Conservatism and innovation in Moritz von Schwind

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Moritz von Schwind plays virtually no role in present-day art history even in Germany. Whenever he is mentioned, the characterization always sounds the same: a conservative late romanticist with anachronistic, Biedermeier-style traits, the creator of lyrical fairy-tale scenes, related in some ways to those of Ludwig Richter. There have been three periods since Schwind’s death, in 1871, when his works have been in greater demand (each documented by an amazingly large production of art volumes): prior to, and immediately following, the First World War, and following the Second World War. The reasons for this are easily given. In contrast to the enforced industrialization of the Gründerzeit (the period of wild speculation following the foundation of a united Germany in 1871), Schwind’s paintings reminded people of the ‘good old days’. They promised to uphold a strong middle-class and provincial sense of order and allowed room for dreaming of the old accustomed ways and conditions. Following the two World Wars, Schwind’s as well as Richter’s works had immediate consoling functions. They formed something like a German ‘home treasure’, the evidence of a seemingly indestructible, ‘good’ intrinsic character which could supersede the feeling of guilt left by the wars, and which made possible a kind of retreat into a world which was presumed to remain intact. Schwind was not good cultural material for the Nazi propaganda machine – his art works were too innocuous, too unheroic. This fact kept them out of the line of fire after the wars. Today, from the perspective of a more critical consciousness, the world as seen by Schwind seems to be completely implausible, and the backwardness of his art is obvious, above all in comparison with that of the French.

This estimation is not wrong, but it denies any opportunity for grasping more precisely the historic location of Schwind’s art – and, above all, for using his actual works to make visible the fact that they do indeed indicate an awareness of the problems of the time and of art in the middle of
the nineteenth century, and that they strive as well towards an individual solution which was manifested in their structures.

Schwind was a student of Peter Cornelius; the latter helped him not only to gain initial fresco commissions but also had a long-lasting effect on the way he defined art. Cornelius only trained his apprentices to make cartoons. He did not believe in the primary importance of colour, but thought of it as merely coincidental. In his opinion, an idea should manifest itself completely in the draft. So he sent his trainees cartoon versions of works to be carried out in fresco with the respective colours merely named on them. The colour version had nothing to do with creativity; its function was only representative or symbolic. Schwind never rejected this principle. In 1853 he wrote:

The art of painting is in such a horrible state that one should not wonder for too long that nobody thinks of an artist as a kind of poet, but rather as some stupid fellow who fumbles around with a piece of paper and tries to see if he'll have an idea. This is then called a sketch. I know nothing of these arts, thank God! But when I have brought my work far enough along that I can leave and another can take my place, my drawings are complete, thought through, all parts have been weighed against each other, that which belongs together has been brought together, the individual motifs will have occurred to me. Enough. The work has been completely authored, and the most important, irreplaceable part has been performed. The other things could be done by another person if need be.¹

The belief that the idea within an artistic expression can be completely objectified was a classical idealist conviction. This basic conviction would, of necessity, affect the work process. It might make sense for the painting of the frescoes, but the classical designing practice made for contradictions in Schwind’s small oil paintings. The problem of artistic self-image was mirrored in this contradiction. By the time of the end of the French Revolution, German artists no longer knew how to define their place in society. Courtly contracts were no longer enough to live off in most cases; they were forced to make their way in a free market. Schwind produced despised potboilers, designs for the popular graphics market and illustrations for journals, such as Fliegende Blätter or Münchener Bilderbogen. The market of the upper middle class had its forum in the promotional sales exhibitions of the various Art Unions and associations. Portraits, landscapes, and interiors were greatly in demand.
‘Inventions’ in small formats and historical pictures had a difficult time. One compromise which many artists sought – and one which promised economic security – was to become a professor at an academy. The academy, the preserver of conventional art, the mediator between state and artist, was nevertheless conceived as hostile to art, especially by Schwind. ‘An academy’, he commented gruffly, ‘is a foolish thing.’ Indeed he, too, was not able to secure his middle-class existence without a professorship at the Munich ‘Akademie’. The Academy also made possible another solution that was very typical for Germany. Schwind was able to isolate a private realm within his artistic profession, and this alone was to bring him genuine artistic fulfilment. For a while he hoped for royal or courtly patronage, which he imagined would free him of all constraints. During his negotiations over the Wartburg frescoes (which he carried out in 1854–5), however, he was forced to recognize that there was no such thing as a royal liberality that would grant the freedom to do anything. The work was poorly paid, the scale was constantly reduced, others tried to alter the content of his pictures, and he was forced to make concessions. In the end, the whole public realm seemed to him to stand in the way of art; the only solution seemed to lie in retreating within himself and to his closer circle of friends. With Schwind, this becomes an escape from reality, from the present, and a projection into an idealized happy past in which art, too, reaches its fulfilment.

Schwind became fully aware of the artist’s low status within society during the revolutionary events of 1848–9. Official commissions ceased to come in, as did supplementary income from occasional graphics jobs. Schwind made no effort to conceal his disgust for a ‘fine popular spring’ (‘sauberer Volkerfrühling’), as he cynically called the revolution. He conscientiously called himself a ‘main reactionary’, and wanted to see the revolutionaries hanged. He expected only disaster for the realm of art: ‘How horrible it will be when the men of the [common] people begin to order [works of art]: I think the imperial family itself would then be placed in the shadows with its art collecting.’ The conclusions he drew are quite clear: ‘I am thankful in as much as the hopeless confusion of these times helps to direct one back to one’s own self. Only our innermost substance can now give us a balance against the intoxication which has taken over in all those heads.’

After the revolution, Schwind isolated himself more and more. From an artistic point of view, this concentration on the private realm led to two
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things. He painted small pictures in series, which were not intended for the general public, only for himself, and on the one hand there were his so-called ‘Reisebilder’ (Pictures of life’s journey), which recorded his memories in a lyrically glorified form. These included the memory of his youth in the Franz Schubert circle in Vienna, memories of his experiences of nature represented in a fairy-tale manner, and of other stages of his life depicted in a historically imprecise way. These were elegiac pictures of a passive, yet happy, existence. On the other hand, there was a portrait gallery of his friends. In association with these completely private pictures, he searched for an artistic form which could preserve their private aspect without any loss—completely intact—and yet open and accessible to a limited public. This artistic pictorial form is by necessity synthetic. It abstractly binds contrasting features together with the help of the arabesque form. The resulting new pictorial form, which in the end is really an offshoot from wall decoration systems, finds its first representation in the so-called Symphony (fig. 11.1), which Schwind began in 1846 and had systematically completed in the form of drawings and cartoons by the year 1848. Their rendering into painted form was delayed until 1852, however, by the lack of any commission. The private pictures are inserted into the whole. By their combination, and within a framework of commentary, they produce a story with a definite private dimension, but one which also permits an allegorical ‘reading’, and is thus, in principle, generally comprehensible. In 1857, the private portraits also received a semi-public location: as sculpture-imitating grisaille paintings, they crown the frieze-like fairy-tale cycle of the Seven Ravens. This, too, employs a synthetic form in which the parts are intended to give each other real sense, in order to bridge the gap between the private and the public spheres. Yet even the series ‘Reisebilder’ has a synthetic quality; the individual picture seems not to have the power to be able to stand alone. It only begins to make sense in context of the series. It is a part of one life’s picture in which not only reality and fiction become mixed, but also, as Schwind writes, ‘the modern, the antique, the Romantic’ appear in succession, without any clear order. Estranged from his own time, Schwind is thus trying to protect and preserve the different periods in his own private cosmos. He also failed to clarify his relationship with history, choosing instead only to glorify the past. This is a historicist vision, which Hegel’s pupil, Friedrich Theodor Vischer, in 1842, reduced to the critical statement: ‘Our time has no present, but only a past and a future.’ In a
similar vein, the poet Nikolaus Lenau, who also belonged to the Schubert circle in Vienna, commented, derogatorily, in 1843: 'Because the Germans have no political public life, they make their private lives into a caricature of a public one.'

The lack of consciousness of the present results from having experienced a break with the past, with tradition and heritage. There is evidence that, politically, Schwind stood close to the idea of the medieval corporate state as developed for the nineteenth
Conservatism and innovation in Moritz von Schwind century by the Metternichian state secretary, Adam Müller. For example, the world in his famous print for Tieck’s *Puss in Boots* (Gestiefelter Kater) of 1850 is framed by a castle and church and their respective symbols of rule, a coat of arms and a roadside cross – these define the framework of order. From an artistic point of view, the experience of the break with history leads paradoxically to two things: to a historicizing of all past styles, and to an increased emphasis on artistic autonomy. Schwind believes himself capable of contributing the lost connection single-handedly from within his own being.

In what follows I analyse the consequences of this paradoxical condition for Schwind’s artistic practice, using the ‘Reisebilder’ and *Die Symphonie. Der Spielmann bei einem Einsiedler* (The Minstrel and the Hermit) (fig. 11.2) is probably dated from 1846, at a point in time when the idea for a series of pictures began to take shape; the main part of the ‘Reisebilder’ was created in the 1850s and early 1860s. The format of approximately 60x45 cm corresponds to the average size of the ‘Reisebilder’. The minstrel is wandering – his staff, hat, and canteen are leaned against a tree – when in a craggy, wooded spot he happens upon the hermit recluse. He stops for a rest, plays something on a bagpipe for the hermit (who brings with him things he has found in the forest) and receives a meal in return: the pot is already on the fire. The hermitage is small, meagre, and isolated. Fir trees and what is left of an oak cling to the towering rock wall. The spring below provides nourishment for a few shrubs and flowers. A crucifix protected by a small roof, a small container of holy water, and a picture of Mother Mary on a tree suffice for the hermit’s sacred meditation. The message is clear: the wandering minstrel as well as the hermit will only find peace outside society, only there will they be in harmony with nature. For this they must live in complete modesty, far from any occupational ambitions. Schwind painted this in Frankfurt against the grain of the time, in contrast to the colourful works and historical painting that were prevalent in Belgium and Düsseldorf, and particularly in contradiction to the taste of the Frankfurt audience, who left him by the wayside, preferring to process in their hundreds to see Lessing’s *Hus*. It is significant and typical that Schwind’s picture has no depth, no perspective, that the bagpipe’s main pipe follows the centre axis exactly – thus immobilizing time and space. There is no early Romantic yearning for the infinite, but rather a suggestion of making oneself completely content with nearness and small spaces. Indeed the things
Figure 11.2
within the direct range of vision do not awaken the artist’s curiosity as natural phenomena; instead all are predefined, set off from each other by distinct outlines, and kept thus in good order.

This is particularly obvious, as well, in the charming picture in the *Biedermeier* style known as *Die Morgenstunde* (*The Morning Hour*) (fig. 11.3), completed during the late 1850s. Here, where the light of the morning streams into the room, one might expect a representation of some impressions of atmosphere — but this is not the case. Schwind’s concern is not with capturing a momentary occurrence, but rather the retelling of a little story, which is revealed in the end in a conventional manner by means of the objects. Pictorial narrative remains the principal function of the picture. The young girl has risen, pulled back the covers, gone barefoot to the window to let in the day. Her linen is still lying across the chair. Next she will begin to wash herself, comb her hair in front of the mirror, and later work at the sewing table to the left — having first pulled back the second window curtain. Here, too, all things have their distinct outline, their own local colour, each contained within itself. It is not the light streaming in through the window which disperses or lends colour or

Figure 11.3
tones. Rather, each object establishes its own colour, its own characteristic light and shadow. The mirror, although still in a shadow, has to gleam around the frame. Similarly, the fixtures on the chest of drawers are made to shine. Schwind allows himself to experiment with colour only on the somewhat translucent curtain – but only in a minor way. A consideration of Menzel’s Balkonzimmer (The Balcony room) or his Schlafzimmer (The Bedroom) (fig. 11.4), of 1845 and 1847 respectively, shows the difference. Menzel emphasizes his visual experience as the central theme. All objects owe their appearance to the light, light gives and takes from them their contours; not the other way around as with Schwind. Menzel’s impression of the objects is subjective, Schwind’s representation of the objects aims towards an objective depiction. Thus, his picture remains a kind of idealized narration, regardless of the private nature of its origin. One may correctly assume that the girl in the picture is Schwind’s daughter and that the scene occurs in Schwind’s country home near Starnberg Lake not far from Munich. The contradiction is obvious: his private world appears in the mode of a public form, for Schwind’s definition of art demands it be so. Because the small format does not completely swallow the detail of the brush strokes, the solution remains a happy one. This picture would have been inconceivable in a larger size.

The Symphony, by contrast, was conceived as a large work. Ideally, it would have been executed as a mural in a music room, accompanied by corresponding pictures to Mozart’s ‘Magic Flute’ and Haydn’s ‘Four Seasons’ and ‘Creation’. For this reason, The Symphony is much more complex in its entirety, and aims at a synthesis of private need and public demand. Yet Schwind was not sure whether his intention would be understood at all. He sent his finished design along with a programmatic commentary to friends, imploring them to show it only to trusted persons. ‘Absit publicum’ (‘no public, please’) was the tenor of all his correspondence. Still he was undecided and torn – for a while he thought he might exhibit the piece at the Dresden Art Association exhibition – only to renege finally on this intention. Then he hoped for patronage from the Weimar royal court and, finally, for mediation from Weimar to the English royal family, which never materialized. Not until 1852 did King Otto of Greece (originally from Bavaria) commission a painted version, and then only the size of a cartoon and for an extremely modest price.

The concept behind The Symphony is quite unusual. It is based – as Schwind acknowledges and notes on a sheet of music in the lowest
Figure 11.4
compartment of the picture – on Beethoven’s ‘Chorphantasie’ (‘Choral fantasy’), Opus no. 80. ‘The entire little story’, says Schwind, ‘moves properly from this musical base in four parts which are analogous to the usual four movements of a symphony – symphony [sonata], andante, scherzo and allegro.’ This caused some bewilderment inasmuch as Schwind – himself an accomplished musician who had played together with Schubert, and some of whose early drawings were owned by Beethoven – knew, of course, that Beethoven’s Opus no. 80 had no symphonic order whatsoever. It is in fact one continuous piece with no segmentation into movements. In addition, it combines, in an extremely unusual form, chamber music characteristics with a huge choral performance. The choral motif was later to achieve a certain degree of fame because it was used to introduce passages of the Ninth Symphony; yet the work remains outside the usual concert canon due to its peculiar structure.

In another way too, Schwind’s design does not correspond to Beethoven’s choral fantasy. For the development of the story embedded within this symphonic framework, Schwind required a solo performance by a female singer. Opus no. 80, however, does not include a single solo part. This incongruity has been the cause of some concern among researchers. However, I see it as providing the key to understand Schwind’s work.

In their development of the little story, the four pictures set inside the frame follow from bottom to top the classical movements of a symphony. The swift opening movement gives us the exposition, the basis for the entire symphony which defines its succession in many ways. Schwind interjects a love story into this movement: an orchestral rehearsal in a private theatre. A large number of the people assembled are actual portraits. Schwind’s friends from the past and present have gathered together. Schwind’s close friend, the conductor Franz Lachner, is directing; even Schubert, already dead by some twenty years, sings in the choir. Schwind himself turns the pages for the pianist. The female protagonist, however, is the highly revered court singer, Caroline Hetzenecker, who left Munich and her musical career to marry a district administrator. Her love story, which is represented in the picture, carries the implication of giving up art and public fame and thus adds an elegiac undertone. The district administrator, standing up in the orchestra, sees her as she awaits her entry. The story now begins to unfold from Beethoven’s marble bust on the middle axis of the lower part of the painting, as a kind of source. The
slow \textit{andante} movement illustrates a still distant encounter, in which the singer is pursued yearningly by a male suitor. During a masquerade ball (the \textit{scherzo} movement), a declaration of love is made. In the \textit{allegro} movement, we see the finale, the couple leaving by coach on their honeymoon, and the singer sees in the distance her new country residence. The story and the symphony have filled out into their final shape. The four main scenes are accompanied by grisaille paintings of natural allegories which give the individual stories their definition within the framework of nature's cyclical processes. In the centre is the favourite of the gods, Ganymede, with Zeus's eagle; for Schwind he represents the awakening spring. The picture of the encounter is framed by four \textit{tondi} depicting the time of day against an arabesque, Raphaelesque veil. Between them are some quite unusual smaller pictures in which refreshments during journeys and the healing effect of a bathing cure are integrated. Smaller pictures, with the four winds in the centre, arch over the final scene as a metaphor of life.

Schwind called his design a modern drawing on several occasions, and seems even to have been surprised himself at how well modern apparel, antique nakedness, and allegory harmonized together. However, he was frustrated, he wrote, by the lack of action in the present.\textsuperscript{23} This is not very easy to understand. There is only an apparent lack of action in the present for him because he can identify no meaningful order in it. His view is only of partial, non-goal-oriented movement. He misses the 'middle' in Sedlmayr's sense of the term.\textsuperscript{24} He can only regard the 'popular spring' with cynical disdain. Ganymede's 'spring' picture is an educational reminiscence — attractive, yes, but \textit{passe}. Schwind is offering a reflection on the disparateness of the present. Modern things are mixed with Pompeian style, Raphaelian grotesque, antique myth, the Romantic perspective of nature, and allegorical devices, and the coherence, too, of the parts of the story is enforced through art alone. The image of the modern no longer stands by itself. It derives its meaning from the context, be it through a series of pictures, a synthetic picture form, or by a synesthesia of the arts. Schwind was certainly a believer in the \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}.\textsuperscript{25} \textit{The Symphony} was to become the wall decoration of a music room, and the late Melusine cycle was to become the interior frieze in a round temple for the making of music.\textsuperscript{26} \textit{The Symphony} had a synthetic pictorial form. Schwind tried to accomplish the synthesis in two ways: through its musical theme and through use of the arabesque. The
choral text to Beethoven's Opus no. 80 makes perfectly clear the theme idea and purpose of the music. It is a hymn sung to the glory of art, describing it in metaphors of nature. It speaks of 'the spring sun of the arts' which brings in light. Eternal blossoming flowers flow out from a sense of beauty. Only art is capable of restoring the lost connection to nature. Thus Opus no. 80 provided Schwind with the motif which prompted him to design his story. Beethoven's piece is not a musical accompaniment to the programme: nor Schwind's picture a mere illustration. The classical symphonic structure provides no more than the framework for the individual chapters of Schwind's pictorial novella. Opus no. 80 is the necessary prelude for setting the mood to the story, the succession of movements provides the moments of the narration, but the artistic form of the arabesque furnishes the actual harmonic coherency. With its non-divided structure, Opus no. 80 is equivalent to the arabesque - it stands as nature through art. The combination of chamber music with the large orchestra is to be seen as forming an analogy to Schwind's private and public dimension in *The Symphony*. In both cases it is a contradictory modern solution.

In the case of Schwind there is no question about the two sources for the structural principle of the work - Runge's *Tageszeiten* (Times of Day) and Cornelius's wall decoration designs. An early Romantic didactic form and a classical decorative tradition permeate each other. Both, however, are transformed by Schwind's way of dealing with them. The early Romantic arabesque, particularly as supported by Friedrich Schlegel's literary reasoning, is one form, indeed the only form able to encompass in a playful manner this world perceived as fragmentary, to turn the rubble of the present into jewels, in order - as Schlegel writes - to give an indication of infinite plenty, an emergence of infinitude. The arabesque is nature converted to the abstract, generating order out of its own. Schlegel, Novalis, and Runge compare the arabesque with music, musical variation, and musical movement form. Schlegel even goes so far as to use 'arabesque' and 'symphony' synonymously. In 1828, Wilhelm von Humboldt declared the principle of the arabesque - without naming arabesque explicitly - to be the characteristic of the modern: 'The growth which art in itself owes to the new period, against Greek and Roman antiquity, lies ... in the excellent and exclusive development of that which has the ability to affect the power of imagination amorphously merely by nuancing and gradation, maintained by the laws of rhythm and harmony, and above all to touch directly our sensitivity.'
A non-figurative rhythm that affects our sensibility is characteristic of
the arabesque. Schwind employs the principle of the arabesque, but its
function is indeed altered. The inner pictures in Runge’s Tageszeiten
symbolize the cycle of life in a natural, mystical way. The clearly separat-
ed frame uses the signs of established religion to indicate the religious
ordination of man. It is left to the spectator to bridge the wide gap
between conventional religion and natural mysticism. The path of the
arabesque provides him with a vague notion of the synthesis – from the
point of origin at the lower end of the middle axis past the unfolding
development to both sides, also signifying the split between contrary
principles, to the rejoining and dialectic dissolution at the upper end of
the axis of the arabesque figure. In that Schwind eliminates the observ-
er’s part, the arabesque loses its power to lend coherence and returns to
being a mere ornamental form. The abstract creation of coherence does
not correspond to any sensual perception – the coherency is merely
asserted individually. Schwind was, however, fully aware of this. Wall
decorations by Peter Cornelius, on which the young Schwind worked,
enclosed large religious or mythological historical themes. One of
Cornelius’s pupils, Ernst Foerster, has handed down to us the fact that
Cornelius no longer considered history in itself to be capable of carrying
a weighty meaning – the arabesque frame had the duty of compensating
for this loss of significance. It could even be more important than the
picture itself, because only within it could a notion of unfalsified nature
be preserved, a remembrance of the lost great chain of being. Schwind’s
The Symphony is just as much an expression of this viewpoint as was the
private cosmos which he – while conscious of its futility – offered up as a
defence against a public life he deemed chaotic.

NOTES
1. Letter to Franz von Schober, Munich, 5 June 1853 (Otto Stoessl, Moritz von
    Schwind, Briefe (Leipzig, 1924), p. 322). Translations throughout this chapter
    are those of Werner Busch.
2. Letter to Eduard von Bauernfeld, Munich, 15 April 1851 (ibid., p. 279).
3. Conrad Höfer, Der Sängerkrieg auf der Wartburg, Eine Studie zur Geschichte und
    Deutung des Schwindschen Bildes, Zeitschrift des Vereins für Thüringische
    Geschichte und Altertumskunde 26 (Jena, 1942); Helga Bäuml, Die Wartburg-
    Fresken Moritz von Schwinds (Leipzig, 1963); Helga Hoffmann, Die Fresken
    Moritz von Schwinds auf der Wartburg (Vienna, 1976); Werner Busch, ‘Zwei
    Studien von Moritz von Schwind zum “Zug der Heiligen Elisabeth zur
    Wartburg”, Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstdichte, 16 (1977), pp. 141-54.
5. Letter to Marianne Frech, Munich, 28 August 1848 (ibid., p. 233).
7. Letter to Julius Thaeter, Munich, June 1848 (ibid., p. 229).
p. 236 (letter to Julius Thaeter, Munich, 9 December 1848), and p. 257 (letter to Konrad Jahn, Munich, 1 January 1850).


23. Letter to Ludwig Schaller, Frankfurt, 30 May 1846 (ibid., p. 200); letter to Franz von Schober, Munich, 10 December 1849 (p. 253); letter to Franz von Schober, Munich, 5 March 1850 (p. 263); letter to Franz von Schober, Munich, 26 April 1852 (p. 290).


27. Seidel, 'Symphonie', p. 27.


