CAH2505 Aesthetic and Art Criticism

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Write up Report

Leading Characteristics of Late Roman Kunsthistorie - Alois Riegl

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Abstract

Alois Riegl, as one of the figures impacting on the development of Formalism, published an article, the Leading Characteristics of Late Roman Art, in 1893 in an attempt to reinstate his discovery of values necessary to the future trajectory of art in Late Roman Art deemed decadent back then. This study focuses on two parts: First, what triggered Riegl to interpret works of the Late Romanian period with notions deviant from popular belief, and; second, how Riegl delineated the history of art as an evolutionary process, constellated by common characteristics spotted in the aesthetics, and appreciated art through the lens of Kunstwollen. Through the juxtaposition of Riegl and other scholars of Aesthetics such as Semper and Wölfflin, and the aid of works from the different stages, readers may catch glimpse of how the conception of Kunstwollen drove Riegl to publish works, how the stages of art are connected and thus interdependent and how Kunstwollen can be applied on artwork.

1. Background Information

Alois Riegl (1858 – 1905) is an Austrian historian as well as an ornamentalist, who studied at the University of Vienna, and is considered one of the most influential figures and the most innovative ideologists in the establishment of the art history. Moreover, he is practitioner of Formalism and interested in decorative arts due to his years of service in the museum field and he holds the view that the beauty of arts should be entirely based on the form of art itself rather than any necessity imposed externally.

He started his academic career in the Museum für angewandte Kunst as a museum research assistant in 1884, followed by curatorial position in 1886, and eventually as the director of textile department in charge of collections of eastern textile works. However, He was not satisfied with the museum works and worked as a no-paid lecturer in University of Vienna in 1889. Between 1890 and 1891, Riegl started giving lectures of decorative arts to students. Eventually, he got the official qualification of being a lecturer in University of Vienna until 1897. In certain extent, those rich working experience in museum field has contributed to his success in art industry by explicating his academic art theories. (Zhang Jian 2004)

Regarded as the one of the milestone of art history by other scholars, Riegl has published three best-known books: Antique Oriental Carpets, Problems of style, and Late Roman Art Industry, exhibiting his theories and analysis of arts. The second one included rich descriptions of ornamental arts and firstly introduce Kunstwollen and artworks in pure form while going against materialism associated with Gottfried Semper investigating arts in materialist approach. The third rescued the aesthetic characteristics of Late-Roman Art Industry by fully elaborating the term of Kunstwollen, which got successful and has become the focal point of art criticism after the publication.
With his rising popularity in art industry, he was served as a chairman of heritage protection in Austria that greatly increased his administrative works. Even more, Riegl has made great efforts in proposal preparation of a plan of museum modernization. (Zhang Jian 2004)

**Reasons why Riegl wrote this book**
Riegl has made a detailed research on late roman art to rescue the notoriety of late roman art, which is regarded as a declination and deemed as less worthwhile in investigation, by linking to the term Kunstwollen he introduced. (Vlad 2004) Riegl aimed to explain why those late roman art left a bad impression to the public in that time, and therefore created a formalist approach in appreciating arts and proved the aesthetic value of late roman art.

2. Kunstwollen (The Will of Art)

Historically, Riegl’s most significant contribution in the academic discipline of art history, which greatly influenced the study afterward, is the concept of “Kunstwollen” - a combination of the artistic tendency of a society in certain period of time, in short, “The Will of Art”, which can be referred to the inner psychological drive to artworks, emphasizing on inner purpose but not external practical function.

Kunstwollen was derived from Riegl’s second book - *Problems of style*, and fully elaborated it in his third book - *Late Roman Art Industry*, which explicate the artistic worldview of late Roman. He attributed his introduction of the concept Kunstwollen to Karl Schnasses, who is a 19th century German art historian, as Riegl deeply indebted to his book Niederländische Briefe (Podro 1982) which explicated the revolution of visual forms of arts by the conception of teleology advocated by Hegel.

Therefore, Hegel has an indirect relationship with Riegl historically through the theory of teleology, which aims to be devoted oneself into striving for the goals produced by anythings extrinsically and intrinsically, meaning that anything exists for achieving goals, which is linking to the concept of Kunstwollen by which Riegl believes that every art work should has its intrinsic artistic goals to achieve, and artists create arts for goals and eventually achieving the aim of self-satisfaction.

**Kunstwollen - The refinement of Semperianism**
Moreover, the formation of Kunstwollen also attributed to the opposition to the theory advocated by Semper who introduced “Semperianism” of holding the view that style is the product of a conjunction of certain materials and techniques. Originally, both of them held similar ideas, which aimed to make art harmony in world and advocated the autonomy of
artwork. However, both of them embodied their aims in different approaches. In fact, Semper was holding the materialist approach to achieve his artistic goal but Riegl mainly emphasized on investigating arts on its pure form and human’s inner drive. (Andrew Hopkins 2010) In other words, Kunstwollen is a concept opposite to the semperian, holding the view that art in a particular style should be contained a will, which transcends any necessities imposed by practical utility, available materials and technologies, demonstrates a basic human aesthetic drive that manifests itself in a variety of forms and formats. (Andrew Hopkins 2010) To put it in another way, in no way do we appreciate arts from outside sources and supporting elements but from the form of art pieces itself which reveal the worldview of artists.

To deeply elaborate the theory of Kunstwollen, artworks should be created intrinsically in a self-contained way but not the imitation of nature, which is viewed as the ideal artistic purpose. To understand this theory easily, it means that every artwork has its own artistic goal to strive for no matter it is architecture, painting, ceramic or decorative art. We just find their will expressed through its formats, qualities, formal and visual elements, and based on the inner purpose of the artwork but not external practical purpose as well.

Kunstwollen is a continuous process of human that mainly strives for the inner artistic goals continuously to show the will of art, achieving self-satisfaction in artworks, which allow application in every age as Riel has stated that each period has its own Worldview that decides its will of art (Zhang Jian 2004), which can be linked to Rieg!’s inclination of theory of evolution and has made detailed research on observation of the continuous evolution of artworks from ancient times to late roman period, finding what are the artistic goals artists strived for and the harmonious worldview(Weltanschauung) in different period.(Zhang Jian, 2004) What is more, he also has pointed out that each period has its own trend in achieving inner artistic goals that can be able to reflect their inner artistic drives and worldview in that period that we can feel it in various aspects including religion, philosophy, law and government organization etc. (Zhang Jian 2004) Precisely, Worldview is the broader view of people’s values deeply rooted by their living environment.

**Three periods of development of ancient arts**
Most importantly, Rieg! has divided the creation of ancient artworks into 3 periods consisting of the ancient egypt, classical greek and late roman art, and he also found that the ideal perception of self-containedness has been remained throughout the whole ancient art period but experienced a little changes, for example, reliefs, which has had great evolution throughout the whole ancient period. (Zhang Jian 2004)
In early history of art, there was a great emphasis on the notion of 2-Dimension, the individual completeness of object(s) characterised by its being ‘contained’ within its contour, its independent existence from its surroundings and a projection towards beholders kept to the minimum. The above relief created in Ancient Egypt is a case in point. The whole relief is dedicated to the portrayal of a lion, with the background kept to a minimal spatial substantiality. The lion is kept in its clear contours and is considered complete. There is no colour rhythm - i.e. the rhythm of light and shade - between the animal and the background, thereby actualising a minimal projection. It is also believed that the absence of such a colour rhythm contributes to the self-containedness of the lion, as without being ‘integrated into’ the background, it outstands itself in the eyes of beholders. (Andrew Hopkins 2010)
In the Classical Greek period, artists started to introduce a spatial understanding in reliefs through the creation and suggestion of motion. Civilisations, or at least individuals at the time, were very concerned about concepts of logic and sequence and will always look for and try to establish a ‘chain-like connection’ between objects - this is how beholders conceive the dynamics of the works. (Andrew Hopkins 2010) By relating one individual shape to the other, beholders began to think and read the work in a group of individual shapes. This renders each independent object less ‘individual’ and ‘complete’, coupled with the use of limited projections made explicit through techniques of soft shadows and gentle foreshortening, beholders comprehend the sense of space in the works. Although reading the works through the law of causality may undermine the completeness, or self-containedness, of each individual object, this is made invalid as however the figures are placed on different layers of planes, they remained leveled on the ground plane, with a spatial unity between each object. (Andrew Hopkins 2010)

Turning to the Late Roman Art termed the third period of antiquity, the crafting of figures has reverted to expressing tactility and individuality of objects in the works. In the work above, we see the overlap of 3-Dimensional figures, which are more developed compared to figures found in works from the Classical period. The reversion of style is limited to that of objects. Artists had ventured to challenge the beholders’ understanding of space through
incorporating their understanding of space and dynamic motion traced in Classical works. Shifting from a spatial unity formed by placing individual objects in perspectives, artists now situate figures on the same plane in different perspectives. This disruption of spatial unity is an exemplar of how the art has evolved to integrating the independence of objects with the profound expression of space. (Andrew Hopkins 2010)

Nevertheless, Riegl had experimented with different theories in an attempt to embody his invention of Kunstwollen. Also had he assumed the two inner purposes - tactile and optical - existent in the will of art in ancient times. With these purposes in mind, Riegl examined the will of art in ancient architecture, specifically in terms of the interior and the exterior. Conspicuously, the exterior refers to the appearance of the work while the interior to the space described in open and closed form. The historian later studied how tacility (tactile) in ancient times had developed into optics (optical) in reflecting the will of art. (Bogue 2014)

In a similar vein, the following discuss Ancient Architecture through the lens of the three stages in art coined by Riegl.

In the Ancient Egypt, the most representative architecture is indisputably the Egyptian Pyramid. The photo above presents the individuality and self-containedness of the Pyramid. It is, first an independent construction without any attachments or being attached to other structures. This also contributes to the self-containedness, or completeness, of the landmark. To interpret the interior in Riegl’s terms, the space inside the Pyramid, as our lecturer showed us before, is not just confined but also becoming more of a narrow tube, thereby resonating with the idea of closed form, retraining the sense of space through human’s sensory perception. (Jennifer M. Barker 2009)
With the work being so complete both physically and aesthetically, it actually shapes the feeling of touching in 3 dimensional way through our human sensory perception but we actually not touch it, especially the example shown above, the bricks unevenly embedded in pyramid. Once you saw it, there is a feeling that makes you feel you have touched it. (Zhang Jian 2004)

In early roman period, Pantheon is one of the most representational architecture in classical greek period. Looking at the above photo, you can find that the space of architecture is no longer in closed form but open form. As for this reason, those tactile feelings appeared in the Ancient Egypt get blurry and only visual form left when there is more spatial space released in an architecture. (Jennifer M. Barker 2009)

Looking at the above photo, there is wider space shown in Pantheon that blur the objects and the surrounding background, which is the main cause of forming visual form but no tactile feelings exist. The inside of Pantheon was elaborately designed with the aim of providing viewers with a feeling of being constrained by space. Significantly, those columns in front of the Pantheon are the “barriers” in shaping the feeling of being constrained by space.

Last but not least, in the late roman period, there is a significant change in delivering space in more open formed without barriers that releases immense space, which aims to creates a
superior sense of freedom to beholders. With more space being released, the object becomes more united with the surrounding space, enhancing the level of integrity.

Looking at the above photo, it can be seen that there is bigger space in central part of the Basilica of Maxentius without barriers like the second period, which actually provides substantial space with audience that makes feel a superior sense of space. Most importantly, Riegl has found that spatiality has dominated the will of late roman art, and those long-vertical built architecture in late roman period was established for creating a sense of freedom, and therefore plane was given but emphasized on more depth expressed in creating spatial space and dynamic motions. (Zhang Jian 2004)

In summary, it can be seen that the similarity of reliefs and architecture in terms of “Kunstwollen” is the increase of dynamic motions and 3D space released as period goes by, which can exactly reflect what are the artistic goals during these periods and prove how artworks developed based on human’s inner drives.
3. Late Roman (250 - 550 A.D.) Kunstoffen - Rhythm

Rhythm, by which Riegl interpreted as the essential artistic medium used in late Roman art to achieve artistic goal, is the sequential repetition or alternation of elements that form patterns and textures. As a leading characteristic of late Roman art, the elements of rhythm are highly embodied in especially the architecture in late Roman which present the consistency of intervals, proportion, symmetry, depth, spatial relation, geometric shape sequence or color sequential order. The application of rhythmic composition of these elements creates predictability, and more importantly, forms pattern as a fundamental element to create strong sense of unity, which was regarded by Augustine as the principal goals of all ancient artistic creation and the expression of beauty in particular types of art.

There are several types of rhythm that frequently appeared in late Roman art:

1. Regular and Alternative all rhythm
   It is the simplest form of rhythm that can easily be identified with its strong sense of pattern. Regular rhythm can be achieved by the repetition or alternation of elements including intervals, geometric shapes, color, depth, space etc. to highlight the contrast between them. While repetition involves the use of patterning to achieve visual "beat", alternation allows specific instance of patterning in which a sequence of repeating elements is presented in turn (Jirousek 1995) as a contrast like short and long, round and square, in and out, or light and shadow.

2. Progressive rhythm
   It is the rhythm that mainly achieved by gradation, which employs a series of elements to relate to one another through a regular progression of steps (Jirousek 1995). It was normally applied to the coffers or windows decorated in the church, temple or other architecture in late Roman which present a proportional progressive tendency in ascending or descending degree of size or in terms of other forms of progression. Both regular and progressive rhythm are favored by Augustine as a characteristic of beauty according to Riegl.

3. Linear rhythm
   It refers to the characteristic flow or composition of the individual line (Jirousek 1995) which is especially important in both ancient and modern aesthetics of architecture as it emphasis on the pattern of spatial intervals between pillars, which were widely constructed for late Roman architecture, to form the strong sense of decorous and dignified.

4. Symmetrical rhythm
   Symmetry is an important element throughout the art history that can apply to the art with many other types of rhythm like regular rhythm, progressive rhythm etc. at the same time in order to create the sense of balance and orderliness.
Pantheon (118-128 AD)
During the time before late Roman period, Roman had already shown the similar Kunstwollen - Rhythm in constructing their architecture. Roman Pantheon is an example of rudimentary stage of late Roman architecture that presents 1) the progressive rhythm of the motifs on the coffered ceiling with their descending size toward to oculus, 2) the alternative rhythm in terms of depth, shape, color of the marbles in the middle, and the round and square motifs on the ground, 3) the linear rhythm formed by the pillars in the portico and the interior and the intervals between them and 4) the symmetry design of the whole Pantheon. All these rhythms form the sense of dignity and harmony.
Basilica of Maxentius (312 AD)

In this late Roman basilica, we can observe 1) the alternative rhythm of the motifs on the ground, 2) the regular rhythm of decoration of windows and the windows themselves, 3) the regular rhythm of the repetitive of the arches and the same shape of space between them, 4) regular rhythm of the coffers inside the arches, 5) and the symmetric design of the who basilica, which form the sense of decorous and well-designed.
Old Saint Peter's Basilica around 320 AD
It is another late Roman basilica that contains 1) the regular rhythm of clerestory and window inside and outside in terms of the size and shape, 2) the linear rhythm of every pillars and the space between them, 3) and the symmetric design of the whole building, which, come together, form the great sense of unity and orderliness.
4. Riegl and Formalism

Riegl stated in the article that the world in the earliest period of development of ancient art was aimed at a religious frame of reference. And Michael Podro (1982, p32), a 20th century British art historian, has raised a question in his book “The Critical Historians of Art”: “Assuming that the development of art is based on the framework of religious, how can Christian be able to appreciate different arts from other religious?” The answer, which is by himself, is that the pure visual form of art has its value and significance that beyond the independence of those different religious, which allow Christian to appreciate other religious arts without prejudice.

**Formalism**

Clive Bell, a English art critic who promoted formalism, advocated that what we only need to appreciate artworks is the cognition of form, colour and 3D space. Therefore, to evaluate an artwork does not require the knowledge of art history, the artist's autobiography or the artist's creative intentions, as well as the age or society that the artwork was created in. (Cited in Dziemidok, 1993) Although there was no clear definition on Formalism recognized by scholars in the past, the main idea of formalism nowadays is the emphasis on the *significant form* of the artwork as primary function. According to the formalists, the experience and appreciation of an artwork should only concentrate on its form including the very sensual qualities like shapes, lines, colors, rhythm. (Dziemidok 1993) In other words, only the form is relevant to an artwork’s aesthetic value, and if it is necessary for audience to transcend the work itself, to face it with historical facts or societal meaning, in order to have a better appreciation, then the artwork must be flawed. (Dziemidok 1993)

**The relationship between Riegl and Formalism**

The embryonic formalism was firstly introduced during 17th century and from that time onwards, more and more art historians put the content and the subject matter of artworks aside and focus their study on the form of art. In 19th century, the inclination of studying the form of art become more obvious as the art historians like Clive Bell, Heinrich Wolfflin and Riegl used formalist approach to analyze the artwork in the past. Actually both of the latter two got influenced by the theory of evolution and were inclined to the research of morphology (Zhang Jian 2004) as their theories are actually similar, which mainly focus on human inner aesthetic drive toward self-satisfaction and appreciating art base on its form expressed rather than something representational. While Wolfflin introduced 5 pairs of principles to explain the change of the form of arts from Renaissance to Baroque period, Riegl analyze the form of arts of late Roman Kunstwollen, especially the external and internal part of the late Roman architecture, in the perspective of rhythm. In contrast, Erwin Panofsky, a 20th century German art historian, was opposed to the idea of Riegl and addressed the meaning of a single artwork (Binstock 2004). He proposed the limitation of Rigel’s idea that ignores the “immanent meaning” which address the historical and social context behind the artwork, for example, he would link the painting to St. Peter and the story...
behind if there is a man holding a key in front of the church in that painting, while Riegl does not approach artworks as a means to convey a message.

No matter what, Wolfflin and Riegl are viewed as the key figures in affecting formalism as their thorough study on the visual forms of arts has greatly contributed to the further development of formalism.

Example of formalism
There is no solidation or limitation of “significant form”, which vary among different people depends on personal accumulated aesthetic experience. In other words, form can be various like music, movie, painting, architecture, decorative arts etc. but should be within those required composition of, for example, pause and melody of music, lines, shapes, colours.

[Image of Blue Flower]

**Blue Flower – Georgia O’Keefe - 1918**
From formalist’s perspective, for example in this painting, the only important thing for audience to appreciate this work is what we feel and experience from the flow, the contrast of color etc. but not the creator’s intention or any other background or story.
From: [https://bno.com/blog/top-10-works-by-famous-abstract-artists](https://bno.com/blog/top-10-works-by-famous-abstract-artists)
Tableau I – Piet Mondrian -- 1921
It is a work made up of simplest combinations of straight lines, right angles, primary colors, and black, white, and gray which developed to make an artwork with only pure form.
From: https://bno.com/blog/top-10-works-by-famous-abstract-artists

Broadway Boogie Woogie  (Piet Mondarian, 1942)
This painting is composed of vertical and horizontal lines, an array of primary colours, which emphasizes on “form” expression. Moreover, this painting is also referred to as music expressed visually with unexpected syncopation of rhythm expressed by points. However, even the array, the color or any elements are regarded as music by the creator, it is unnecessary and not important for audience to consider but our thought on those elements of form, from formalist perspective. From:http://www.widewalls.ch/geometric-abstract-art/
They are the abstract art which is mainly based on the optical form, delivering paintings in complementary contrast and gradation of color, geometric shape and the combination of them. This artwork also demonstrate the expression of pure form and that it is not necessary for an artwork to have its meaning.

From: [http://www.widewalls.ch/geometric-abstract-art/](http://www.widewalls.ch/geometric-abstract-art/)
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