

Rémi Mermet and Giovanna Targia on the *Principles of Art History*

Clara Pacquet, David Zerbib

Published in 1915, the *Principles of Art History* by Heinrich Wölfflin features among the most influential works of the 20th century for that discipline: it has been reissued many times during the author's lifetime and beyond. Since 2015, the centenary of the original publication, the Swiss art historian's work has been the subject of renewed interest, spurring readers to reinterpret it in the light of contemporary debates. A new edition by L'Ecarquillé has just been published.¹ At the same time, the University of Zurich has been preparing a critical edition of the author's complete works for almost a decade, in paper and digital versions,² edited by Tristan Weddigen, Oskar Bätschmann and Joris van Gastel.

We have the opportunity to revisit this emblematic figure from a critical point of view with the help of two young researchers: Rémi Mermet, FNRS postdoctoral researcher at UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles, who holds a doctorate in philosophy and art history, and Giovanna Targia, postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Zurich, who holds a doctorate in art history and is a member of the editorial team for the complete works of Wölfflin. How can the "principles" of Wölfflin's art history prove relevant today, at a time when art history is rethinking itself in the light of critical readings of Western historiography and when the very concept of its subject –art– is called into question by theoretical perspectives which relativise its significance and dissipate its specificity within a de-hierarchized relationship to cultural forms?

Clara Pacquet, David Zerbib: What is the point, in your opinion, of reading or rereading Wölfflin's text today, particularly in the context of new approaches and methodologies in art history, visual studies and aesthetics?

Rémi Mermet: The main point of the *Principles* is to remind us that there is nothing natural about vision. It is not enough just to open your eyes to see. Just as we have to learn to read, we must learn to see, because each culture has its own way of apprehending the visible. In concrete terms, that means that in order to understand a work from the past, we must attempt to grasp its particular "language", involving in turn a necessary letting go of the obvious that constitutes our own visual culture. The act of seeing involves complex hermeneutics, which Wölfflin tried to make us aware of. Now the least we can say is that a century later, that awareness is far from being accomplished. In a world saturated with images, it is surprising, even worrying, that visual literacy is not the focus of more developed investment in education. Fortunately, from an academic research point of view, things have changed. Although Wölfflin was long regarded as a dusty classic of art historiography, the emergence of a "post-formalist" art history –which no longer considers the visible form as a given, but as the result of sociocultural dynamics– shines a light on the ongoing relevance of his thinking –something the pioneers of visual studies entirely missed. Going beyond the strict limits of art history, I would even say that it is the renewal of the question of the sensible, both in terms of aesthetic reflection and artistic creation, that led to this renewed attention to Wölfflin.

Giovanna Targia: The *Principles* can be defined as a "canonical", even iconic book, having "shaped art history".³ Eight editions of the work were published during Wölfflin's lifetime, translated into over twenty languages.⁴ Its continuing presence in discussions within the humanities is a fact worth examining in itself. It is precisely because new approaches and methodologies are emerging in art history, visual studies and aesthetics, that we are witnessing a new interest in questions of form and formalism. Wölfflin's theories on the historicity of the production of form and its perception have gained a renewed relevance in the era of booming "technical reproducibility" of works of art, but also in the light of the histories of the media in the broad sense, and changing media ecologies.

¹ Wölfflin, Heinrich. *Principes fondamentaux de l'histoire de l'art : le problème de l'évolution du style dans l'art de l'époque moderne*, Paris: L'Ecarquillé, 2023. Edited by Danièle Cohn, Rémi Mermet. Translated by Sacha Zilberfarb

² <https://www.woelfflin.uzh.ch/de.html>

³ See, for example the analysis by David Summers in *The Books That Shaped Art History*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2013. Edited by Richard Shone and John-Paul Stonard

⁴ *The Global Reception of Heinrich Wölfflin's "Principles of Art History"*, Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2020. Edited by Evonne A. Levy and Tristan Weddigen

Moreover, in-depth analyses of his drawing practice and his use of language resonate with contemporary thinking on the epistemic role of the sketch in academic research and on the performative aspects of research and teaching. In an age of mass production of post-digital images and the proliferation of media platforms, Wölfflin's insistence on the indispensable value of a visual education questions the specific academic responsibility of art history and visual studies within a wider cultural horizon. It questions their capacity to reach a much wider audience, while tackling issues such as human production of images versus non-human production, manipulation and exploitation.

From a historical point of view, the genealogy of the circumstances where the writings of Wölfflin emerged offers an insight into the social environment, the institutional infrastructures, the museum landscape and the international exchanges which helped shape his conceptual models, but which also led him to revise them regularly. The critical edition of Wölfflin's complete works which is in progress will allow readers to reconstruct the context of each of his texts, and reevaluate them from a contemporary perspective. From that point of view, an "archaeology of knowledge" linked to the visual, and nourished by the concepts Wölfflin created, should be considered a particularly opportune initiative.

Clara Pacquet, David Zerbib: Unlike the major writings of Aby Warburg or Erwin Panofsky, to quote just two other figures of the *Kunstwissenschaft*, the German school that Wölfflin helped found, the legacy left by this crucial text appears ambivalent, according to readings of it. While seeking to understand the evolution of pictorial forms through the evolution of the "forms of vision" belonging to an age, Wölfflin soon found himself confronted with criticism saying the history of artists would disappear with his approach, as well as the role of personal expression and the uniqueness of artworks. On the other end of the political spectrum, he was rebuked for making the evolution of forms too autonomous with regard to social and economic determinisms. How do we interpret the accusations of essentialism and dogmatism aimed at his book, casting into doubt his approach as a historian, and even more recently those involving what would be called his Eurocentric concept of the universal?

Rémi Mermet: Wölfflin's fate is actually quite strange compared to that of Warburg or Panofsky. Like all the proponents of the *Kunstwissenschaft*, Wölfflin sought to link closely historical research, aesthetic considerations and epistemological inquiry. But in his specific case, this mix of genres was interpreted as a weakness rather than as a methodological strength. This is partly because Panofsky himself –followed by Wind and Gombrich, among others– established his reputation on sharp criticism of the Swiss art historian, whom he regarded as a great predecessor, thus setting in stone the artificially constructed opposition between formalism and iconology. However, that does not explain everything. What makes Wölfflin's thinking sometimes difficult to grasp (but also so fertile), is that it never hides its own experimentations. The great merit of Sacha Zilberfarb's new translation is precisely that it makes this experimental character, forged in the language itself, accessible in French. Of course, some Wölfflinian proposals, such as championing the almost organic unity of style in each era, or the recurring alternation of linear and pictorial styles, are clearly obsolete today. But Wölfflin suffered an age-old lack of understanding, because people refused to see that his *Principles*, far from being dogmatic, claimed nothing but exemplarity. These are not universal, founding principles for all possible art history, but a series of operational concepts, which are used to bring a bit of order to European artistic production of the 16th and 17th centuries. Their sole ambition is to help us to better judge the singular works for which they were specifically formed. In that sense, there is nothing insurmountable about their Eurocentrism, since their "fundamental" quality is lodged less in their content than in the method they demonstrate: to find, for each art form, the most appropriate conceptual framework.

Giovanna Targia: It is actually very important to consider the ambivalences in the history of the reception of the *Principles*. A polarised spectrum of polemic and praise mostly characterised the first stages of the reception of the book in Germany. This was largely due to Wölfflin's eminent academic position, which was one of the fundamental differences between him and scholars such as Warburg and Panofsky, whose extraordinary renown was only firmly established later on and, for the most part, outside of the German institutional landscape. As a consequence, Wölfflin himself constantly felt the need to counter-react, to better articulate his own positions through journal articles or by adding new prefaces to the successive editions of his book, up to the point of planning the publication of a second

volume of the *Principles*, for which a large number of notes and preparatory materials are preserved among his papers, as the coming critical edition will show.

It is interesting to note that the criticism over the centuries of Wölfflin's supposed essentialism and dogmatism has come as much from the left as the right. After the Second World War, the political implications of some of his theories –including the way he reconciled the history of style with an evolutionary psychology of form– did appear more problematic than before, and in the contemporary circumstances of a postcolonial narrative, nobody would apply Wölfflin's unavoidably Eurocentric frame of reference of the universal today without caution, even though it does not make an expressly Eurocentric use of the *Grundbegriffe*. The widening of the field of research of art history actually weakens the particular status of Wölfflin's north-south comparison and releases the influence of his concepts from those boundaries. I believe that setting both the arguments and the counter-arguments in their respective historical moments is the necessary and fruitful first step to take when reevaluating the *Principles*.

Clara Pacquet, David Zerbib: Wölfflin is linked to a so-called “formalist” line of thought. Is that a fair way to define his approach? And if so, what place does he occupy in the development and evolution of formalism?

Giovanna Targia: I would suggest approaching the term “formalism” as plural. In fact, a wide range of formalist positions, based on the vast semantic field of the concept of “form” emerged in the history of aesthetics and art history like a sort of recurring phenomenon. The formalist discourse which arose at Wölfflin's time bears witness to a crucial moment in the institutionalisation of art history. On one hand, this moment can be compared to the almost contemporaneous foundational crisis in the philosophy of mathematics. It was a matter of providing the discipline with rigorous, logical and methodological foundations. On the other hand, its implications have widely exceeded one single academic field, even if Wölfflin's formal analysis aimed to establish art history as a well-defined academic discipline, which particularly needed to free itself from history and cultural history. Wölfflin sought to capture “the essence of art” by identifying the distinct characteristics of historical styles and their internal development, outside of biographical and socio-historical factors.

Rémi Mermet: I believe the classification of “formalism” in its negative connotation constitutes the main obstacle to a rigorous consideration of Wölfflin, which doesn't get lost in sterile quarrels about the conservatism his thinking has sometimes been accused of. Not that these questions are not important –they are, to the highest degree– but they should only be judged through the prism of a close reading of the texts, and not through prejudice about the biography of their author. It is certain that Wölfflin is a man of his time, who shares the presuppositions and the vocabulary of his class and culture, including the very problematic term “race” used to classify what are in fact cultural contexts of the creation of art. Nevertheless there is nothing in his writings which confirms that his outlook is intrinsically reactionary.⁵

Clara Pacquet, David Zerbib: Given the importance of “pluralising” our approach to formalism to guard against a reductive reading of Wölfflin, could you tell us what exactly opens up a more dynamic and less universalising concept of form in his work? Could the concepts of *style* and *morphology*, which you have worked on in your respective research projects, enable the debate to be rooted less on the ideological side than in forms of life, situated forms, going beyond a dichotomous comprehension of the relationships between the particular and the universal?

Rémi Mermet: Far from the *cliché* of a disinterested “formalism”, we should recall that for Wölfflin, form is not at all an aestheticizing escape outside reality. On the contrary, it places aesthetics back at the heart of the making of our existence, by relating the analysis of “style” to that of individual forms of life, without ever falling into a relativism that forbids the critical evaluation of the works. As such, Wölfflin's attachment to the question of form seems to me to be precisely the key to his modernity, and of his relevance to thinking in our pluralistic, constantly metamorphosing era. In the tradition of Goethe and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Wölfflin actually attempted to understand how artistic forms shape our relationship to reality, the way in which they give meaning to our visible experience, at a

⁵ Mermet, Rémi. “De l'affinité entre les peuples : Heinrich Wölfflin et la question des styles nationaux”, *Archives de Philosophie*, vol. 87, n° 4, 2024, p. 41-62.

much more fundamental level than the simple expression of a personal or collective ideology. Even better: he sought to demonstrate how human societies –and artists at their peak– never stop striving for new distributions of the sensible, thus authorising a political reading, in the radical sense, of his history of forms of seeing.

Giovanna Targia: Actually far from a rigid concept of form, Wölfflinian theories quickly demonstrated their relevance through their interdisciplinary reach, finding many resonances in an intellectual landscape wider than art history –from literary theory to epistemology, from musicology to many schools of thought inspired by Goethe’s concept of “morphology”. Fundamental for Wölfflin, the morphological approach is based on having a vision which is disposed to see the universal in phenomena, in their visible form, and on an aspiration to comprehend a constant law within their metamorphosis.

More recent positions plead in favour of productive applications of what is called the “new formalism” or “post-formalism” in the study of art and its history (this is the case in authors like Whitney Davis⁶, or in reflections on the relationship between the history of art and computer vision, developed, for example, in the latest issue of the journal *The Art Bulletin*).⁷ Whether it is linked to algorithmic thinking, vision via computer and artificial intelligence, or to transcultural comparisons, in revised accounts of Modernism, or in cognitive reflections on connoisseurship, the concepts of form and formalism have attracted current interest in interdisciplinary discourses. We can therefore ask ourselves whether a reconsideration of these concepts, to which a rereading of Wölfflin could contribute, could become the key to a more inclusive reflection on methodology in the light of the current challenges with which the humanities are confronted.

Translated from the French by Dina Leifer

⁶ See: Davis, Whitney. “What is Post-Formalism?” (Or, *Das Sehen an sich hat seine Kunstgeschichte*), *nonsite.org*, 11 October 2012. URL : <https://nonsite.org/what-is-post-formalism-or-das-sehen-an-sich-hat-seine-kunstgeschichte/>

⁷ *The Art Bulletin*, n° 2, vol. 106, 2024