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“A work of art is an object that
necessitates contemplation”.
Latency of visual studies within
the Vienna School of Art History?

Abstract

This article investigates a research method of the so-called Vienna School of Art History, mainly its transformation by Max Dvořák around the First World War. The article suggests the possible influence of Georg Simmel's philosophy on Dvořák in this time, evident mainly in Dvořák's interpretation of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's art, written by Dvořák in 1920 and published posthumously in 1921. This another view on the Vienna School of Art History is then researched in writings on Pieter Bruegel the Elder by Dvořák's students Hans Sedlmayr and Charles de Tolnay when Tolnay extended Dvořák's thinking and Sedlmayr challenged its premises – both Tolnay and Sedlmayr thus in the same time interpreted Bruegel's art differently, even though they were both Dvořák's students. The article then suggests a possible interpretative relationship of the Vienna School of Art History after its transformation by Max Dvořák with today's approaches to art (history), mainly with the so-called visual studies.

Keywords: Max Dvořák, Vienna School of Art History, Georg Simmel, Visual Studies, Charles de Tolnay, Hans Sedlmayr.

Introduction

In Max Dvořák's text on the art of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, written in 1920 and published posthumously in 1921,¹ a reference to Georg Simmel's interpretation of

1 M. Dvořák, *Pieter Bruegel der Ältere*, Wien, 1921. Max Dvořák was born in 1874 in Roudnice in Central Bohemia, he started to study history at Charles-Ferdinand University in Prague, then

Michelangelo from 1910 might be found,² which can indicate Simmel's influence on Dvořák's reading of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's art. This hypothesis can lead us to a different understanding of Dvořák's art-historical method emerging in the time of World War I,³ as a starting-point of an approach to art history rooted in the so-called Vienna School of Art History,⁴ but with indications similar to today's ways of interpreting visual arts, diverted from modern art history toward visual studies.⁵ Following and, so to speak, having in the peripheral vision recent Sjoerd van Tuinen's take on Mannerism as a concept related to art history as well as to philosophy after transformation of both disciplines mostly after the 1980s,⁶ thus when also Arthur Danto's and Hans Belting's seminal concepts of the end of art and art history were published,⁷ and when theories of Bildwissenschaft and visual studies started to appear,⁸ this study opens a possibility of another – and most importantly much earlier – concept of art history aimed at other than formal or iconographical concept of visual art.

Van Tuinen, in his aspiration to “reconnect ... systematic sense of mannerism with its art historical sense,” when, “mannerism is a concept of becoming specific to art, occurring in the 16th century qua historical “style”, it is not limited to art”,⁹ overlooks Mannerism as it was formulated by Max Dvořák, who was the first one who came up with this concept in the sense used in the modern history of art of

he transferred to Vienna University to the Institut für österreichische Geschichtsforschung in 1894. There he became interested in art history and attended the lectures of Franz Wickhoff. In 1905 Dvořák took over an assistant professorship after Alois Riegl, and in 1909, after Wickhoff's death, Dvořák became a full professor and he stayed at the Vienna University until 1921 when he collapsed during one of his lectures. In the first phase of his professional career as an art historian Dvořák built on Riegl's and Wickhoff's method by searching for evolutionary principles in art; however, in the face of the approach of World War I he altered his method to focus more on the inner-spirit of artworks. See P. Betthausen, P. H. Feist, C. Fork, eds., *Metzler Kunstshistoriker Lexikon*, 2. Auflage, Stuttgart – Weimar, 2007, pp. 68–71.

2 M. Dvořák, „Pieter Bruegel der Ältere“, in: Idem, *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte. Studien zur abendländischen Kunstentwicklung*, Leipzig, 1924, pp. 217–257, cit., p. 220.

3 This thesis of Dvořák's reading of Bruegel's art through the notion of collapse of the the known world in the World War I, aimed at Dvořák's connection to Alois Riegl's art-historical method and its relation to early phenomenology, was elaborated by the author of this study in: T. Murár, „Je-li umělecká forma vtělením duchovního vztahu ke světu. Max Dvořák a umění Pietra Bruegela staršího“, *Umění LXVI*, 2018, pp. 458–465.

4 See: M. Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History. Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847–1918*, Pennsylvania, 2013.

5 See e. g. J. Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction*, New York, 2003.

6 Sjoerd van Tuinen, „The Late and the New: Mannerism and Style in Art History and Philosophy“, in: S. van Tuinen, S. Zepke, eds., *Art History after Deleuze and Guattari*, Belgium, 2017, pp. 145–163.

7 Arthur C. Danto, „The End of Art“, in: B. Lang, ed., *The Death of Art*. New York, 1984, pp. 5–35. – H. Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte* München, 1984.

8 H. Bredekamp, „Bildwissenschaft“, in: U. Pfisterer, ed., *Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft*, 2. Auflage, Stuttgart, 2011, pp. 72–75.

9 van Tuinen (note 6), p. 146

the 20th century.¹⁰ I will not go into detail here how Dvořák’s concept of Mannerism was formulated, but I want to show the interconnection between early modern philosophy and art history on the example of Dvořák’s interpretation of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s art. In my opinion, the main reason for leaving Dvořák’s thinking out of van Tuinen take on Mannerism as a broader intellectual concept is because Dvořák’s connection to philosophical thinking is not in general researched by the historiography of art history.¹¹

How I will show, Dvořák’s interpretation of Bruegel may have been influenced by Georg Simmel’s thinking, also apparent in thinking of Dvořák’s student Charles de Tolnay – therefore this art-historical method does not need to be limited only to Dvořák himself. At the end of the study, I will propose the possibility of how this half-forgotten legacy of the Vienna School of Art History, philosophically rooted, may come closer to today’s takes on visual arts.

Max Dvořák and Georg Simmel

Dvořák as the first scholar saw Bruegel as a European artist who was influenced by Italian painting¹² when he based his thesis on the thought of the artist as compression of spiritual and intellectual forces of the era: “There is never a leading, groundbreaking artist outside the intellectual wholeness of his time, and if there are threads that connect him with his time, which are not visible to us, it means that we are not sufficient enough in the conception of either his art or his age”.¹³ The Mannerism of the 16th century, of which representative Bruegel according to Dvořák was, brought back restrained “inner” feelings of the human spirit that were newly expressed in the human creativity,¹⁴ which Dvořák explained through his articulation of duality between “naturalism” and “idealism”.¹⁵

10 See: W. Bařus, „Max Dvořák betrachtet Tintoretto oder über den Manierismus“, *Ars* XLIV, 2011, pp. 26–43. – H. H. Aurenhammer, „Max Dvořák. Tintoretto und die Moderne“, *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* XLIX, 1996, pp. 9–39.

11 Attempts of course can be found, see e.g. J. Vojvodík, „A World of Purely Artistic Conception and a Universal Art of the Spirit: Max Dvořák and Karel Teige between Phenomenology and Surrealism“, *Word and Sense* 24, 2015, pp. 25–41. – M. Rampley, „Max Dvořák. Art history and the crisis of Modernity“, *Art History* XXVI, 2003, pp. 214–237. – H. H. Aurenhammer, “Inventing ‘Mannerist Expressionism’: Max Dvořák and the History of Art as History of the Spirit”, in: K. A. Smith, ed., *The Expressionist Turn in Art History. A Critical Anthology*, Burlington, 2014, pp. 187–208.

12 Dvořák (note 2), pp. 219–220.

13 Ibid., p. 220: „Nie steht ein führender, bahnbrechender Künstler jenseits der geistigen Gesamtlage seiner Zeit, und wenn uns die Fäden, die ihn mit ihr verbinden, nicht sichtbar sind, so besagt dies, daß wir in der Auffassung entweder seiner Kunst oder des Zeitalters nicht tief genug gedrungen sind.“ Whether it is not stated otherwise, the translations are by the author of this study.

14 Ibid., pp. 221–223.

15 J. Bakoř, „Max Dvořák – a neglected re-visionist“, *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 53, Wien, 2004, pp. 55–72, cit. pp. 61–63.

This concept has been developed by him since 1914¹⁶, Dvořák at first observed in work of the late 13th and late 14th century artists, how it is possible to read in his university lectures at the Institute of Art History in Vienna from 1915.¹⁷ Later Dvořák articulated this duality as traceable already since the beginning of the 13th century:

The inner development of medieval art resulted in a division, not necessarily between naturalism and antinaturalism, but rather a dissension between what is known by means of concepts and what is experienced by means of subjective observation. This discord was based upon a fundamental question of philosophic position which occupied the entire Middle Ages in every sphere of intellectual and spiritual endeavor and which was given formal expression in the “conflict of universals”.¹⁸

Dvořák thus since 1914 constituted a method of art history as a research based on an inner-formation of an artwork as a unique reality, which is created upon the two-fold relationship between the artistic reality as an inner-transformation of the experienced world (principal is the spiritual re-formulation of the world through the contact with nature) and the artistic reality as the widely common intellectual conceptualization of the world (principal is the idea through which the world is constituted).¹⁹ It is this methodological transformation of Dvořák’s art-historical thinking that Josef Vojvodík connects to Edmund Husserl’s notion of inner-subjectivity as the possibility to re-construct the (European) pre-war consciousness: “The trust in a “hidden force” of the cognitive subjectivity is inherent to Husserl’s transcendental idealism (Husserl likes to use the notion of “subjectivity of experience/experiencing” [Erlebnissubjektivität]), as well as to Dvořák’s spiritually-historical mode of art history with its subjectivization of art”.²⁰

16 Ibid., p. 63.

17 „Im Quattrocento wurde auch sehen an Stelle des gotischen Idealtypus ein weltlicher Typus geschaffen; aber damals war es nur ein einzelner Typus. Hier wurde ein allgemein menschlicher, poetischer Typus geschaffen, das auf die Phantasie eingewirkt hat. [...] Giotto eine realistische Szene ins Uebernatürliche übertragen hat, Lionardo dagegen eine übernatürliche Begebenheit in eine künstlerisch poetische Realität verwandelt hat.“ Archive of the Institute of Art History, University of Vienna, The Estate of Max Dvořák, Box 6, Notes to Lecture on *Idealismus und Realismus in der Kunst der Neuzeit*, Winter Semeste/1916.

18 M. Dvořák, *Idealism and Naturalism in Gothic Art*, trans. by Randolph J. Klawiter, Indiana, 1967, p. 105. Dvořák through this art understanding articulated an art-historical approach separated from Riegl’s method, when he emphasized the role of the man in the art (historical) creation, Ibid., p. 123: “Only on the basis of a clear knowledge of the historical particularities of the underlying principles in various times and places, individualities conditioned by these circumstances, can the way to a historical understanding of the artistic phenomena of by-gone periods be found.” The original text was published in 1918, see: M. Dvořák, „Idealismus und Naturalismus in der gotischen Skulptur und Malerei“, *Historische Zeitschrift* 119, 1918, pp. 1–62, 185–246.

19 Ibid., pp. 15–76.

20 J. Vojvodík, „Fading, Fading...‘: Ztráta, vzkříšení a dějiny umění jako palingeneze: K umělecko-historickému myšlení Maxe Dvořáka na pozadí fenomenologie jeho doby, in: K. Svatoňová, K. Krtilová, eds., *Mizení. Fenomény, mediální praktiky a techniky na prahu zjevného*, Praha, 2017,

In continuity to this methodological transformation, Dvořák in his text on Bruegel from 1920 diagnosed a collapse of the certainty in the objectively comprehended truths and he emphasized an inward force of the human as the possibility how to overcome this uncertainty and which is, from the art historical point of view, expressed in particular works of art.²¹ Dvořák showed that in Bruegel's art a turn from religious dogmas and metaphysical truths toward the human as the creator of the meaning of one's being is evident. It means that, according to Dvořák, in Bruegel's art the change of the spiritual life from the idea of the God in heaven to the God in the human is traceable – therefore, the concept of the upper truth is traded for the inner life of the individual.

This moment of overcoming God toward the human being in Bruegel's art Dvořák stated as follows:

Bruegel was the first one to whom realistic scenes of ordinary people were not only an external staging apparatus but rather the measure of the human and as a source for study and knowledge of the drives, infirmities, passions, customs, habits, thoughts and feelings that dominate man. Not as self-sufficient individuals who have taken the place of ecclesiastical and profane ideals, rather the figures who can be regarded as representatives of this plurality. [...] The depiction of the human mass belonged to the essential features of Christian art; while crowd was in it either merely an echo of higher-level events which cause was beyond the common life or a means of an increase of the external truthfulness and realism of the presentation, Bruegel introduced into art what modern writers call the folk-soul: the psychical life itself in its peculiarity and autonomy, in its anthropological conditionality and cultural-historical factuality and thus a quite new concept of the inner truth of the human description.²²

With such reading of the (historical) role of the human, Dvořák stands close to thoughts not only of early phenomenology but also of Georg Simmel. In his last

pp. 155–202, cit. p. 179: „Důvěra ve ‚skrytou moc‘ poznávající subjektivitu je vlastní stejně tak Husserlovu transcendentálnímu idealismu (Husserl užívá s oblibou pojem ‚subjektivita prožitku/prožívání‘ [Erlebnissubjektivität]), jako i Dvořákovu duchovně-dějinnému modelu dějin umění s jeho subjektivizací umění.“

21 Ibid., p. 180

22 „Bruegel war der erste, dem realistische Volksszenen nicht nur ein äußerer Inszenierungsapparat waren, sondern dem das Leben selbst als Maßstab des Menschlichen und als Quelle des Studiums und der Erkenntnis der die Menschen beherrschenden Triebe, Gebrechen, Leidenschaften, Sitten, Gewohnheiten, Gedanken und Empfindungen galt. Nicht um einzelne Individuen, die als Ganzes an Stelle der kirchlichen und profanen Idealgestalten getreten ist, oder um Gestalten, die als Vertreter dieser Vielheit angesehen werden können. [...] Die Darstellung der Menschenmasse gehörte zu den wesentlichen Zügen der christlichen Kunst; während sie jedoch bis dahin entweder nur ein Echo von Begebenheiten höheren Grades war, deren Ursache über ihr normales Leben hinausging, oder ein Mittel die äußere Wahrscheinlichkeit und Wirklichkeitswirkung der Darstellung zu erhöhen, führte Bruegel in die Kunst ein, was von neueren Schriftstellern als Volksseele bezeichnet wurde: das psychische Eigenleben einer breiten Volksschicht in seiner Eigenart und Autonomie, in seiner anthropologischen Bedingtheit und kulturgeschichtlichen Tatsächlichkeit und damit einen ganz neuen Begriff der inneren Wahrheit der Menschenschilderung.“ Dvořák (note 2), pp. 219–220.