign-born Renaissance. This well-hidden stream – the true essence of “Germanness” – finally surfaced in the Baroque, which confusingly was in itself, as most German historians admit, imported from other countries, but which was adopted, adapted and improved by German artists to become nothing less than the highest possible form of art.

WHAT IS GERMAN BAROQUE ART?

Is the Baroque really a “projection screen” chosen at random? That seems unlikely, although Engel does not explain why it served as such a major (though, once again, never exclusive) obsession for German art historians, and what made it one of their preferred vehicles for the invention of the German nation and for the discourse that sustained such a construct. She is masterfully recounting the “what” and the “how”, but the reasons that made the Baroque so important are not explained – nor are her own reasons to follow that particular frenzy and not the parallel, perhaps more (too?) obvious ones.

The Germanness of the subject is ambiguous: the historians discussed are all from the German-speaking countries (which, in itself, is a complex issue Engel mentions a few times: what is the relation of Austrian or Swiss scholars to the German national project?). The art, however, is not. Or rather, is not exclusively so. Many of the texts analyzed here are striking precisely because they are explicitly trying to make a case for German Baroque art as particularly interesting and outstandingly excellent. Some limit themselves to art created by German artists – whatever this category in fact means – or on German territory, not necessarily a clear-cut term either. But some do not: the most well-known of the art historians discussed here, Burckhardt, Wölfflin and Riegl, wrote often – and perhaps their most famous works – on artworks which have little to do with Germany. In a way, this combination reflects the variety and complexity of the scholarly milieu the book describes: some authors were interested in the Pan-European

Baroque – one is tempted to say the Baroque *per se* – while others used it as an object of national glorification. Yet others – Wölfflin, famously – were interested in the interaction of the German scholar or art lover with foreign art, particularly Italian.

And when German Baroque art is at the centre of attention, what exactly is this art, actually? Once again, for readers, even art historians, not familiar with that period of German art, it is difficult to imagine a whole scholarly milieu writing about, and often claiming the unsurpassable superiority of, a corpus that is hardly represented in the normalized, now already “traditional” canon of what we used to unproblematically call “Western” art. The perplexity is less pronounced in the case of architecture, an art form that is indeed the most prominent in the book: some German Baroque monuments are still well-known and currently mentioned even in general art historical surveys. Think, for example, of Balthasar Neumann’s *Residenz* in Würzburg or of the *Berliner Schloss*, designed by Andreas Schlüter. But the same cannot be said of sculpture, not to mention painting. It is, in fact, the same Schlüter who is responsible for a statue mentioned in the book countless times, and playing a central role in the discursive frenzy of the German Baroque-mania: the 1700 equestrian monument representing the *Großer Kurfürst*. This work was almost unanimously considered the sculptural masterpiece of the German Baroque, indeed sometimes of the Baroque *tout court*. In Engel’s study, it is reproduced on the cover and a few other times (including the very first and the very last illustration in the book), and the author fascinatingly compares the visual strategies that modified the statue’s appearance, and thus the message of the author, in different illustrations, both graphic and photographic, accompanying art historical texts. This is striking, and all the more astonishing given that this absolute celebrity artwork remains today virtually absent from non-German narratives of 17th- and 18th-century art.

For painting, the incongruity between the claimed grandeur of the German Baroque and its absence from more general, “universal” art histories is more blatant still. While absence from the canon

is by no means a proof of the poor quality of the artworks themselves, the gap remains puzzling. Most non-specialists art historians would probably be hard pressed to name a German easel painter (ceiling painting being slightly more well-known) between Adam Elsheimer and the late 18th-century Neo-Classacists. In this case, the conundrum seems to have been a challenge even for the art historians discussed in the book: the most readily available solution was to claim Dutch art as German(ic) and to praise Rembrandt as the greatest painter of his time, described by all the adjectives repeated here again and again to describe both the Baroque and German culture: profound, spiritual, full of phantasy and, indeed, painterly.

REDISCOVERY OF FORGOTTEN ART HISTORIANS

The book itself undeniably does sometimes seem repetitive, but this is not, of course, the author's fault: the art historians she reads were not all original or particularly profound thinkers. This raises the question of their intrinsic value, a question that Engel often asks, most explicitly in the conclusion: are those historians' thoughts on the Baroque still valid or at least interesting for us, or are they only material for what the German calls "Wissenschaftsgeschichte", the history of the sciences and of their dominant ideas? The answer depends, obviously, on the specific scholar one is reading: some are so fatally outdated that reading them seems almost embarrassing now – these include the many borderline-racist theories prevalent in the Weimar Republic or – which often goes together with the latter – some pompous, overly poetic texts; we just don't do art history of this kind anymore. Mostly, time has made what seems to be the right selection: those names that are still well-known today – Wölfflin, Burckhardt, Riegl – are often the most interesting, even if they do not always avoid the afore-mentioned vices.

It is extremely rewarding, though, to re-discover other worthy art historians: August Schmarsow, Hans Tietze, Werner Weisbach or Heinrich Lützeler, to name but a few. These were original thinkers whose analyzes of the Baroque we can still

appreciate and use today. Moreover, they reveal the obvious, but often forgotten fact that the celebrated "founding fathers" of our discipline were working within a dense and complex professional network, rife with mediocrity and often repeating a limited number of clichés, but a necessary object of research if we wish to understand the protagonists' own contributions and *Weltanschauung*. The biographical information following the first appearance of every new scholar in the book – where, what and with whom he studied ("he", as there are no female scholars in this story – an interesting, if not surprising, fact in itself), what was his dissertation and his *Habilitationsschrift* about, etc. – may seem dry and repetitive, but is helpful to make sense of this network and to construct lineages and watershed moments.

What the book does particularly well is tracing the reappearances and modifications, the rise and decline, of what the German language meaningfully calls *Deutungsmuster*, patterns of interpretation, or, with more of a rhetorical flavour, *Argumentationsfiguren*. These are ideas, as the "history of ideas" strives to follow them through time, but already made into reusable formulae – always available to new nuances, but still similar and recognizable across their different, subsequent occurrences.

A theme that is constantly addressed by the art historians studied here is the hazy distinction between the Baroque and its two chronological neighbours – Mannerism on the early side, and, even more prevalently, the Rococo later on. Any teacher of art history would testify to the difficulty of these delimitations even today: so many grey zones and ambiguities exist in the current, more or less accepted definitions of these three stylistic/historical terms. It seems that all the possible solutions have been at some point proposed in the German historiography of the period at hand: identification of the Baroque with one of the two terms, radical distinction with a positive evaluation of one style and an extremely negative of the other, or any variation thereof. The only act never considered seems to have been getting rid of such notions altogether: if historians and art historians are in general, by an almost inevitable *déformation*

professionnelle, enthusiastic generalizers and categorizers, the protagonists of this book are even more avidly so. It sometimes feels as if their only scholarly aim was to invent ambitious, sweeping metanarratives and totalizing terms, and then ignore any evidence to the contrary.

A CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ART HISTORIOGRAPHY

The structure of Ute Engel's book – by and large chronological – inevitably brings about some repetitions and some confusions. As each scholar's career spanned many years and decades, their work is necessarily often parallel and, in any case, closely entangled. Thus, some art historical texts are quoted as reacting to studies which are themselves exposed only later in the book, some protagonists' work is divided into several different chapters, and some are repeatedly referred to in different contexts. Engel does her best to give a clear account and to construct a coherent narrative where reality was necessarily chaotic.

The book begins with a “state of the research” section, which is inevitably a *mise-en-abyme* of sorts: as the book is about the historiography of the Baroque in Germany, the introduction has to cite previous studies on that topic, thus describing the historiography of the historiography. There follows a longer introductory chapter covering both the emergence of the term and concept “Baroque” – the prehistory of the period discussed in the book – and the links between German art history in general and the development of a modern German national identity.

The main three sections of *Stil und Nation* are as much as possible strictly chronological, again considering the fact that some scholarly and publishing enterprises were not so neatly limited to a single period. The first of these sections concerns the time of the German *Bund*, ca. 1830–1866; the next, and longest one, follows the extensive scholarly activity from the foundation of the *Kaiserreich* in 1871 until the 1918 defeat and the fall of the Hohenzollerns; and finally, a major section narrates the intense dozen years of the Weimar Republic, 1919 to 1932. A coda is dedicated to the

following years and to the fate of Baroque studies and Baroque scholars in Nazi Germany; it is short and somewhat disappointing, because the subject is so intriguing, but this is wholly understandable, as Engel's book pointedly ends in 1933, as if what comes afterwards is a separate story.

ANALYSIS OF THE RHETORIC OF IDEAS

Two important aspects to which Engel pays particular attention are language and imagery. It is particularly welcome as historiographers don't always show so much interest in these fundamental questions, too often treating the history of the discipline as a mere dialogue of abstract ideas and concepts. However, needless to say, an academic text is a linguistic, rhetorical object in its own right, and in art history the illustrations – even their absence – are also an essential component of the discourse. Engel, then, analyzes not only the ideas introduced by the scholars she studies, but also the linguistic constructions they use to express their thoughts, their choice of words, the syntax, the level of complexity and, conversely, of clarity of the German texts. She detects rhetorical subterfuges, common patterns and dubious subtexts. This is particularly precious for non-native readers, for whom the author is a vital guide to the subtleties of the German academic idiom. Indeed, sometimes the nuances are difficult to grasp, for example when the author exonerates some heavily nationalistic art historians from the fault of biological, blood-centred racism on the basis of their specific choice of terms in an otherwise blunt, and today completely intolerable, discourse.

The attention to illustrations is even rarer and thus particularly precious. In fact, all the images in the study are “quotes” – figures that appeared in the books and articles discussed. While they are taken out of context and shown out of scale, they are still a treasure trove of visual information – on the selection of monuments and artworks reproduced, on the different techniques of photography or, earlier, graphical representations, on the lighting and the viewing angles chosen. There are 129 black-and-white images in the book and 9 colour tables, a high number for a book on historiography

but all extremely helpful. Not only do they show us the artworks discussed, but they also enable us to learn how and to what extent the contemporary readers had visual access to these artistic monuments and objects.

LACK OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

The book refers to studies of the Baroque by German literary scholars in the period at hand, but the interdisciplinary, or intermedial angle is perhaps the single serious lacuna that one regrets. One conspicuous absence in the literary field is Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, mentioned only once, in passing, in Engel's book. To be sure, the often abstruse *Trauerspiel* essay, completed in 1925 and published in 1928, did not receive much attention at the time, and perhaps should not be considered a prominent participant in the intellectual landscape of the Weimar Republic. However, of all the German texts on the Baroque, Benjamin's work is quite certainly the most widely read in the last few decades, indeed the only one still discussed across disciplinary boundaries – including art history. For a study wishing to raise the question of the current relevance of German Baroque historiography, Benjamin could be a fascinating case to delve into, all the more so because he proposes a view of the Baroque contemporary with the authors discussed here, but so idiosyncratic – an alternative perspective that was a road not taken, or more precisely taken with a considerable delay.

Philosophy is more of a presence in the book, but here, too, some tantalizing aspects would justify a more sustained account. Hegel and Nietzsche, in particular, are mentioned a few times, but in the latter case, at least, one could argue for a fundamental importance that is somewhat diminished in Engel's book. Nietzsche is the subject of a 3-page passage on the concept of the Baroque as a *Spätstil*, a “belated” style. Engel is mainly interested here in the philosopher's celebrated short text explicitly discussing the Baroque, “*Vom Barockstile*” from *Menschliches. Allzumenschliches*. But Nietzsche's writings more generally, and perhaps most of all *The Birth of Tragedy* with its

binary structure contrasting the Apollonian and the Dionysian, arguably gave an important impetus to art historians working on the Baroque (see Itay Sapir, *Flowing Wine, Solid Stone. Dionysian and Apollonian Metaphors in Writing on Seventeenth-Century Art*, in: *Einfluss, Strömung, Quelle. Aquatische Metaphern der Kunstgeschichte*, ed. by Ulrich Pfisterer/Christine Tauber, Bielefeld 2018, 199–216), even though Nietzsche's book itself mostly ignores the early modern period. Engel's study, after all, is replete with binary divisions and either/or comparisons: Baroque and Renaissance, Northern and Southern, painterly and linear and innumerable other pairs were the fundamental intellectual structures applied by most scholars studied here. Nietzsche is, perhaps, at least partly responsible for that curious phenomenon.

If the discussion of the literary Baroque here is limited, one art form which is completely absent from *Stil und Nation* is music. This is surprising, because while the German visual arts created during the Baroque are a theme hardly explored outside of Germany, German Baroque music, culminating with, but not limited to, Johann Sebastian Bach, is and has long been a staple of the musical canon. It also played an extremely important role in the construction of German national identity in the period studied by Engel, in particular in those circles considering Protestantism as the major contribution of Germany to the world and as a pillar of its collective character. A joint study of the German historiography of Baroque visual arts and music would be a vast undertaking, and one can understand Engel's reluctance to add more to her already spectacularly voluminous study, but at least a reference to the parallel field of Baroque music could have been illuminating.

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