

## ART AND SOCIETY IN EUROPE IN THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY: CONNECTIONS AND COMPARISONS

Conference at the GHI, December 6–8, 2002. Conveners: Christof Mauch (GHI), Deborah Cohen (Brown University), Peter Mandler (Cambridge University). Participants: Celia Applegate (University of Rochester), Leora Auslander (University of Chicago), Eva Giloi Bremner (Princeton University), Holger Hock (Cambridge University), Stefan Muthesius (University of East Anglia), Emma Winter (Cambridge University).

The subjects of art, architecture, and design constitute fields in their own right. Perhaps for that reason, none has garnered sufficient attention from social, cultural, political, and economic historians. Many historians have been understandably chary of trespassing upon the expertise of specialists whose knowledge far exceeds their own. Lacking an understanding of technique and genre, historians have tended to use pictorial sources simply as illustrations. That has, to some degree, changed in the past decade. Historians have grown more sophisticated in their approach to visual culture. They have also undertaken important studies in the historical sociology of art and design, investigating cultural institutions such as museums and phenomena such as collecting and consumption.

The conference at the GHI brought together historians who are working on topics in art, architecture, and design in Britain, France, and Germany. It was both comparative and cross-national in scope. We began with two broad questions. First, does culture have a national face? Second, and interrelated: Are nationally-focused studies the most revealing way to study culture? Of course, similar social, political, and economic phenomena have often been studied in national terms; there are, for instance, a number of studies of industrialization that examine national variation even as they recognize an end-point much the same across the West. But should the history of culture proceed along the same model?

The first session was devoted to a pair of papers that offered very different accounts of the role of the British state in promoting art. Peter Mandler's paper, "Art in a Cool Climate: the Cultural Policy of the British State in European Context, c. 1780—c. 1850," told the dismal story of the laissez-faire state's neglect of the arts. Unlike on the Continent, where a belief in art's civilizing effects and the national patrimony (among other reasons) led to state support, two peculiarities distinguished the British: first, Parliament's parsimony and distrust of the Crown, and second, deeper Protestant qualms about art more generally. The wars that engulfed the Continent from 1794 to 1814 caused, Mandler argued, a greater divergence between the British and the French and Germans, as those

states pursued an active arts policy intended to bind together the populace. Britain, by contrast, had little need to worry about national integration, and public opinion favored the sphere of commerce as the best way to promote art. And yet, as the market eventually proved inadequate in Britain to promote good design and bolster the country's export industries, the 1830s and 1840s witnessed some convergence with the Continent: The rebuilt Houses of Parliament, the South Kensington Museum, and local museums and art colleges were the result. Despite their promoters' fervent hopes, however, these initiatives ran aground by the 1850s. Local authorities proved uninterested in spending tax money on artistic initiatives, an aversion that Mandler attributed to the detachment in Britain between local cultural and governing elites.

By contrast, Holger Hoock's account of the arts in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain was rather more optimistic. There were important differences between academies in eighteenth-century Europe; however, these should not, he argued, blind us to the critical functional similarities. Setting the British Royal Academy within the context of other European art academies, Hoock pointed out, results in a far less gloomy portrait than is commonly painted. Not only did British governments between the 1790s and c. 1820 spend more money on cultural projects than they had ever before, but the Royal Academy gained for itself a privileged role vis-à-vis the state. It won important concessions on the taxation of art, helped to design new coinage, and gained a consultative role on monuments.

The second session of the workshop considered the subject of Anglo-German interactions. In her paper, "Art and Industry: Historicism in the Wilhelmine Empire," Eva Giloi Bremner explored the circles surrounding Friedrich Wilhelm and Crown Princess Victoria. Building upon archival work in the royal papers, she drew connections among the spheres of historicism in the arts and crafts and liberal economic and political thought. Historicism has been, Bremner argued, wrongly associated with backward-looking sentiment, and specifically with the famed feudalization thesis of the middle class. Instead of being a feudal remnant, historicism, for Bremner, is more properly associated with the liberalism imported by Crown Princess Victoria along with her attachment to the Italian Renaissance. The sins (or at least the preoccupations) of the parents were visited upon their son, and here Bremner's contribution was also rehabilitative. Bremner situates Wilhelm II's love of historical fancy dress within the context of his parents' costume balls, antique collecting, and art fancying—a context in which dressing up as Frederick the Great looks less like maniacal delusion and more like bourgeois pageantry.

Emma Winter offered an account of a cross-fertilization that proceeded in the other direction. Why, she asked, did a Select Committee in

1841 recommend that the walls of the new Houses of Parliament at Westminster be decorated with frescos—a Catholic art-form *par excellence*? And, no less puzzling, why was the role of Ludwig I of Bavaria lauded as an example? She traced the origins of the recommendation to Ludwig's kingdom, and specifically, to his hope that culture might vault his small state onto the European stage. English admirers of Ludwig's patronage enjoyed similarly high hopes for fresco painting in the Nazarene style, once transplanted onto British soil. The Select Committee imagined that fresco painting might serve as a unifying and elevating force for a politicized populace. But, as Winter demonstrates, they underestimated the confessional anxieties that their proposal would spark in a Britain roiled by the Oxford Movement. The Select Committee's recommendation raised the question of the relationship between art and religion—an issue that led ultimately to the rejection of German artistic models.

The third panel paired a paper on France and one on Germany to discuss the significance of the arts to projects of national unification. Leora Auslander explored the role of aesthetics in the national pedagogy of France's Third Republic. Her interest lay in the everyday practices that helped to instill Frenchness. Pitting the local against the national is not, Auslander argues, the most fruitful approach, because republican cultural policies must be considered as a whole in order to be understood. Her paper uncovered appeals to the heart and to the mind in a variety of sites, from paintings in museums to national symbols on coins, from monuments to domestic interiors. If fine art was thought to have transcendent appeal, the domestic sphere functioned as the site of national culture. The French state, Auslander concluded, succeeded in maintaining the aesthetics of the everyday "French"; neither imports nor modernist styles gained much of a foothold in French homes during the Third Republic.

In her paper "What Difference does a Nation Make?" Celia Applegate assessed how German unification affected art and its institutions. She began with critiques of the standard interpretations—to wit, arguments either that unification changed everything or that it changed nothing. Applegate's question was different: She asked what a single German state made possible that wasn't possible before. There were, as she noted, important developments in the spheres of copyright laws and language standardization, alongside the less easily quantifiable but obviously important fact of nationhood itself. At the same time, however, the significance of unification should not be overstated. Even after unification, individual states continued to sponsor their own artistic projects. Nor does unification seem to have affected the various private cultural organizations that existed before 1871 and continued thereafter to operate in a largely unchanged manner.

The final panel of the workshop examined the subjects of art and design. Stefan Muthesius' paper on the applied arts in late nineteenth-century Central Europe considered the relationship between universalism and nationalism. Not until the later 1860s, Muthesius argued, was the term "national" widely deployed in discussions about the decorative arts. In the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire, beset with its own problems of political nationalism, nationality remained a concept to be used cautiously. For Imperial Germany, by contrast, it was not chiefly the term "national," but rather the style implied that raised controversy. Both Austrians and Germans manifested a love-hate relationship with the French, to whom they compared themselves anxiously. Into this decorative chaos rushed the Bavarians, who, Muthesius concluded, successfully developed a style that became synonymous with German *Gemütlichkeit*.

Deborah Cohen's paper explored the ways in which art in Britain had, by the 1870s, burst its banks, overflowing into the shops, the magazines, and most importantly, the homes of the middle classes. From the ubiquitous "art furniture" displayed in store windows to the "artistic effects" achieved by those who decorated, the British home had become the haven for art. Why did art proliferate in this way? Two sorts of answers, Cohen argued, are needed: One takes account of the role of figures such as Ruskin and Morris, as well as the South Kensington project. But if this answer is necessary, it is not sufficient: A deeper social and cultural explanation is required. Cohen's paper sketched a transformation in the ways that middle-class Britons conceived of their household goods; she traced a trajectory from possessions as sinful to possessions as they came to be seen at the end of the end of the nineteenth century—as an expression of individuality. Art provided a crucial waystation along that road, both as a means of vindicating abundance and later, as an expression of the consumer's discernment and individuality.

The parallels uncovered in the papers were perhaps more striking than the differences. We encountered similarities of models, of aspirations, of conceptions, of antagonists, even of players. We even saw, in the various papers, that actors in the various countries shared the same worries—they each ascribed superiority or uniqueness to other countries; the Germans wrung their hands about British superiority and, of course, vice versa. And if that weren't striking enough, we have ostensibly distinctive "national" styles that were revealed to be anything but. The broader outlines of bourgeois culture in the long nineteenth century were very much on our agenda, even as we tried to assess in which arenas national differences mattered.

*Deborah Cohen*