Sarah Bassett: Style and Meaning in Late Antique Art. Ancients and Moderns on Seeing and Thinking. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2024. XIV, 243 p., 46 ill. £ 39.99. ISBN: 978-1-009-46632-5.

What does it mean to confront one of the great-old-hoary-big themes of art history in the current moment? In the case of this book, the invention and study of late antique art has been a theme of intense scholarly interest since the end of the nineteenth century, torn between conflicting cultural narratives of the heroic rise of Christianity (that is, the European arts of the Christian world) and the tragic decline of ancient civilization (that is, Classical naturalism), both it may be said inescapably Eurocentric models of formulation. It is a brave scholar who takes up the challenge.

Sarah Bassett divides her model of approach into two parts respectively called "Moderns" (pp. 25–95) and "Ancients" (pp. 97–215). She grasps the need for understanding the foundational critical historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as both the creative invention of, and also the disciplinary frame for, the very field of late antique art. Each of her two sections toggles between actual art objects and 'theory', namely the art-historical formulation of the field for the "Moderns" and the rich range of Greco-Roman philosophical and rhetorical writing about art for the "Ancients". So far, so good. The problem in my view (in both parts of the book) is that she is very sparse in discussion of the extraordinarily rich and diverse scholarly literature on both the historiography of late antique art and the rhetorical approach to ancient art (especially characterised by the idea of vivid description, 'ekphrasis'). This matters because the former field, the historiography of late antique art, segues swiftly into the vast literature on the historiography of all European art history, since both Erwin Panofksy's Iconology and the Second Vienna School's 'structuralism' of form [Strukturforschung] are fundamental revisionist appropriations of Alois Riegl's key concept of Kunstwollen (the "will to art" or "artistic volition" as a collective cultural drive), which was the underlying drive for his seminal "Die spätrömische Kunst-Industrie" of 1901.[1]

1 A. Riegl: Die spätrömische Kunst-Industrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn im Zusammenhange mit der Gesammtentwicklung der Bildenden Künste bei den Mittelmeervölkern. Wien 1901.

The latter theme, the complex of art and rhetoric, is one of the most vibrant and rich current literatures in Classical philology and archaeology. The lack of engagement with a vast critical corpus means that Bassett reads her 'sources' – whether ancient texts or modern art historians – at face value and with little of the complex nuance and resonance that make both the ancient and the modern brigades so interesting and so plain difficult. Moreover, the distinction seems to assume that one *can* in fact divide between ancient and modern: I would argue the two are mutually implicated and inextricably bound up with one another. A further (and related) problem is that Bassett explains none of the paired terms that govern her title – what she implies by 'style' or 'meaning', let alone what she means by 'seeing' and 'thinking'. Yet 'style' and 'meaning' are central to the reception of Riegl – style being key to the formalist model espoused by the Second Vienna School and meaning to Panofsky's Iconological approach (as in his famous book "Meaning in the Visual Arts").[2]

Thus, one answer to the question of how we might do it now – and specifically not a programme undertaken by Bassett – would be to go deep into the literatures both on what ancient rhetoric was doing in relation to visual culture and what art historians at the end of the nineteenth century and through the last century thought they were doing. In the latter case, that would place the projects of the key founding students of late antique art, Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl, Josef Strzygowski, Nikodim Kondakov – theoretically, methodologically, historically, historiographically – in the intellectual contexts in which they arose and to which they spoke. While Bassett absolutely sees the significance of this, she hardly discusses the scholarship *about* her key figures – from the very rich revisionist and interpretative work on the Vienna School of Wickhoff and Riegl either by its immediate successors, whether in the Second Vienna School (from Max Dvořak, Hans Sedlmayr and Otto Pächt to Guido Kaschnitz von Weinberg) or its re-assessment by a series of monumental scholars, many of them associated with the Warburg Library (from Karl Mannheim to Panofsky and Edgar Wind), or by the current students of these hugely important and foundational strands in art history (such as Christopher Wood, Karl Johns or Ian Verstegen on the Viennese, none of whom is even cited). Bassett does offer a brief historical contextualization

2 E. Panofsky: Meaning in the Visual Arts. Papers in and on Art History. Garden City, NY 1955 (Anchor Books A59).

of late Habsburg Vienna (in chapter 2, "Rome on the Danube: Late Antique Art and Austrian Identity", pp. 47–57). But the observation that prior to their "groundbreaking publications, neither author [Wickhoff and Riegl] had evinced much interest in things Roman" (p. 47) misses the compelling continuity repeatedly constructed by the late nineteenth-century successors of the Holy Roman Empire with their ancient Roman predecessor, or the line of Catholic monarchy traced between Emperor Franz Joseph and Emperor Constantine, the great convert forebear (by contrast with all those Protestant upstarts in imperial Germany and Britain, or non-imperial Switzerland). That is, specific scholarly interests or expertise were at that time (and perhaps always are) subservient to the broader sphere of cultural concerns – then, the ideological needs of the old European empires, in our day, such topics as identity politics and the opposition to them.

What Bassett *does* do within the nexus of complexities and receptions of the invention of late antique art by Wickhoff and Riegl is to make a good case for their fundamental influence on the birth of abstraction as a key modern theoretical frame for art history. Among art historians, she focuses especially on Wilhelm Worringer (whose "Abstraction and Empathy" was published in 1908)[3] and among artists on the spirituality of modernist painters like Odilon Redon or Wassily Kandinsky. This story, told in roughly the first 100 pages of the book, is a genuine contribution but incomplete and too selective as an account of the transformation not only in the arts but in the methods of writing about them, which is the deep subject underlying her book. For instance, in relation to Strzygowski (whom she discusses briefly) she genuflects to the Russian school (here represented by Dmitri Ainalov in relation to Kondakov) but fails entirely to register the fundamental importance of a theory of Byzantine Christian spirituality, born of Hellenistic origins and the direct ideological ancestor of the self-image of late Tsarist Russia, to the spirituality of the Theosophists (such as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky) or modernist Russian artists like Kandinsky. The story is simply much more complex, intertwined and nuanced than she has space to explicate.

Her second section, "Ancients", is necessarily selective in that she speaks only of a few categories of material in a large corpus: after an opening on

3 W. Worringer: Abstraktion und Einfühlung. Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie. Munich 1908 (Abstraction and Empathy. A Contribution to the Psychology of Style. Translated by M. Bullock. New York 1953).

"The Styles of Mimesis" (pp. 99–124) (rightly discussing the hugely important problems of style and of naturalism in antiquity), she quickly focuses on narrative imagery and story-telling (notably following Wickhoff on the Vienna Genesis manuscript and comparing it with the fifth-century mosaics of St Maria Maggiore, before a few pages on imperial art from Antoninus Pius in the second century to Arcadius in the fifth), on ceremonial images (which is mainly a chapter on the reliefs of the Arch of Constantine and on the mosaics of Justinian's San Vitale at Ravenna) and finally portraiture, civic and sacred, from the fourth to the sixth centuries. These are actually rather creative and fruitful pairings, not precedented in the literature and constitute an original contribution. But they are so very selective. We have nothing on narrative painting (such as the catacomb frescoes so emphasized by Dvořak), nothing on sarcophagi (a key category for Riegl), nothing on architecture, very little on the decorative arts (again a key driver in Riegl) with the exception of a brief account of the Mildenhall silver dish of the fourth century. Arguably, Riegl's own division of the material into architecture, sculpture painting and 'Kunstindustrie' (shall we say "decorative arts"?) was much more encompassing and richer.

Constantly, and again creatively, Bassett interfaces her discussions of objects and monuments with reference to the ancient philosophical and rhetorical writings about art (she might have gone further to include texts from the rich corpus of late antique and Byzantine ekphrastic epigrams in both Greek and Latin). That systematic imbrication of material with literary culture remains rare in Classical archaeology or art history and it is a good reflex. But, again, she makes very little reference to any of the vast quantity of discussions in all the European languages of these texts and their relation to visual culture. She reads them as if they have never been read before and as if there is no history of discussion or debate about their meanings. Even the key ancient monuments she examines receive very cursory and selective bibliographies – in the case of the Arch of Constantine (which many would see as the key monument of transition), among the major monographs (not to mention dozens of articles) which receive no reference at all are those (to list them alphabetically) by Bernard Berenson, Iain Ferris, Antonio Giuliano, Robert Ross Holloway, as well as Patrizio Pensabene and Clementina Panella, the last of which is key for the late twentieth century restorations. The issue of restorations is not trivial since it demonstrates the essential problem with any insistence on a hard distinction between ancient and modern. An

egregious case of this in the material culture is Bassett's illustration of the famous sixth-century encaustic Christ Pantokrator from Mount Sinai (pp. 7–8). She is not the only person to claim the image in its current form is sixth century, but she and everyone else fails to comment that the restorers of the 1970s only cleaned (radically cleaned) the body and background to remove all paint that was not encaustic: the face remains entirely unrestored, with all the additions and accretions of centuries of repainting, most of it in tempera and some perhaps in oil, the last phase of which is probably nineteenth century.

So, to return to my opening question: how do we write today about the big themes in a venerable discipline like art history or Classical archaeology? Bassett's decision – to keep it manageable and to prevent a quadrupling of her bibliography – is to avoid the secondary literature and generally to cut the range of reference to the bone. The price? A serious credibility gap in whether the reader can be sure she is on top of the full range of what is known about her chosen subjects of discussion and whether she grasps the many prisms through which they have been seen. For myself, having spent an entire career treading all areas of this territory (and Bassett is kind enough to refer to me generously), I think we have to take on the modern history of the debates about our subjects (that is, not only Wickhoff and Riegl but all that has been written about them; not only – say – Pliny's art historical anecdotes or Philostratus' *Imagines*, but the very large critical literature that has accumulated about these incredible and scintillating texts) as well as tackling the primary objects and their primary secondary literatures. The challenge is a nightmare. But it makes art history – especially the art history of the deep past – extremely exciting, since it is also always the critical history of the ideologies governing the very recent past and even the near present seen through the prism of modern takes, interpretations and mis-takes ...

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