E. H. Gombrich, Art History and Psychology in Vienna Fifty Years Ago, Art Journal, Vol. 44, 1984, pp.162-4 [Trapp no.1984D(ENG).1]

This is a translation by the author of his contribution to the XXVth International Congress for the History of Art held in Vienna in September 1983. Presented under the chairmanship of Professor L. D. Ettlinger in the section "Vienna and the Development of Art Historical Methodology" under the title "Kunstwissenschaft und Psychologie vor fünfzig Jahren." It will be published in the Acts of the Congress. Thanks are due to Professor Hermann Fillitz for his permitting publication of the present English version.

In 1934 Julius von Schlosser published his study of the "Vienna School of Art History," [1] where, incidentally, I figure in the appendix as the last of its graduates to date. Since one may assume that this pamphlet was written in the year before its publication, we arrive exactly at the year 1933, in other words fifty years ago, as stated in my title. Fifty years ago, then, Julius von Schlosser wrote the passage which may immediately take you back to the atmosphere of those days long past. We read there on page 101:

> One of my most original and idiosyncratic pupils, Hans Sedlmayr (whom I have mentioned before), has attempted, at first with somewhat youthful ardor, to establish contact with Gestalt Psychology which had also been developed in Austria, especially by von Ehrenfels. This urge towards modern psychology, which has been felt by Riegl, has altogether come to the fore among the younger generation today. I need only mention here the first of my pupils (*Urschüler*) Ernst Kris whom I value so highly and whose most recent research (about F. X. Messerschmidt, Anecdotes about Artists) had taken this turn with very remarkable critical caution.

My revered teacher Schlosser (whose views were discussed earlier today by Professor Podro) was of course especially fond of critical caution. But those who knew him also realised that this attitude of aloofness concealed an immense amount of knowledge and many years of experience also in the field to which he here referred with such telling circumspection. True, after he had completely identified himself with the philosophy of his friend Benedetto Croce, the problems on the border between psychology and the theory of art increasingly receded into the background, but whoever opens his collected essays published under the title *Präludien* [2] (and also takes note of the bibliographical references) will soon discover how thoroughly he had been versed in these questions. I am thinking most of all of his essay of 1903 with the characteristic title "A Marginal Note to a Passage from Montaigne" [3] which deals with the much-discussed question of the origins of ornament. We read there "that in the last analysis the whole question concerns not so much a historical as a psychological fact" and that "it would probably be hard to find another standpoint but that of psychology." For what matters in primitive art is not the imitation of nature, but (exactly as in the art of the child) "the recordings of notions (*Vorstellungen*) that dwell in the imagination." Three years later, Schlosser wrote in his "Dialogue on the Art of Portraiture": [4] "We all start, as it were, from the attitude of the image worshiper: for the little boy a stick can represent a horse, for the little girl a piece of wood a baby. In the course of development this rude symbol will satisfy as little as the early flat wooden idols satisfied the Greeks of later periods." Schlosser here refers to insights that were generally accepted at the time. One of them had been codified, as it were, in the famous book by Emanuel Löwy *The Rendering of Nature in Early Greek Art*, [5] which had been published in Rome in the year 1900 and was based on the psychological notion of the "memory image," which had been introduced by Ernest Brücke more than a hundred years ago. Remember that Löwy, that infinitely loveable scholar, also taught in Vienna fifty years ago after his return from Rome, and never failed in

his lectures and seminars to refer to the psychological laws that dominate the rendering of nature in ancient Greece. Not only in ancient Greece, however; "wherever we are able to trace the development of art on a large scale" - we read in his early book - "it moves, to speak morphologically, from the psychological towards the physiological, the image on the retina, the objectively recorded slice on nature … True, that last final consummation is never attainable, were art ever to arrive there, it would destroy itself" (p 17), a remark that incidentally throws a flood of light on the artistic situation at the turn of the century.

While Löwy was of course mainly concerned with the evolution of Greek art, it is well known that in Schlosser's writings similar psychological ideas come into play in his analysis of medieval styles, where he repeatedly concentrated on the psychological problem of the formula, the "simile." [6] His assistant Hans R. Hahnloser had consequently to deal with this topic in his edition of Villard de Honnecourt's pattern book, [7] where, following a proposal by Ernst Kris, [8] he replaced the expression of the "memory image" (*Gedächtnisbild*) by that of the "conceptual image" (*Gedankenbild*).

But the more it was realised that the conceptual image tended everywhere to dominate the visual arts the more urgent became the question of how to explain the continuous striving in the history of art after a rendering of nature based on fidelity to retinal sensations.

Here I must not omit mentioning an article by another Viennese, a study by Heinrich Gomperz from the year 1905 entitled "Some Psychological Conditions for the Emergence of Naturalistic Art." [9] It made a deep impression not only on Schlosser. According to the hypothesis there proposed, the desire for external likeness arises from the loss of the original magic identity between the image and the imaged. This is an idea to which Schlosser also pays tribute in his profound and wide ranging paper on the history of portraiture in wax [10] and which also later influenced Kris, who always remained preoccupied with the psychological problems of magical thought. These concerns also come to the fore in a paper by Löwy of 1930 on the origins of visual art, [11] in which an essential role is attributed to the "apotropaic" symbol, serving the protection against demons.

If I may use a somewhat drastic metaphor, I would say that we all imbibed psychology with the milk of our Viennese *Alma Mater*. Thus, it was certainly not a new element that the young generation introduced into the Vienna School, when - as you know from Schlosser's account, which I quoted earlier - they turned to psychology. Admittedly, when Schlosser there refers to the "somewhat youthful ardor" of Hans Sedlmayr, he gives indeed an excellent characterisation of the impression that his book on Borromini's architecture [12] made on us. I was at that time in my first year at university and I immediately bought the book and was profoundly impressed by its boldness and originality. It will be remembered that the author there makes a claim that he was at last taking art history out of its "prescientific" stage to a strictly testable scientific method. The monograph is divided into several parts; in the first the insights of Gestalt Psychology are applied to the analysis of Borromini's churches. What is at issue are the various possibilities of visually interpreting certain configurations and shapes, a question to which that school of psychology has made such important contributions. But after dealing with these formal problems the author turns also to the interpretation of Borromini's artistic personality, relying on the theories of Ernst Kretschmer, who, in his book on physique and character, [13] which was much read at the time, introduced the distinction between cyclothymic and schizothymic types. Borromini's architecture, so we read, is schizothymic. Aiming higher still, the author also relates the artist's oeuvre to the world view, in this case the Cartesian philosophy, which he considers to be typically schizothymic. Even further he goes in his postscript where he writes that he was able to verify his interpretation since he himself could produce meaningful formations in the

artistic idiom of Borromini, which, afterwards, he also found to be represented in the master's drawings.

Today I feel much more sympathy for Schlosser's cautious attitude than for the ambitious claim Sedlmayr put forward in his book, but I certainly would not want to deny the influence that Sedlmayr's attitude had on me. Without it, I would hardly have decided to write my thesis on the architecture of Giulio Romano and to add to my analysis a psychological interpretation, which admittedly deviates at some points from Sedlmayr's position. [14] As a matter of fact, Sedlmayr himself had meanwhile turned to very different questions - partly for purely external reasons. His paper of 1934 on Bruegel's Macchia [15] rather follows in the wake of Schlosser's great friend Benedetto Croce, but also uses the notion of "alienation," which Wilhelm Fraenger had taken over from psychiatry and introduced into his art historical studies.

So far I have spoken of art historians in Vienna who tried in various ways to approach psychology; but it is high time - my time being short - that I speak of a representative of psychology who, in his turn, approached art historical research. I refer to the holder of the Chair in Psychology in Vienna, Professor Karl Buhler, who exerted a very significant influence on all of us. Buhler's university lectures were frequented by many, and his seminar generated many new ideas. Although I don't think that Schlosser himself was on close personal terms with Buhler, we students naturally knew many of his numerous pupils. Buhler, too, had been formed by the Gestalt School, but the range of his interest extended much further. He was himself an important historian who was able to trace the history of any problem that concerned him. I am here thinking first of all of his splendid book on the theory of expression. [16] It fits in well with my theme that the preface to this impressive work on the history of ideas was again dated exactly fifty years ago, "Vienna September 1933," it being of course understood that his preliminary researches had become familiar by then from his lectures and his seminars.

What matters most in my present context is the fact that Buhler here succeeded (intentionally or not) in building a bridge between two normally hostile camps among the psychologists of Vienna - his own school and that of Sigmund Freud. The middleman here was Ernst Kris, whom I have already introduced in the beginning, when I quoted Schlosser's words of praise for him. As one of the editors of the journal *Imago*, Kris belonged to the intimate circle of the founder of psychoanalysis whose teachings he loyally championed throughout his life. Buhler had frequently criticized Freud, and it certainly needed diplomatic skill to act as a mediator. Even so, anyone reading Kris' monumental paper on the character studies of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt of 1932 [17] will easily see that not only the insights of Freud but also the methods of Buhler come into play in this account. Stimulated by these researches, Kris developed a burning interest in the problems of facial expressions and their interpretation. It so happened that experiments and research also went on in Buhler's seminar along these lines. I well remember having served myself as a subject for experiment on the reading of facial expressions in snapshots, which, I believe, had been organised by Buhler's student Ruth Weiss. I there learned to appreciate how many different interpretations one can read into such photographs as soon as one lacks the key to the action and context. Inspired by these results, Kris now conceived an interesting series of experiments in order to test a hypothesis concerning the statues of the founders of Naumburg Cathedral. He thought that it was precisely their intense but unspecific facial expressions that had given rise to a legend in which each of them was assigned a dramatic role. At that time, I had already begun to work as his amanuensis, [18] and so I also met, in the course of this work, leading members of Buhler's circle such as Egon Brunswick, Elsa Fraenkel-Brunswick and Käthe Wolf. Without this interest in the history of physiognomics, Kris would not have conceived the plan of writing a history of caricature, a project in which I collaborated with him for many years.

Naturally, the older themes of the Vienna School, the power of image magic, and Freud's book on the joke and its relation to the unconscious (1905) were also intended to play their part in our study.

Most of all, it was the psychoanalytic notion of "regression in the service of the Ego" that proved to be fruitful and that Kris placed right in the centre of his reflection on the comic. The fact that in his book on legend, myth and magic in the image of the artist (1934), [19] which he wrote jointly with Otto Kurz, he combined psychoanalytic ideas with an interest in the typical anecdotes told about artists and with questions of image magic helps to explain Schlosser's appreciative remarks.

So far I have spoken of the mutual fertilisation of psychology and the theory of art fifty years ago; now it is incumbent on me to refer in conclusion to another stimulus whose importance I realised only much later. I am thinking of the second and even more significant book by Karl Buhler, his fundamental work on the theory of language [20] published in 1934, but already summed up in 1933 in his article on the axiomatics of language [21] and in his earlier university courses.
It goes without saying that I am quite unable here to do justice to this achievement and that I can hardly provide more than a glance into the table of contents. We there find for instance a section on "Comparable Matters outside Language," [22] which prompts me to recall that in Buhler's seminar dissertations were also written on heraldry and on trademarks. What concerns us even more directly is the chapter entitled somewhat awkwardly "Symbolic Fields in Nonlinguistic Instruments of Representation." [23] Buhler here wants merely to clarify the capacities of language by glancing at other sign systems, but as far as I know the eleven pages that he devoted to these questions belong to the most fundamental disquisitions ever dedicated to the general problem of representation. Buhler, too, starts from the insight that there exists a spectrum, ranging from the extreme fidelity to nature exhibited by a waxwork, which (even so) resembles the model only relatively, to, for instance, a temperature chart, which merely records certain relationships in a given field. In between we find (if I may simplify and supplement his account a little), for instance, the notes of a musical score, the map, the landscape painting, and the illusionistic backdrop of the stage as different but equally valid systems of signs. As you notice, this analysis no longer speaks of the question of the notion of the "conceptual image," because first we have to get our logic right before psychology can come into its own again. What is at stake is the notion of "relational fidelity," which is brilliantly explained in connection with black and white photography. Nor does this rich work omit to touch on the medium of the film, on which we find several remarks which may even be of interest today. I hardly need remind you of the fact that the questions Buhler here raised, almost for the first time, have meanwhile become highly topical, if not even somewhat modish. The literature on the semantics or semiotics of the image has grown dramatically during the post-war period, and, since I myself am interested in these questions I receive many of these writings through the post. By no means all of them see these questions as clearly as Buhler had seen them. But I must remind you for the last time of the date; less than five tense years separated us from that fateful and disastrous March of the year 1938, which put an end to it all. Karl Buhler lost his position because his wife, Charlotte, did not qualify as so-called Aryan, and both of them were perhaps too old to be able properly to establish themselves in the United States. Even those of us who were younger and who were treated more mercifully by fate will never know how many ideas and insights were thus nipped in the bud.

Notes

1 Julius von Schlosser. "Die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte" *Mitteilungen des osterreichischen Instituts fur Geschichtsforschung.* Erganzungsband 13. Heft 2. Innsbruck. 1934. 21

2 Julius von Schlosser. *Präludien, Vorträge und Aufsätze.* Berlin, 1927.

3 Ibid., "Randglosse zu einer Stelle Montaignes," pp. 213-26.

4 Ibid., "Gespräch von der Bildniskunst," pp. 227-47.

5 Emanuel Lowy, *Die Naturwiedergabe in der älteren griechischen Kunst*, Rome, 1900. English translation by John Fothergill). London, 1907.

6 Julius von Schlosser. "Zur Kenntnis der kunstlerischen Uberlieferung im späten". *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhochsten Kaiserhauses*, 23, 1902, pp. 279-339. Also see: Schlosser, *Die Kunst des Mittelalters*, Berlin, 1923.

7 Hans R, Hahnloser. *Villard de Honnecourt*, Vienna, 1935.

8 Ibid., footnote to p. 27.

9 Heinrich Gomperz, "Uber einige psychologische Voraussetzungen der naturalistischen Kunst," *Beilage zur (Munchener) Allgemeinen Zeitung*, 160 and 161, 1905.

10 Julius von Schlosser. "Geschichte der Porträtbildnerei in Wachs," *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, 29, 1910, pp. 171- 258.

11 Emanuel Lowy, "Ursprünge der bildenden Kunst," *Almanach der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien*, 4, June, 1930. [Now translated by Karl Johns in the *Journal of Art Historiography*.]

12 Hans Sedlmayr. *Die Architektur Borrominis*, Berlin, 1930.

13 Ernst Kretschmer. *Körperbau und Charakter*, Berlin, 1928/1929. (See: A.A. Roback, *The Psychology of Character*, London, 1927. pp, 269-74.)

14 Ernst Gombrich, "Zum Werke Giulio Romanos," *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, N.F. Band 8. 1934, pp, 79-104.

15 Hans Sedlmayr, "Die 'Macchia' Bruegels," *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, N.F. Band 8, 1932, pp. 137-59.

16 Karl Bühler, *Ausdruckstheorie: Das System an der Geschichte aufgezeit*, Jena, 1933.

17 Emst Kris, "Die Charakterkopfe des Franz Xaver Messerschmidt," *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, N.F. Band 6,1932. pp. 169-228.

18 For a record of our collaboration, see now the chapter on Emst Kris, in my volume, *Tributes: Interpreters of Our Cultural Tradition*, London, Phaidon Press, and Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1984. pp.221-33.

19 Ernst Kris, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, Vienna, 1934. An English translation (with the title quoted in the text) was published by Yale University Press, New Haven. Conn., 1979.

20 Karl Bühler, *Sprachtheorie: die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache*, Jena, 1934.

21 Karl Bühler. "Die Axiomatik der Sprachwissenschaften," *Kant-Studien*, Band 38. 1933. pp. 24-90.

22 Bühler, *Sprachtheorie* (cited n. 20), 'Vergleichbares ausserhalb der Sprache," pp.57-61.

23 Ibid., pp. 161-65, and "Symbolfelder in nichtsprachlichen Darstellungsgeräten," pp. 179-90.