

Regine Prange

Even if an artwork breaks with tradition, it acquires its value by successfully following and modifying an accepted tradition of art production. In the Renaissance, the reference to classical antiquity legitimated the modern idea of the artist as an autonomous, creative subject, while the perceived ideal of classical sculpture demonstrated the necessity of breaking with the formula of Byzantine art. Classicism recommended the imitation of antique sculpture and architecture over the empirical study of nature. In this way, it maintained a metaphysical synthesis of individuality and divine authority, underpinned by a concept of universal truth. Mediated by the fine arts, this concept of universal truth was not abandoned but transformed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Promoted by the feudal lords and representing their sovereignty, classicism was gradually appropriated and revised by a newly established academic practice located in universities and museums, themselves institutions of the liberal civic state. German authors, such as the philosopher Friedrich

Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, the art historian Karl Friedrich von Rumohr, and the architect Gottfried Semper, contributed considerably to this transformative process. In effect, an anthropological and psychological “translation” of normative classicist ideals was effected to fit industrial societies and their democratic structures. Absolute harmony could no longer be derived from handcrafted imitation, since the handcrafted was increasingly created by machines. Instead, and more than ever before, absolute harmony had to be explained by inner, unconscious forces of genius. The classical idea of form was consequently replaced by an ideal perception. What Ernst Gombrich termed “the preference for the primitive”¹ accompanied the epistemological shift from *natura naturata*, the static nucleus of classicist art theory, to *natura naturans*, which conceived of the artist’s activity as a process of perception and production.

The scholarly focus of the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl on late antiquity grew out of this context. It followed



1 *Emperor Justinian I, Bishop Maximianus, and Attendants*, ca. 547 CE, mosaic, San Vitale, Ravenna, north wall of the apse (artwork in the public domain; photograph by Cameraphoto Arte, Venice, provided by Art Resource, NY)

the Romantic reevaluation of the Middle Ages and it widely agreed with Semper's and Adolf von Hildebrand's anthropological definition of art production, which viewed the making of art in relation to natural laws of perception and to social and aesthetic needs. Riegl's rehabilitation of late antiquity (which had been languishing as a period of "degeneration") was motivated by his idea of the evolutionary process of the *Kunstwollen*, the form- and style-producing artistic will, which moved from a primitive tactile mode of perception to an advanced, premodern, "optical" mode in which spatial values were experienced only by the mind. In his book of 1901, *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, Riegl analyzed the main features of the art and art industry of late antiquity. Between the lines, he also described the characteristics of the art contemporary to his time, namely, Impressionism and Symbolism. To align past and present as Riegl implies, the tradition of the antique had to be suited to modern aesthetics. In other words, the tradition of the antique had to emerge from the dissolution of anthropocentric rules of perspective and narration.

In *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, Riegl examined nothing less than the modernist tension between illusionary space and material flatness. In order to solve this tension, he did not look at Roman reliefs, architecture, or ornament as such. Rather, he concentrated his attention on the way an artwork expresses a tactile or optical mode of seeing, and he considered the movement from one mode to the other as a historical schema. Riegl observed that antique art, corresponding to the tactile mode of seeing, was generally restricted to the plane and that it "strove for the representation of individual unifying shapes via a rhythmic composition on the plane."² Without questioning this restriction to the plane, he argued that the late Roman *Kunstwollen* generated an abstract quality of space. Form was related to and unified in space rather than the reverse. The intensified isolation of form in space led "the

hitherto neutral shapeless ground" to be elevated "to an artistic one, that is, to an individual unity of a finished powerful shape."³ Not surprisingly, the climax of the late antique *Kunstwollen* is the "emancipation of the interval, ground, and space."⁴ According to Riegl, figures represented directly facing the spectator, as in the famous mosaics at Ravenna (Fig. 1), have separated from the plane in order to become spatialized.

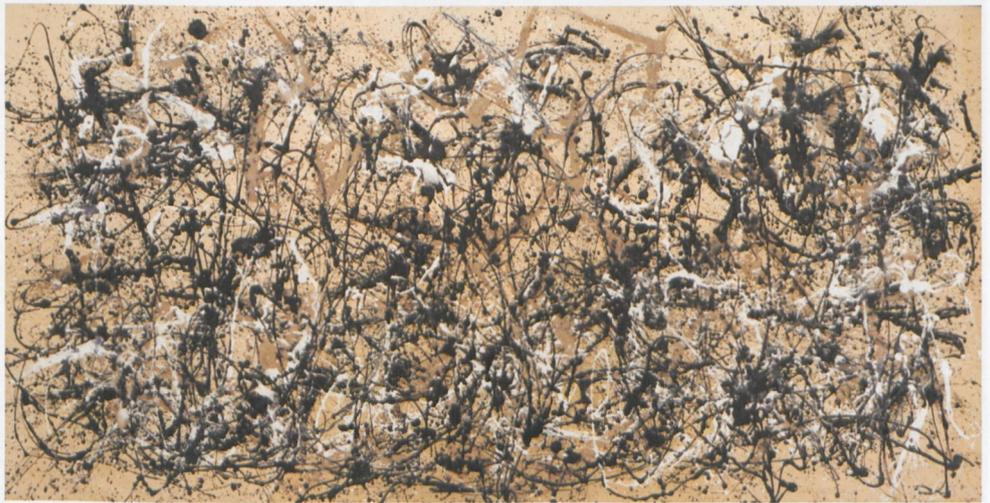
Riegl's anachronism held true until Abstract Expressionism and Post-painterly Abstraction. Both these styles are considered the outcome of a continuous modern tradition, beginning with Impressionism (Fig. 2). Riegl had discovered the antique origins of Impressionism and Symbolism in the linear and coloristic rhythm of Roman art. Jackson Pollock's linear and coloristic painting *Autumn Rhythm* (Fig. 3) appears to conform still to Riegl's description. Pollock's promoter Clement Greenberg employed Riegl's term "opticality" to characterize an evolutionary model of art history, with the goal of the autonomy of art. Instead of representing reality, Greenberg argued, painting should represent its own essential quality—flatness. In terms still appropriate to Riegl's definition of the protomodernist features of the art of late antiquity, Greenberg claimed that spatial expression is nevertheless obligatory: "The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l'oeil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness."⁵

It is well known that Minimalism aimed at the complete negation of spatial illusion and that painting was finally abandoned in favor of the object. The arrival of Pop art seemed to make clear, moreover, that Greenberg's Rieglian construction was a false one. Greenberg's formalistic approach, cul-

2 Max Liebermann, *Judengasse in Amsterdam*, 1905, oil on canvas, 15¾ × 21⅝ in. (40 × 55 cm). Kunstmuseen Krefeld (artwork in the public domain; photograph © Kunstmuseen Krefeld)



3 Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm, Number 30*, 1950, enamel on canvas, 105 × 207 in. (266.7 × 525.8 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, George A. Hearn Fund, 1957, 57.92 (artwork © Pollock-Krasner Foundation/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2013)



minating in an antisculptural, nonperspectival space, could not explain the new, literalist attitudes of Pop art. Yet Riegl's message (one might call this the ideological function of his historiography) is still valid and legible: Riegl's interpretation of the late Roman art industry as a tradition of the modern *autonomy* of line and color—an autonomy beyond figuration—was the first step in the generalized appropriation of all styles and the leveling of high and low that characterize postmodern strategies of art production. Claiming the “levelling of ground and the individual shapes,” Riegl's optical impulse foregrounds the depthlessness that Frederic Jameson pronounces the cultural logic of late capitalism, namely, its ability to abolish the hermeneutic model of depth and the idea of the “subject as a monadlike container.”⁶ Today, the gesture of anachronism has become a rhetorical means of citation in art itself. Its master, Jeff Koons, employs the models of classicism again in his work *Antiquity 3* (Fig. 4)—this time, as part of a collage painting whose hypermediated

surfaces imitate the technologies of digitization.⁷ By combining three sculptures of Venus on a flat “expressionist” painting with erotic and childhood figures and toys—a woman (Gretchen Mol) posing with an inflatable pool dolphin and an inflatable monkey—Koons presents the ambition of the art historian's magisterial gaze. Its truth is evident. The absence of history's depth generates the pleasures of opticality. But there exists no pleasure, for there is no ground on which to create, or to believe in, an aesthetic totality.

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4 Jeff Koons, *Antiquity 3*, 2009–11, oil on canvas, 102 × 138 in. (259.1 × 350.5 cm). Private collection (artwork © Jeff Koons; photograph provided by Gagosian Gallery)

Notes

1. E. H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art* (New York: Phaidon, 2002).
2. Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Bretschneider, 1985), 223.
3. *Ibid.*, 224.
4. *Ibid.*, 229.
5. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in *Clement Greenberg:*

The Collected Essays and Criticism, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance: 1957–1969* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85–93, at 90.

6. Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 224; and Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992), 15.
7. See *Jeff Koons: The Painter and the Sculptor*, exh. cat. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), *The Painter*, 180; and Joachim Pissarro, "Jeff Koons's Antiquity Series," in *ibid.*, 39–43.