



HAL
open science

Manufacturing National Boundaries? The Notion of Style Between Identity Constructions and Spatial Approaches

Michela Passini

► **To cite this version:**

Michela Passini. Manufacturing National Boundaries? The Notion of Style Between Identity Constructions and Spatial Approaches. *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2024, 3 (2). hal-04861850

HAL Id: hal-04861850

<https://hal.science/hal-04861850v1>

Submitted on 2 Jan 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - ShareAlike 4.0 International License

2024

Manufacturing National Boundaries? The Notion of Style Between Identity Constructions and Spatial Approaches

Michela Passini
CNRS-IHMC, michela.passini@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas>



Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Passini, Michela. "Manufacturing National Boundaries? The Notion of Style Between Identity Constructions and Spatial Approaches." *Artl@s Bulletin* 13, no. 2 (2024): Article 3.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC-BY-NC-SA license](#).

Manufacturing National Boundaries? The Notion of Style Between Identity Constructions and Spatial Approaches

Cover Page Footnote

This paper was translated in English thanks to a grant from the Institut d'histoire moderne et contemporaine (CNRS, ENS, Université Paris1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, France).

Manufacturing National Boundaries? The Notion of Style Between Identity Constructions and Spatial Approaches

Michela Passini

CNRS-IHMC

Abstract

Art historians have long been preoccupied by art's geographical inscription. But it was during the interwar period that research on the geography of art really took off and was recognized as a field of study in its own right. This is evidenced by the organization of an international congress of art history (Stockholm, September 1933) specifically devoted to art geography.

What was the field covered in 1933 by artistic geography? How did it define its objects? And how an art history marked at the time by an extremely present methodological nationalism did shape geographical approaches?

Résumé

Depuis les débuts de la discipline, les historiens de l'art s'interrogent sur l'inscription spatiale de leurs objets. Mais ce n'est que dans l'entre-deux-guerres que la géographie artistique s'affirme comme un domaine d'études à part entière. En témoigne l'organisation d'un congrès international d'histoire de l'art spécifiquement consacré à la géographie de l'art (Stockholm, septembre 1933).

Quel est le champ couvert par la géographie artistique en 1933 ? Comment définit-elle ses objets ? Et comment une histoire de l'art alors marquée par un nationalisme méthodologique omniprésent a-t-elle élaboré des approches spatiales de la production artistique ?

Michela Passini is a tenured researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS-IHMC, Paris France). She is currently working on a book about Erwin Panofsky's migration to the USA and the invention of iconology. Among her publications : L'œil et l'archive. Une histoire de l'histoire de l'art (Paris, 2017).

English translation by Victor Lu.

Art historians have long been preoccupied by art's geographical inscription. From its very beginning, the discipline has placed its objects in a grid that is both chronological and topographical. The great paradigmatic accounts of Italian art, such as Giorgio Vasari's *Lives* (1550 and 1568) and Luigi Lanzi's *Storia pittorica della Italia* (1795-1796), are both based, albeit to varying degrees, on a territorial and stylistic distribution of artists according to regional schools. Much more developed in Lanzi's work than in Vasari's, the reflection on the major centres of Italian painting combines a geographical approach with a more specifically political one: the stylistic unity and artistic prestige of a region are determined by its climate, by the power of its capital city, by the presence and activity of patrons, and by the emulation that takes place between artists¹. Similarly, in Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (History of Art Among the Ancients, 1764), climate is considered an essential factor in the cultural development of a "nation", along with forms of government².

When art history became a discipline at the end of the 19th century, the questioning of the spatial dimension of artistic production fed the research work on the Renaissance and took the form of comparative studies on the development of two major stylistic areas: Italy, on the one hand, and the countries north of the Alps, on the other³. However, it was during the interwar period that research on the geography of art really took off and was recognised as a field of study in its own right. This is evidenced by the organisation of an international congress of art history – the thirteenth, held in Stockholm in September 1933 – specifically devoted to "Kunstgeography" or art geography⁴.

What was the field covered in 1933 by artistic geography? What were its tools and methods? How did

it define its objects? The proceedings of the Stockholm congress provide a first element of answer. "When, in the history of a particular nation, can one for the first time or in a particularly interesting way, distinguish a national character?": so was the formulation of the plenary sessions⁵. The congress' report published in the *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* by Ludwig Heydenreich goes in the same direction: according to the author, the geographical approach would make it possible to solve one of the major problems of the discipline that of the origin of national styles ("Entstehung nationaler Style")⁶.

Within the framework of an art history marked at the time by an extremely present methodological nationalism⁷, the geographical approach was associated with the reflection on the national dimension of styles. If one admits that art is determined by the "character" of the community that produces it, the geographical context in which it evolves takes on a particular importance. Some art historians defined the art community producers from a socio-cultural point of view; others relied on racial patterns and therefore considered style as an ethnic invariant. In both cases, the geographical approach was conceived as the tool to measure the real territorial extension of a local, regional or national style. In other words, beyond political borders, the geography of art would have made it possible to establish a historical cartography of the diffusion of styles and, therefore, of areas of aesthetic influence. It is in these terms that the stakes of the geographical approach were presented by Johnny Roosval, a medievalist, president of the Swedish committee for the International Congresses of Art History and organiser of the one in Stockholm:

It seems in truth urgent that we abandon the outdated, but still ongoing, way of subordinating the artistic facts of a thousand years ago to the conditions of the political geography of 1933. What are we waiting for to react against this much accepted

¹ Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Ginzburg, "Domination symbolique et géographie artistique", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 40, 1981: 51-72, 106s.

² Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004), 36-37.

³ See, among others, Eugène Müntz, *La Renaissance en Italie et en France à l'époque de Charles VIII* (Firmin-Didot, 1885, Paris), Jacques Mesnil, *L'art au nord et au sud des Alpes à l'époque de la Renaissance. Etudes comparatives* (Van Oest, Paris et Bruxelles, 1911).

⁴ Johnny Roosval (ed.), *XIII^{ème} Congrès international d'Histoire de l'Art, Stockholm 4-7 Septembre 1933* (Comité organisateur du Congrès, Stockholm, 1933).

⁵ Roosval, *XIII^{ème} Congrès international d'Histoire de l'Art*, 35.

⁶ Ludwig Heydenreich, "Der XIII. Internationale Kongress für Kunstwissenschaft in Stockholm", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 2, 1933, 410-411.

⁷ Michela Passini, *La fabrique de l'art national. Le nationalisme et les origines de l'histoire de l'art en France et en Allemagne 1870-1933* (Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art, Maison des Sciences de l'homme, Paris, 2012).

routine? What are we waiting for to draw up art's geographical maps, considering exclusively the artistic data and deliberately neglecting the political limits [...]?

⁸

Such an invitation to abandon a political approach to space in order to question in a different way the circulation and diffusion of iconographic forms and motifs was based on the idea of a stylistic continuity existing within the same geographical area – a continuity over the centuries and the great historical upheavals that would go beyond state divisions and would find its origin in a pre-existing aesthetic identity. Bringing to the foreground this original core and defining its territorial inscription was the objective of the geography of the art, according to the organisers of the Stockholm Congress:

The Swedes form a unity by their race, their language, their religion, by their land, their pale sun adored, their abundant snow, equally loved. That is why their art also shows unbroken chains of relationships between the eras of time. [...] All this is said by Taine, and applies to all nations. [...] The artistic tradition exists in every healthy nation, but the living continuity is more or less visible. Wars and migrations have often caused breaks in the chain. For you, who have dedicated your life to the study of the past, these gaps are not real. You see even the faintest nuances that, in spite of everything, exist, linking one period to another through the gaps. For most of your fellow citizens these links remain invisible. So it is up to you to find them and to show them well⁹.

These statements reveal the profoundly ambiguous nature of the notion of “national style” that served as a starting point for the work of the Congress. According to the authors, the notion did not refer to the nation as a political and territorial entity, but to anthropological and cultural realities whose contours could be more or less broad. Thus, Heinrich Wölfflin – one of the main theorists of “national characters” in art history, under whom Roosval studied – asserted in his 1920s and 1930s works

the existence of two ways of seeing and, therefore, of representing the world: the Italian or the classical, and the “German” – a term that covers a large Germanic area –, or the anti-classical.

This paper traces the genesis of a discourse on national styles, one in which the concept of “nation” becomes, quite paradoxically, a tool for overcoming State boundaries in art historical writing, and in the shaping of an art historical discipline. The intellectual and ideological repercussions of such a development will be the focus of the following pages.

Thinking About the “National”: “Artistic Characters” According to Heinrich Wölfflin

At the beginning of the 20th century, Wölfflin was probably the art historian who most comprehensively and critically addressed the question of national artistic characteristics. The extent and persistence of national or local aesthetic traditions are among the privileged objects of study of the art historiography of the first half of the century. Art historians of this period, however, rarely questioned the nature and meaning of the national categories they so widely employed. The existence of strongly individualised “national characters”, of which art and culture would be the reflection, is for most of them a given, an obviousness which largely contributed to determining their approach; the nation constitutes then one of the prisms – and certainly one of the most powerful – through which is observed any artistic phenomenon.

Such a way of classifying and interpreting the artistic production does not necessarily depend on a reactionary positioning. Inherited from a doctrine already formalised by Winckelmann, according to which art would be the most faithful expression of the spirit or genius of nations understood as individuals, this form of methodological nationalism enjoyed in the 19th and 20th centuries an extremely wide diffusion among personalities covering the whole spectrum of political affiliations. Erwin Panofsky's *Albrecht Dürer*, for example, opens with the question of a Germanic artistic identity.

⁸ Roosval, XIII^{ème} Congrès international d'Histoire de l'Art, 29.

⁹ Roosval, XIII^{ème} Congrès international d'Histoire de l'Art, 32-33.

Published in 1943 in Princeton, where Panofsky took refuge from Nazi persecution, the work cannot be suspected of complacency towards the national mythologies of a “Germanness” of the arts, then advocated by the Nazis. The problem of the definition of the artistic “genius” of Germany, of its national style, appears here as essential:

The evolution of Western European art, starting from the high medieval flowering, can be compared to a great fugue, whose main theme will be taken up again, with variations, in the different countries. The Gothic style was created in France; the Renaissance and the Baroque, born in Italy, were perfected thanks to the contribution of the Netherlands; the Rococo and the Impressionism were French; the Neo-Classicism and the Romanticism, essentially English. In this great fugue the voice of Germany is missing¹⁰.

A fetish object of German-language art history throughout the first half of the 20th century and beyond, Dürer embodied for many scholars the very essence of Germanness. But while he had been described as the most “German” of German artists, Dürer was at the same time one of those who most assiduously sought contact with Italian Renaissance culture. Understanding Dürer, therefore, meant penetrating the meaning of an artistic tradition in all its complexity, and the way in which this apparent contradiction was approached is a good indicator of the positioning of art historians in a strongly divided scholarly space. It is no coincidence that Panofsky, who had been grappling with Wölfflin’s work throughout his career¹¹, chose to devote a monumental study to the Nuremberg painter at the same time as Wölfflin’s seminal essay on Dürer was reaching its sixth edition¹². Wölfflin, for his part, examined Dürer’s art on several occasions, and always at decisive moments in his own trajectory. Both central in the canon of German art and constitutively exceptional, alternately considered

authentically Germanic or dangerously Italianate, Dürer’s work was the support of his reflection on the national inscription of the artistic fact.

Dürer plays a much important role in Wölfflin’s 1931 study of national artistic characteristics. Published two years before the Stockholm congress on the geography of art, the work entitled *Die Kunst der Renaissance. Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl* (“The Art of the Renaissance, Italy and the Germanic Sense of Form”) is his last book and undoubtedly his intellectual testament¹³. Organised like his *Fundamental Principles* around a series of contrasting binomials¹⁴, the book aims to define the characteristics of the two great ways of seeing – and therefore of painting, sculpting or building – which, in Wölfflin’s eyes, share the field of European art: those of the Germanic “North” and the Italian “South”. As in the *Principles*, the technique of comparing paintings, sculptures and buildings produced at the same time in the Germanic space and in Italy allows to bring out a series of “national” stylistic constants. Thus, for Wölfflin, German art favours open form while Italian art demands contour; one seeks freedom and rhythm, the other structure; German irregularity is opposed to Italian regularity, northern tension to southern repose, movement to monumentality, the typical to the universal, relative clarity to absolute clarity. Although Dürer tried to reproduce the regularity and monumentality of his Italian models, he reinterpreted them according to typically Germanic formal patterns. His works, even the most Italianate, retain their “Deutschtum”, their Germanness. But what exactly does it consist of? On what is its specificity based?

To attempt to answer this question, we must take a step back. In his *Fundamental Principles of the History of Art*, published in 1915, Wölfflin already explicitly theorised a “double origin of style”: “Besides the individual style, there is therefore a school style, a country style, a race style”¹⁵. It was in this

¹⁰ Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1943), French translation: *La vie et l'art d'Albrecht Dürer* (Paris, Hazan, 1987, republished in 2012), 11.

¹¹ Erwin Panofsky, “Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst”, *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 10, 1915, 460-467.

¹² Heinrich Wölfflin, *Die Kunst Albrecht Dürers* (Bruckmann, Munich, 1905, sixth edition: 1943).

¹³ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Die Kunst der Renaissance. Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl* (Brückmann, Munich, 1931).

¹⁴ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Brückmann, Munich, 1915), French translation: *Principes fondamentaux de l'histoire de l'art. Le problème de l'évolution du style dans l'art moderne* (Brionne, Gérard Monfort, 1992).

¹⁵ Wölfflin, *Principes fondamentaux*, 8.

work that Wölfflin posed for the first time the existence of two “ways of seeing”, two “national artistic characters”, whose opposition would structure the evolution of the artistic production in Europe in modern time: “From the outset, we drew the attention to the fact that the schemes of the vision differ from one nation to another. There is, in the art of presentation, a manner proper to the Italians, another proper to the Germans, and they always remain similar through the centuries. Of course, these are not constants in the mathematical sense, but the establishment of a national type of imagination amounts to an auxiliary sketch necessary to the historian. A time will come when the history of European architecture will not only distinguish Gothic art from Renaissance art, but will bring out the national physiognomies which imported styles do not quite succeed in erasing”¹⁶. For Wölfflin, the essence of the creative act lied in vision and this one was necessarily determined by the geographical base in which it was rooted. Light’s quality, the forms of the landscape and the frame determined the artist’s vision and constituted the filter through which he restores reality. The territorial inscription was thus an essential element of the interpretation of an artwork.

However, Wölfflin was extremely cautious in advancing the theory of national characters in *Fundamental Principles of the History of Art*, insisting on their fluidity and their essentially heuristic quality. His diary and working notes testify to the growing anxiety with which the scholar viewed the hold of politics on research in the war years: a deep distrust of the use that could be made in such a context of categories like “German” seems to have determined his restraint¹⁷. If he introduced in the *Principles* the fundamental distinction between an artistic North and South, Wölfflin did not deepen it, just as he refrained from thematising the relative value of their cultural productions. It is in other texts of the same period that we should look for the first draft of a reflection on national identities in the arts.

¹⁶ Wölfflin, *Principes fondamentaux*, 268.

¹⁷ Passini, *La fabrique de l’art national*, 132f. Warnke Martin, “Heinrich Wölfflin”, in Michel Espagne and Bénédicte Savoy (ed.), *Dictionnaire des historiens d’art allemands* (Éditions du CNRS, Paris, 2010), 363-372.

Wölfflin gave in November 1914, only a few months before the publication of his classic work, a lecture at the Munich Academy of Sciences on Renaissance Architecture in Germany¹⁸. The aim here was to identify the features that determine the “Germanness” of German architecture in the 17th century, a “Germanness” that remained intact despite the obvious imitation of Italian forms. In order to explain its specificity, Wölfflin mobilised a series of key notions that would remain central in his reconstitution of national artistic characters: the different role that the harmony of proportions played in each of the two figurative traditions; the construction of objects as independent plastic units or as interdependent pictorial realities; a more or less accentuated regularity in the organisation of the different parts of a building.

This short text served as a precedent for a more extensive study which, after the war, took up its main theses to paint a more detailed picture of the two national characters: the article entitled “Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl” which, published in the journal *Logos* in 1922, was in turn to form the core of the eponymous work that Wölfflin published in 1931. Here, Wölfflin developed in much greater detail the analysis of the two national styles that would dominate the historical development of art in Europe. However, he made very explicit the limits of his method, beyond which, he argued, it would be risky to go forward:

One could imagine that a mixture of the two tastes would be impossible and that one would have to be on one side or the other; but it is not so: we discover the singular fact that the North has been perfectly capable, if not always at least at certain periods, of opening itself to the values of southern beauty, even of seeking in the South its true ideal of beauty¹⁹.

Whereas in the *Fundamental Principles*, Wölfflin had described the Classical and Baroque styles as

¹⁸ Heinrich Wölfflin, “Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl”, *Logos*, 10, 1922, republished in Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte. Gedrucktes und Ungedrucktes* (Schwabe, Bâle, 1941), French translation : “L’Italie et le sentiment germanique de la forme”, in Wölfflin, *Refléxions sur l’histoire de l’art* (Paris, Flammarion, 1997), 157-166.

¹⁹ Wölfflin, *Refléxions sur l’histoire de l’art*, 163-164.

two moments in the history of forms, without really delving into the question of their national roots, in his article for *Logos*, he suggested for the first time that Classical Renaissance art would be an essentially Italian style, “an art that seems to us specifically Italian for the simple reason that, of all Italian productions, it is the one that lends itself least to comparison”²⁰. But if classical art corresponded to the Italian people, which art would then express the German sensibility? Unlike Georg Dehio or younger colleagues such as Wilhelm Worringer or Kurt Gerstenberg, who were his students, Wölfflin refused to oppose the Italian Renaissance to the Gothic or the Baroque as an artistic manifestation of the Germanic character. One of the most personal features of his approach consists precisely in the attempt, in reaction against the dominant tendencies of contemporary German historiography, to leave open for a German art that was increasingly perceived as essentially Gothic, anti-classical, irrational, a path towards the regularity and solidity of the classical forms of the Renaissance, in other words, to defend the possibility of a Northern classicism.

If we now return to *Die Kunst der Renaissance in Italien*, it should be noted that all of Wölfflin’s work to define the German artistic character did not translate into nationalistic claims. Wölfflin did not establish the primacy of Germanic art. On the contrary, as in his previous works, the Italian classical form retains a kind of moral superiority that constantly attracts German artists and scholars. The two figurative traditions retained a real porosity in his eyes, and the work is a study of the conditions of the possibility of exchanges between North and South.

Although Wölfflin’s approach may seem far removed from the current way of approaching artistic geography, his work nevertheless provided an essential basis for reflection on the “Kunstgeography” of the 1930s and 1940s. In the context of the historiography of the time, Wölfflin was one of the first to raise the question of artists’ geographical inscription, even if for him it was less a question of a territorial anchorage, in the material sense of the

term, than of insertion in a horizon of formal possibilities determined by the visual habits acquired in a given environment. All cannot be made in all time, he wrote in his *Fundamental Principles of the History of Art*, and certainly one would not betray his thoughts by adding that in art, all cannot be made in all places. The systematic consideration of the ethnic dimension of art and the theorisation of its identity component had a decisive influence on the research of a younger generation of German art historians, who seized on Wölfflin’s work to develop the tools, practices and methodological proposals of a new spatial history.

Kunstgeography at the Thirteenth International Congress of Art History (Stockholm, 1933)

Wölfflin’s work on national characters invites us to circumscribe and define “formal communities” whose scope goes beyond the limits of states. The idea of a nation that underlies them is, above all, cultural and anchored in a supposed identity of means of expression. The notion of “German” art thus covers for Wölfflin a vast Germanic space, including the German-speaking countries, but also Flanders and Holland. This desire to take into account artistic traditions inscribed in territories and linked to specific visual constants, beyond political borders, was already clearly apparent in his teaching at the beginning of the 1910s and was to serve as a starting point for researchers he trained and who, in the inter-war period, produced the first studies aimed at a spatial history of art.

This is the case of Paul Gerstenberg, a student and later assistant of Wölfflin in Berlin, and author of the manifesto *Ideen zur eine Kunstgeographie Europas* (1922)²¹, of the organiser of the Stockholm Congress Johnny Roosval, and also of a scholar such as Paul Frankl, who presented his reflections on the challenges of an artistic geography and continued to refine his spatial approach to medieval art after the Second World War. In their writings, all three

²⁰ Wölfflin, *Reflexions sur l’histoire de l’art*, 158.

²¹ Kurt Gerstenberg, *Ideen zu einer Kunstgeographie Europas* (Seemann, Leipzig, 1922).

called for the creation of historical atlases of art similar to those that map the diffusion and evolution of languages, religions and other cultural phenomena. It would then be a matter of abandoning a historiography determined by national borders in favour of an approach that privileges the analysis of the material conditions of the circulation of forms.

Gerstenberg insisted in his programmatic text that it is precisely on the material, concrete dimension of the limits that the diffusion of styles, iconographic models, techniques and know-how meets. The physical borders, such as the seas, the rivers, the reliefs, must then be studied, according to the cases, as many obstacles or, on the contrary, of facilitators of exchanges. He stated, for example, that in the 12th century, the Alps represented less a barrier than a contact zone between the Germanic North and the Italian South: from Como to Quedlinburg, from Verona to Königslutter, the details of the architectural ornamentation present striking similarities. Art historians would therefore benefit from looking at the Alpine region as a unit, instead of fragmenting it and studying it from within national art histories. The same pattern would apply to the Pyrenees or the Carpathians²².

As soon as political borders are disregarded, Gerstenberg argued, it became possible to delineate uniform stylistic areas that remain relatively stable in the Middle Ages and the modern period. The map of artistic Europe that then emerged could not be read according to traditional categories of “German”, “French”, or “Italian” art, but was composed of broad transnational zones characterised by a common formal landscape (“Zonen gemeinsamer Optik”): a Nordic area, including Normandy, Great Britain, Ireland, Iceland, and Norway; Flanders and Holland; a Germanic area from East Germany to Poland; a second one including South Germany, Austria, and Bohemia; a broad Franco-German area; the Alps; the Mediterranean rim; the Baltic region. The perspective was to identify as closely as possible the process of diffusion of styles within the different zones: Romanesque art, like the Renaissance, conquered Europe according to

a dynamic that went from south to north, while the Gothic spread from the French west to the Germanic and then Slavic east. For Gerstenberg, these great international styles were always carried by “peoples” or “ethnic groups” (“Völker” or “Stämme”) who function as “artistic vectors” (“Kunstträgers”). One of the challenges of artistic geography is, therefore, to highlight the material and intellectual conditions that determine the primacy of one “people” over others.

Like his master Wölfflin, Gerstenberg did see the different “peoples” succeeding each other in artistic supremacy, according to a Hegelian reading of history: Italy would dominate in the 16th century, Flanders in the 17th century, France in the 18th century. But, much more than Wölfflin, Gerstenberg was interested in the social factors that can influence such cultural domination. Already in his thesis on the German Gothic, defended under the direction of the Swiss scholar, he had combined the formal analysis of the development of a specifically Germanic style with the study of the socio-cultural foundations of its diffusion. An important part of his work was thus devoted to a systematic exploration of the relationship between architectural forms and the characteristics of German society at the time. Gerstenberg drew a series of “historical parallels” (“geschichtliche Parallele”) between the evolution of the Gothic and the development of scholasticism or the rise of the bourgeoisie, emphasising for example the close relationship between the affirmation of certain architectural typologies, such as the *Hallenkirche*, and the expansion of mendicant orders. In his manifesto for an artistic geography of Europe, this socio-cultural approach was presented as a corrective: against an art history that would limit itself to identifying “influences”, his goal was to rethink the material, but also cultural, limits that artistic circulations encounter.

The same ambition animates the work of Johnny Roosval, who presented a synthesis of his research on the medieval art of the Baltic regions at the Stockholm Congress²³. The situation of the Baltic

²² Gerstenberg, *Ideen*, 9-11.

²³ Johnny Roosval (ed.), *Résumés des communications présentées au congrès. XIII^{ème} Congrès international d'Histoire de l'Art, Stockholm 4-7 Septembre 1933* (Comité organisateur du Congrès, Stockholm, 1933), 96-97.

North in the Middle Ages illustrated the notion of “artistic domain”: Roosval used it to characterise stylistically homogeneous areas at a given time, in a manner similar to what Gerstenberg did when he defined “Zonen gemeinsamer Optik” (areas characterised by a same way of seeing). Roosval, on the other hand, developed the material dimension of his research even further, reconstructing, for example, the export of iconic baptismal fonts from Gotland during the 12th century or the expansion of brick architecture in the 13th century as symptoms of the consolidation of the Baltic domain.

However, to explain the reasons for such stylistic homogeneity within a field or area, both Roosval and Gerstenberg resorted to the vocabulary of “national character”. Although both advocate a historiography capable of transcending political boundaries to apprehend broader artistic units, the conceptual toolkit of the nation and “national artistic character” remained operative, as if there were no other way to think about the persistence of forms within a geographical area. It was always in these terms that Paul Frankl – assistant and pupil of Wölfflin as well as Gerstenberg and Roosval – presented to the congress the “Tasks of Artistic Geography”²⁴. The latter should try to solve three fundamental questions: the influence of the physical environment on artistic production, its national dimension (“das Problem des Nationalen in der Kunst”) and the definition of artistic fields (“Kunstkreise”). For Frankl, the three were closely linked, since the physical and visual properties of a landscape are the basis for the initial perception of a national aesthetic identity, which in turn determines the existence of a homogeneous stylistic domain.

The closely related notions of “Zone gemeinsamer Optik” (Gerstenberg), “domaine artistique” (Roosval) and “Kunstkreis” (Frankl) testify to the efforts of a generation of art historians trained in Germany to articulate a spatial and material approach to artistic production with their desire to understand the permanence of forms. For these researchers, the “national” is, above all, the tool that

allows them to think about continuity, to work on the long term and on the very slow evolution of forms, in contrast to traditional monographic approaches. Once again, let us emphasise that, in the intellectual context of Germany at the beginning of the 1930s, before Hitler’s rise to power and the Nazification of the university and cultural institutions forced scholars to choose sides – even simply by using a certain vocabulary or referring to certain notions – this form of methodological nationalism, which was extremely widespread, was far from being a political indicator: while Gerstenberg joined the National Socialist Party in 1933, Frankl – a Jew – fled Germany in 1938 and had his book *Das System der Kunstwissenschaft* banned by the Nazis for its stance in favour of modern art²⁵.

Alternative Models of Style Spatialization

For Gerstenberg, Roosval and Frankl, the Wölfflinian model of “national characters” played an essential role in the elaboration of an approach that, while seizing the vocabulary of the “national”, is ultimately transversal. The nation, understood in an anthropological rather than a political sense – as a community of culture, and more specifically of visual culture – served precisely to go beyond the framework of states. The work of Josef Strzygowski, mentioned by Roosval at the opening of the colloquium, also constituted a central methodological reference for medievalists such as Frankl, Roosval and Gerstenberg. In his research on the formal and iconographic sources of medieval art, Strzygowski was the first to push his investigation to the frontiers of art history, and to connect spaces that were then thought to be separate, in a resolutely innovative way for the time. The periphery became the centre, and Rome lost its primacy in favour of geographically and culturally distant areas – the Altaic plateau, the Scandinavian North, etc. –, whose works the Austrian scholar decreed the entry into history. Not only did he propose a geography of art very different from that usually implied by a still

²⁴ Roosval, *Résumés*, 86-87.

²⁵ Paul Frankl, *Das System der Kunstwissenschaft* (Rohrer, Brünn, 1938).

largely Eurocentric historiography²⁶, but he was challenging the discipline's classical chronology, questioning the separation between prehistory and art history on the one hand, and on the other, the dichotomy between works of art – prestigious and recognised – and artefacts, studied more by archaeologists and ethnologists than by art historians.

If Wölfflin's work gave the example of a formal study over a long period of time of the phenomena of permanence, transmission and slow transformation of artistic traditions, applied to the art of the Renaissance and the modern period in Western Europe, Strzygowski's legacy consisted in a considerable widening of the geographical horizons of research and in the practice of a spatial history nourished by a philological approach of the genesis of forms. The perspective was to trace, from object to object, from borrowing to borrowing, the journey of motifs and techniques from the East to the medieval West, keeping as a common thread the supposed continuity of the Aryan race. Arthur Kingsley Porter (1883-1933), another researcher cited by Roosval as a major reference in the elaboration of artistic geography, developed during these same years an alternative spatial approach, free of any reference to ethnographic or even racial constants.

Kingsley Porter is an emblematic figure in the institutionalisation of art history in the United States²⁷. Trained at Yale, where he specialised in the history of medieval art, and then at the School of Architecture at Columbia University, he taught at Yale from 1915 and was appointed William Dorr Boardman Professor at Harvard in 1920. His most influential work appeared in 1923 under the title *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*²⁸ and reflects a

vision of Romanesque art that is different from, if not opposed to, that developed by his European counterparts. Eccentric in relation to his object of study, capable of conducting research in French, German and Italian, as well as in other languages²⁹, Porter seized upon a subject usually read through the prism of “national characters” – this medieval art in which European researchers were striving to detect the beginnings of an identity – and reconstructed its developments on a European scale.

The central idea of his book was not new in itself: Porter takes up the work of the philologist Joseph Bédier on the diffusion of *chansons de geste* along the pilgrimage roads and makes them the main channels for the expansion of the core of forms, techniques, iconographic motifs and stylistic characters that constitute Romanesque art. The most innovative aspect of his work lies in its composition: consisting of one volume of text and nine volumes of reproductions, *Roman Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads* is a photographic atlas of Romanesque architecture and sculpture. The arrangement of the images blurs the boundaries between nations to reveal the continuity of techniques, motifs and stylistic traits. It is easy to understand why his method appealed to the organisers of the Stockholm Congress, to which Porter was invited. He died a few months before the conference, so his paper on Irish cross carving was read with words of tribute.

Medieval, Romanesque and Gothic art had been the privileged terrain of an artistic geography in the process of elaboration. The Middle Ages had represented for art historians at the beginning of the 20th century the primary basis of national aesthetic identities; the inter-war period saw the refinement of research on the national inscription of visual cultures. The first geography of art then maintained close relations with a history of medieval art, one of whose objectives was to take up the spatial dimension of artistic phenomena in order to determine the historical extension of styles. For the proponents of the geographical approach, especially the German-speaking ones, the goal was not so much

²⁶ Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History. Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847-1918* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 2013), 185, Christopher S. Wood, “Strzygowski und Riegl in den Vereinigten Staaten”, *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 53, 2004, 226.

²⁷ Kathryn Brush, “La storia dell'arte medievale: Goldschmidt, Vöge, Toesca, Måle et Porter”, in Enrico Castelnuovo and Giuseppe Sergi (ed.), *Arti e storia nel Medioevo*, vol. 4, *Il Medioevo al passato e al presente*, (Einaudi, Torino, 2004), 248-252, Kathryn Brush, “Adolph Goldschmidt und Arthur Kingsley Porter. Vergleichende Corpuswerkforschung in Deutschland und Amerika vor 1933”, in Kai Kappel, Claudia Rückert, Stefan Trinks (ed.), *Atlanten des Wissens. Adolph Goldschmidts Corpuswerke 1914 bis heute* (Deutscher Kunstverlag, Berlin et Munich, 2016), 62-83, Nicolai Bernd, “Arthur Kingsley Porter”, in Heinrich Dilly (ed.), *Altmeister moderner Kunstgeschichte* (Reimer, Berlin, 1990), 220-232.

²⁸ Arthur Kingsley Porter, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads* (Marshall Jones, Boston, 10 vol., 1923).

²⁹ Brush, “La storia dell'arte medievale”, 249

to establish a chronological primacy, but to show rather the continuity and the diffusion of a specific visual culture within a given space.

Within this approach, style is construed as a unity, almost as a subject. It spreads, gains traction or recedes, but never loses its specificity, its “national”, indigenous character. Hybridisation, cross-

contamination, and re-semantisation aren't readily thinkable or easy to address based on such a theoretical toolkit, and art history would struggle for a long time in the straits of a methodological nationalism whose power was all the greater as its basic assumptions remained implicit.

This paper was translated thanks to a grant of the Institut d'histoire moderne et contemporaine (IHMC, Paris, France)