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## Traces of Psychology: The Art Historical Writings of Ernst Kris

When Ernst Kris met the young student Ernst H. Gombrich, who is revered today as one of the important art historians of the twentieth century, he recommended to him that he give up art history. This advice was based less on any doubt of the young man's professional attitude than on Kris' own aloofness from a subject which he considered to be immature in terms of methodology. Gombrich recalled his words: "We really know much too little about art to be able to draw any definitive conclusions. The best thing our colleagues can do is to take up a more developed branch of knowledge." Kris proposed psychology as an alternative, even if he harboured reservations about the application of this discipline for problem solving in his own field (Gombrich 1984, 224).

The outcome of this perspective for Kris in the long run is well known: He concentrated on psychoanalysis and abandoned art history. But what effect did this ambivalent attitude have on his strictly art historical publications, which originated before and up to 1938, alongside his psychoanalytical texts? This essay is concerned with a question about Kris the art historian which has up to now curiously been neglected.<sup>1</sup> It will point out the basic concepts of his writings in this field and their origins and thereby show that Kris' doubts about his profession as an art historian were induced not only by the theories of Freud but that of others as well. It may offer a contribution to the recovery of psychological and psychoanalytical influences on art history of the 1920s and 30s (cf. Herding 1990, 1994).

That first meeting with Gombrich took place in 1931. Kris had been working for nine years in the sculpture and applied art collections at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and was at the height of his fame as the author of art historical publications.<sup>2</sup> At this time he was literally dividing his activities

between art history and psychoanalysis. Encouraged by Sigmund Freud and by his wife Marianne Rie, in 1924 he had undertaken a training analysis with Helene Deutsch.<sup>3</sup> After 1927 he became a practising psychoanalyst himself without neglecting the duties of museum work. Gombrich strikingly describes the great psychical and physical strain of this double-life. At the beginning of the 1930s his doubts about art history gave Kris the courage to withdraw from the profession, although Freud advised him against doing so (Gombrich 1984, 226). And in fact Kris remained faithful to art history until his emigration in 1938, although the stress between the demands of both activities continued to increase. In 1933 Kris became co-editor of the magazine *Imago*; from 1934 onwards he trained therapists at the Viennese *Institut für Psychoanalyse*. During 1933-1935 he was simultaneously involved in the complete restructuring of the collection at the Kunsthistorisches Museum and writing collection guides.

At this critical moment, Kris created a characteristic outlet for himself which assured his reputation as a pioneer: From 1932 he was the first professional art historian to publish essays which applied his psychoanalytical (ego-psychological) point of view to objects of art historical research. These were also his first ever psychoanalytical publications. In the beginning he took great pains to achieve a real dialogue between the two subjects, insofar as he published the first of these texts in two versions. Its subject is the Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736-1786), in whose late works—the so called “Charakterköpfe” (characterheads)—Kris believed he had found symptoms of a psychosis. These versions, for the *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* (Yearbook of the Art Historical Collections in Vienna) in 1932 and for *Imago* in 1933, clearly take account of the respective readership not only in the introductions, but also in their whole form and even in their language (cf. MacGregor 1989, 252-253). In spite of all this effort his art historian colleagues did not show any interest in this widening of their perspective. So Kris did not follow this up but only wrote from the overlapping area in *Imago* and in an independent publication, the writing he published in collaboration with Otto Kurz 1934, *Die Legende des Künstlers* (The Myth

of the Artist). As he turned to psychoanalysis, he published fewer and fewer art historical texts, before his emigration to the U.S.A. in 1938. And once he left Vienna, he never published again as an art historian.

In 1952 Kris collected most of his psychoanalytical essays on art in the volume *Psychoanalytical Explorations in Art*. Thereby he stressed their separation from the rest of his art historical writings and obscured at the same time the fact that his interest in psychoanalysis was not solely based on Freud. Of special importance in this respect was the grounding of his thinking in the tradition of Viennese art history.

By 1922 Kris had completed studies in art history, archaeology and history at the University of Vienna.<sup>4</sup> His main tutors in art history were Max Dvorak and Julius von Schlosser. Von Schlosser who also supervised his dissertation called Kris his "Urschüler" (arch- or original pupil) (von Schlosser 1934, 201). In fact Kris is in many respects a classical exponent of the later Viennese School: the orientation of his art historical research—in terms of period, subject matter and methodology—clearly shows that von Schlosser was the main influence on the art historian Kris.<sup>5</sup>

A dominant feature of study in Vienna at that time was a hands on approach to the object of research: Nearly all the founding fathers of the Viennese School had worked for a while in a museum. Von Schlosser directed the collections of sculpture and applied art at the Kunsthistorisches Museum from 1901 to 1923. This practical experience was decisive for Kris in the choice of his first career. In 1922 he started working in von Schlosser's department, first as a voluntary assistant, then, from 1927 onwards, as an assistant custodian (Gombrich 1984, 222).

The strictly art historical material he published until he emigrated was typical of his school of origin, even down to the young scholar's chosen study period. He devoted himself to works from the centuries between 1400 and 1600 and especially, like the late Dvorak and von Schlosser, to Mannerism, which in the 19th Century was still neglected by research as being an epoch of decline. And even when in Kris' writings of the late 1930s he tentatively expanded the time frame of the

given subject matter, he never overstepped the period boundaries laid down by von Schlosser, who included art up to Goya (Lachnit 1990, 155).<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, Kris' choice of artistic genres depended on von Schlosser. Amongst the topics of Kris' research were sculptures as well as paintings. But above all he concentrated on cut glass, gems, cameos and works of art by goldsmiths. This interest owed less to the fact that the curator and subsequent Director of the collection, Leo Planiscig, was a leading expert in Italian Renaissance Sculpture (cf. Ritvo 1966, 487) than—as Kris himself admitted—to von Schlosser's research into Kunst- und Wunderkammern (art- and curiosity-cabinets) and wax portraiture (Kris 1926, 138).

Kris once justified his chief concern with applied art and minor art works by saying that art history had to consider the complexity of interwoven historical ambitions:

Thus the ideal challenge was presented, to show the unending number of interweaving currents of diverse spiritual layers: to realise that the phenomena of historical life constitute only a giant-theory. As a methodological consequence however it appears that the job of historical research is to introduce the deviations of intellectual movements alongside the great lines of development in order to achieve an overall historical picture. (Kris 1927a, 253)<sup>7</sup>

This statement reveals already the influence of Freudian meta-psychology. But there was an even more concrete connection between Kris, the expert in objets d'art and Freud. As is known the founder of psychoanalysis also valued some works of "minor art"; beside little sculptures he collected gems and cameos (cf. *Freud and Art*, 1989). And it was through this part of his collection that the two were first led to a close acquaintance (Ritvo 1966, 487). Unfortunately Freud's precious stones have not yet been the subject of individual study, although historians know that they played an important role in the early period of psychoanalysis: Between 1912 and 1928 Freud gave silver rings with inlaid gems to his closest confidants (cf.

Wittenberger 1995, 212-217). The possible influence Kris' knowledge had in the choice of the gifts remains to be explored.

Eventually, Kris' education in the Viennese School of Art History also influenced his methodology. Here his concentration on exact descriptions of the works under discussion and on questions of attribution should be mentioned. The emphasis on seemingly unimportant details resembles the methodology of Giovanni Morelli, a connoisseur highly respected by von Schlosser—and admired also by Freud. Freud compared this attention to trivia to psychoanalysis, which also values the observation of seemingly trivial details (Freud 1914, 222). For Kris, an expert in both professions, this similarity between the dispositions of art history and psychoanalysis must have been reason enough to try to combine them.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed not only the general methodology but some of the core ideas of the young art historian originated in his Viennese training. Since his dissertation on *Die Verwendung des Naturabgusses bei Wenzel Jamnitzer und Bernhard Palissy* (The Use of the Life Cast by Wenzel Jamnitzer and Bernhard Palissy), edited in 1926 as an article with the title "Der Stil 'rustique'," Kris returned repeatedly to the tension he found in a number of late Renaissance artworks between a crass super realism<sup>9</sup> and classical concepts of beauty. An example of this is the so called Merkelsche table centrepiece by Wenzel Jamnitzer from 1549 (today in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam) (Ill. 1): Although its construction follows Renaissance models, the foot and goblet edge overflow with a multiplicity of the tiniest animal and plant mouldings whilst on the rim of the uppermost vase, in the finest silver, cast meadow grasses are visible (cf. Kris 1926, 147-150). This crucial concept of the effectiveness of a thrillingly tense duality within the mannerist aesthetic, Kris acknowledged to be merely a continuation of his teacher's comments on wax portraiture of the time (Kris 1926, 138).<sup>10</sup>

He also took up von Schlosser's concern to demonstrate the autonomy of the work of art. Von Schlosser repeatedly spoke out against subsuming art history into cultural history—even if mainly to distinguish himself from Riegl and Dvorak



Illustration 1: Wenzel Jamnitzer, *Merkelsche table centrepiece*, 1549, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

(Medicus 1993, 134). Building on the literary critic Karl Vossler's ideas he separated the history of style (as actual art history, which considers artistic achievement) from the history of language (whose primary interest is the development of cultural communication) (Lachnit 1990, 157). In doing so he distinguished the contributions of inspired individuals from the more mundane achievements of their contemporaries. Kris likewise emphasized the achievement of the creative individual in many of his writings. On one occasion he juxtaposed the "Stilstufe" (stylistic step) of a work against the general "Stilphase" (stylistic phase) (Kris 1934a, 213) and on another occasion the "Eigenart des Künstlers" (artist's originality) against the "Formempfinden der Generation" (form-sensibility of the generation) (Kris 1927a, 244). He emphasized that the particularly ingenious Merlkelsche table centrepiece was created without being commissioned; and that consequently one could conclude that "the artistic intention speaks directly to us" (Kris 1926, 147). Clearly this emphasis on intention can lead to (individual-)psychological questions.

Explicit psychological interest was already present among the founding fathers of the Viennese School—Riegl (cf. von Schlosser 1934, 201), Dvorak and even von Schlosser. Although the latter had always expressed suspicion about the significance of psychology for aesthetics, it was he who favored concentrating on the psychology of the individual artist instead of on the “Kunstwollen” of Alois Riegl (cf. Hofmann 1984/85, 6). Moreover in his study *Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance* (Art- and Curiosity-Cabinets of the late Renaissance) he examined the psychology of the collector, and in his essay about wax portraits he looked at the magical concepts associated with chosen objects (cf. Lachnit 1990, 153-54). One psychological process which at that time was often referred to in the art historical studies of the Viennese School, especially by Dvorak, was of importance for Kris’ subsequent development: “Einfühlung” or empathy. This process, theoretically established in late 19th century Germany by Johannes Volkelt in Leipzig and Theodor Lipps in Munich, became an integral component of Expressionism (cf. Drüe 1983) and was fundamental for what was later known as “German psychology”. Although Kris did not apply empathy as avidly as some contemporary art historians (e.g. Wilhelm Fraenger), he too exaggerated its application to the point of speculation.

Thus in 1925, describing a cameo by Jacopo da Trezzo, which shows the face of the Arch Duchess Johanna, Princess of Portugal, he not only emphasises the “suggestive expression of the features which seems to mirror a sad, compelling human destiny” (Kris 1923-25, 166), but, in a detailed description of the individual features, he attempts to characterise the individual portrait. He talks about the “tapering contour lines of the face” which “run rapidly from the cheekbones to the chin and accentuate the hectic spiritualistic aspect of the features” (Kris 1923-25, 164). In an essay from 1934, interpreting a marble bust of the youthful Karl VI by Gabriel de Grupello he seeks to penetrate the psychology of a character even further: “The physiognomic expression, which serves this medium of representation is of a special kind: Sudden astonishment and light tension emanate from the features of the boy: He wants to look older, to be a great man, like his brother (Joseph I.)” (Kris 1934a, 214). Special attention to empathy caused Kris to

see a problem in Messerschmidt's character-heads. The failure of the attempt to empathise with these grimaces, indicated to him the foundering of an essential (psychological) art historical methodology and made the completion of the discipline through psychoanalysis seem imperative (Kris 1933, 392-394).

In addition to the legacy of the Viennese School mentioned above, there is also evidence that an influence on Kris' psychological interests came from the Hamburg School of Art History. He wrote an eloquent dedication of his publication *Die Legende des Künstlers* of 1934 to the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg then housed in Hamburg. Another reflection of the Warburgian perspective occurred in the essay "Die Arbeiten des Gabriel de Grupello für den Wiener Hof" (The Works of Gabriel de Grupello for the Court at Vienna) of the same year in which Kris juxtaposes the sculpture of *Saint Bartholomew* by de Grupello, dated 1710-16, (Ill. 2) with Bernini's *Verità*, dated 1646-52, (Ill. 3) and draws attention to the fact that here the same pose "is committed to a contrary intention of expression" (Kris 1934a, 216)—a relationship which Aby Warburg would have called "inversion" (cf. Gombrich 1970, 247/248). But although Kris illustrates this comparison it is only mentioned briefly in the text, as is the case with other psychological observations in Kris' early writing.<sup>11</sup>

Kris' psychoanalytic leanings not only resulted from the psychological interests he encountered as an art history student; for in his Curriculum Vitae of 1939 he indicated that alongside history and art history he also studied psychology at the University of Vienna. This reference is missing in the Curriculum Vitae from the time of his graduation in 1922—the year Karl Bühler, the influential psychologist, took over the Viennese Chair for Psychology (Gombrich 1983, 101).

Bühler, representative of the so-called Würzburg School, was initially concerned with the Psychology of thought, but subsequently was concerned with problems of expression and with language. It was already noted by Gombrich that Bühler's studies in expression, particularly as they are presented in the book *Ausdruckstheorie-Das System an seiner Geschichte aufgezeigt* (Theory of Expression-The System Demonstrated by means of its History) of 1933 had considerable influence on Kris'





Illustration 2: Gabriel de Grupello, *Saint Bartholomew*, 1710-16, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich



Illustration 3: Lorenzo Bernini, *Verità*, 1646-52, Galleria Borghese, Rome

Messerschmidt research (Gombrich 1983, 102).<sup>12</sup> But also in his art historical texts Kris repeatedly talks about such matters; for example, in the Grupello essay, he analyzed the “physiognomic change in the prince’s features” revealed in the sculptor’s portraits of Prince Johann Wilhelm von der Pfalz (Kris 1934a, 208).

An essay for the *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* of 1930, bearing the unremarkable title “Über eine gotische Georgs-Statue und ihre nächsten Verwandten—Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis der österreichischen Skulptur im frühen 15. Jahrhundert” (A Gothic Statue of St. George and its Closest Relatives—A Contribution to the Knowledge of Austrian Sculpture in the Early 15th Century), provides in fact an extraordinary illustration of the synthesis of the different influences in Kris’ work noted above. This seminal text offers us an opportunity to examine the psychological leanings in Kris’ art historical works in detail.

The work of art which stands at the core of the essay had been found shortly before in the attic of the Pilgrims Church of Grosslobming in Steir, Austria (Ill. 4 and 5). Kris’ publication was therefore the first devoted to the piece and consequently the author made great efforts to integrate this St. George in a carefully reconstructed masterpiece. To this end the author with great virtuosity applied the whole historical methodology right up to Morelli. In addition, he sought to pinpoint more exactly the “artistic quality of the composition, the originality of invention” (123) he observed in the statue of the dragon slayer. To this end, Kris compares the statue with other versions of the St. George figure “from about the same period and in approximately the same artistic circle” (127) so that it becomes clear that the relief-like invention on the front and back view of the Grosslobming figure adheres to strict parameters. It falls into the conventional “taste of the period style,” though “carried out masterfully” (153)—the comparative examples shown by Kris to be not nearly as convincingly executed as the Austrian piece.

In summary, the St. George figure by the Master of Grosslobming for Kris was “highly individual and not of a form absorbed from the conventional period style” (143), a phrase



Illustration 4 and 5: Master of Grosslobming, *Saint George*, around 1400, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna

reminiscent of von Schlosser's distinction between the history of style and the history of language. However, Kris subsequently reformulated his conclusion, stating that the work of the Austrian sculptor is "not only different from that of his contemporaries, it is of a different type. Using the same foundations, with the medium available to everyone, he not only found a new solution; he posed a new problem" (127, cf. 131). An accompanying footnote leads to the contemporaneous psychology of thought, "whose paradigm of problem and solution offers a beneficial perspective for some historical investigations". This suggests the ideas of Karl Bühler, whose specific branch of the psychology of thought at the Würzburg School required proving that thought does not just flow mechanically but is directed towards a goal. Kris thus arrived at a psychological basis for demonstrating an "original artistic achievement," which sometimes invokes the issue of "Verfrühung" (predating): The St. George statue displays "a veiled contradiction ( . . . ) between intention and means, which only later generations in the 15th Century were able to achieve in a generally accepted form" (153).

But the St George essay also contains clear evidence of Freud's influence, especially in the emphatic description of the statue with which the text starts. Kris focuses here on the exact moment of the battle:

the right foot treads on the tail where it joins the body. The foot is taut and stretched out in order to put pressure on the spine and lame the mighty and dangerous tail, which, trailing outwards, folds itself around the knight's right foot, trying to press him against the wings, then goes between his legs attempting to wrap round the left foot. But the strength which is on the verge of filling the still powerful bends of the ribbed tail is no longer sufficient; one almost feels how the cleverly chosen position of the foot maintains its hold. The saint takes advantage of the situation to strike the decisive blow. A moment later the head of the virtually beaten monster will sink down limply." (122)

The observation of the stone carving is translated with Expressionist verve into the climactic moment of a dramatic narrative. Beyond this Kris seeks to show what may have immediately precipitated the situation being depicted. The rear of the figure provides clues here:

Some conclusions about the moment before the struggle can also be drawn: Saint George seems to have trodden on the dragon's body as he emerged from the rocks. His sword has remained caught on the wing which might have been at first only half extended, and is thus held back; that he had to duck the wing can be inferred from the position of the right foot (123).

This (re)construction of successive moments in a sculpture is reminiscent, partly even in its dramatic construction, of Freud's procedure during his analysis in 1914 of the *Moses* of Michelangelo in which the pose of the Renaissance statue is interpreted as "the remains of a movement that has already taken place" (Freud 1914, 229). Similarly, Kris presents the Master of Grosslobming as a clever, psychologising artist. Freud, who states at the beginning of his essay that he was no connoisseur but a layman (Freud 1914, 211), becomes the model for the art historian Kris' analysis.

Kris' essay about the Master of Grosslobming is to be seen as a cautious attempt to put psychology in the service of art history. But despite the evident influences of the psychologist Bühler and the psychoanalyst Freud, the legacy of Julius von Schlosser still dominates at this time. Only slightly later, the two Messerschmidt essays of 1932 and 1933 will indicate in his writings for the first time a conflict between Kris' two father figures. It was only with Kris' emigration and the forced abandonment of his career at a European museum that Freud at last emerged as the victor.

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## Notes

1. Experts regard these in some cases as "exemplary and exhaustive" (Gramaccini 1985, 221), or as "still fundamental today" (Schultes 1986, 1). Nevertheless they are awaiting a reprint—in contrast to the psychoanalytical essays which were published in one volume in 1972. Even a reliable index is missing. Neither "Writings of Ernst Kris" in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, XIII (1958), nor Alexander Grinstein in *The Index of Psychoanalytic Writings*, New York 1956-1966. Vol. 2: 1130-1134, and Vol. 7: 3558-3559, nor the *Bibliography of Ernst Kris' Art Publications*, edited by L. Bendix. New York 1963 (privately printed by New York Psychoanalytic Institute), nor Wendland 1999, 388-391, provides a complete list of Kris' publications without mistakes.
2. Especially two books had contributed to his fame: the volume co-written with Fritz Eichler *Die Kameen im Kunsthistorischen Museum*. Vienna 1927, and the survey *Meister und Meisterwerke der Steinschneidekunst in der italienischen Renaissance*. Vienna 1929.
3. Wendland 1999, 388, is erroneous when she writes "zusammen mit Helene Deutsch"—possibly a translation mistake.
4. He studied archaeology under L. Rusche and E. Löwy, history under O. Redlich. Cf. Walter Ernst Kris, "Curriculum Vitae." In *Rigorosenaht Kris*. Archives of the University of Vienna (copies in the Hamburger Archiv zur Wissenschaftsemigration in der Kunstgeschichte).
5. Up to now only the strong dependence of Kris upon Freud has been noted in the literature. Cf. Gombrich 1984, 229.
6. Kris reached the 18th Century in his essay on Messerschmidt.
7. This and the following are translations by the author.
8. Hoffer 1957, 360, emphasizes in his obituary Kris' "special liking for picking out minute details".
9. Kris speaks of a "krassen überrealistischen Typus" (1929a, 96). He wanted to preserve the term "Naturalistik" for this, cf. Kris 1926, 150.
10. On this concept in Dvorak see Hofmann 1984/85, 6.
11. Cf. for example Kris 1929, vol. 1,3, where he recommends exploration of the early superstitious motifs for the art of stonemasonry in the collections of antiquity and the middle ages.
12. Kris refers to the Charakterköpfe of Messerschmidt already in 1927, 227 (No. 664).

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