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What to do with the “Most Modern” Artworks?

Erwin Panofsky and the Art History of
Contemporary Art

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Abstract

In the 1930s, when the world-renowned Medieval and Renaissance art scholar Erwin Panofsky became acquainted with the New York contemporary art scene, he was challenged with the most difficult dilemma for art historians: how could Panofsky, who was firmly entrenched in the *kunstwissenschaftliche* study of art, use his historical methods for the scholarly research of contemporary art? Can art historians deal with the art objects of their own time? This urgent and still current question of how to think about “contemporaneity” in relation to art history is the main topic of this paper, which departs from Panofsky’s 1934 review of a book on modern art. In his review of James Johnson Sweeney’s book *Plastic Redirections in 20th Century Painting*, Panofsky’s praise for Sweeney’s scholarly “distance” from contemporary art developments in Europe is backed by a claim for America’s cultural distance, rather than a (historical) removal in time. Taking a closer look at Panofsky’s conflation of historical/temporal distance with geographical/cultural distance, this paper demonstrates a politically situated discourse on contemporaneity, in which Panofsky proposes the act of writing about the contemporary as a redemptive act, albeit, as this paper will demonstrate, without being able to follow his own scientific method.

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An Incomprehensible Monkey

In his early and foundational text "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst" (1932), Erwin Panofsky briefly reflected on the difficulty of interpreting a recent, almost contemporary, work of art.¹ According to Panofsky, Franz Marc's painting *Der Mandrill* (1913), exhibited in the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1919, did not offer art historians a

possibility for interpretation because they had not been able to "grow into" (*hineinwachsen*) the historical situation; they could not yet understand the principles of representation at the heart of the painting.² The monkey's tubular shapes in green, blue, and yellow, entangled in a sea of abstract forms, were puzzling to both museum visitors and art historians. Since one could barely recognize the animal, a scholarly, *kunstwissenschaftliche* study of the painting hardly seemed possible, as Panofsky's iconological method depended on an interplay between the various levels of interpretation, which derived from direct experience, knowledge conveyed by literature, and a consideration of possible world views.

Instead, for Panofsky, it seemed that an understanding of a contemporary work of art depended on a "subconscious habituation to the new" (*eine unbewusste Gewöhnung an das Neue*).³ Yet, even a habituation necessitated some form of "renegotiation," or "reinterpretation" (*Umdeutung*) of the image ("any description will—even before it opens—already have had to renegotiate the purely formal elements of depiction into symbols of something depicted") and it seemed that such a renegotiation was impossible due to *Der Mandrill's* contemporary, ungraspable, expressionist nature.⁴ Consequently, one must conclude that for the "most modern" art works, as Panofsky called them, the art historian is left without an apparent scholarly, systematic method of interpretation. While for older art works one is able to use a scientific, interpretative method, for modern art pieces it seems the art historian is left to a haphazard and contingent process.

Panofsky at the Museum of Modern Art

Two years later, Panofsky changed his opinion on the scholarly interpretation of contemporary art works. By then, Panofsky, a Jewish intellectual from Hamburg, had fled to New York after his exclusion from the German work force in 1933 and had become increasingly enmeshed in the world of modern and contemporary art in America. During a

¹ Erwin Panofsky, "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst," *Logos* 21 (1932): 103-19, in *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, eds. Hariolf Oberer and Egon Verheyen (Berlin: Bruno Hessling, 1964), 88. Unless otherwise noted, I use the following translation: Erwin Panofsky, "On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts," trans. Jaś Elsner and Katharina Lorenz, *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (March 1, 2012): 467-82.

² Panofsky, "Zum Problem," 88, translation by author.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.* 86.

stay at New York University (NYU) in 1933, Panofsky visited the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) on numerous occasions together with curator Philip Johnson, director Alfred Barr and his wife Margaret Barr, who had rallied for Panofsky's tenure at American universities. With them he discussed the question "whether or not van Gogh belongs to the Jugendstil,"⁵ and on another occasion he was horrified by the sight of the so-called "International show" at the Rockefeller Center because he thought Picasso, amongst other artists, had been misrepresented.⁶ Over the course of several stays in New York, Panofsky was increasingly engaged with a young group of art scholars in the city, among which was not only Barr, but also the art historian Meyer Schapiro, who was by then a lecturer at both NYU and Columbia University and a member of the board of trustees at MoMA. In 1935, Shapiro had invited Panofsky to join a private discussion group called *λογων εστιαζιζ* (translated "word fest," an expression borrowed from Plato), which was hosted every month at MoMA.⁷ Little is known about the contents and actual frequency of these meetings.⁸ Amongst the members of *λογων εστιαζιζ* were at least Robert Goldwater, Jerome Klein, Louis Lozowick, Lewis Mumford, Dimitri Tselos, Jere Abbott, and James Johnson Sweeney.⁹ Many of its participants shared a strong interest in modern art: Goldwater worked on a book on primitivism in modern art, Klein was an art dealer at the New York *Downtown* gallery for contemporary art, Lozowick a modern artist from Russia, and Mumford a critic of contemporary architecture and culture.¹⁰

In 1934, within Panofsky's increasingly networked New York situation, Barr asked him to write a review of James Johnson Sweeney's recently published book *Plastic Redirections in 20th Century Painting*. Panofsky's article was considerably cut down prior to its publication in *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*.¹¹ Yet the gist of Panofsky's argument was left

⁵ Erwin Panofsky to Margaret Barr, 8 February 1933, *Korrespondenz*, vol. 1, 568. Cited letters are from Dieter Wuttke, ed. *Erwin Panofsky: Korrespondenz 1910-1936. Erwin Panofsky: Korrespondenz 1910-1968. Eine Kommentierte Auswahl in Fünf Bänden*, Bd. 1. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001). Translations by author.

⁶ "The Mac-Mahon show is simply poisonous: every country represented by one picture, mostly his worst. Thus Picasso is 'illustrated' by one of the most uncharacteristic, dullest paintings he ever made in 1932, so that, measured by the standards of this exhibition, he would seem to be much less important than one of the mexican or checoslovakian anonymi. It would be an alluring idea to figure, that all the modern pictures in the world would go lost except for this exhibition. And then an art-historian in 2500 writing a book on the 'Situation of Art in 1933'." Panofsky to Margaret Barr, 9 March 1933, *Korrespondenz*, vol. 1, 578.

⁷ Original invitation in 1935, answered by Panofsky on 26 March 1935, see *Korrespondenz* vol. 1, 938.

⁸ More about the meetings can be found at the MoMA Archives, NY: AHB [AAA: 2165; 981], as cited by Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. And the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 451n59.

⁹ Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Alfred H. Barr, Missionary for the Modern* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 125; Kantor (2002), 451n59; The membership of James Johnson Sweeney is attested in Lee Sorenson, "Meyer Schapiro," *Dictionary of Art Historians*, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/schapirom.htm>.

¹⁰ Wuttke, *Korrespondenz*, 938n2.

¹¹ Erwin Panofsky, "Review of *Plastic Redirections in 20th Century Painting* by James Johnson Sweeney," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 2 (November 1934), 3. The original article enclosed with Panofsky's letter to Barr is no longer present in the Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers at The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Erwin Panofsky (Princeton) to Alfred Barr (New York) October 1934, *Korrespondenz* vol. 1, 764.

intact: by employing the right kind of scholarly detachment, Mr. Sweeney “has now proved that it is, after all, possible to apply the methods of art-history to contemporary art.”¹² Sweeney’s book followed an exhibition (curated by Sweeney) at the Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago that displayed new developments in modern art such as Cubism, Surrealism, and super-Realism.¹³

Evolution in Sweeney’s Plastic Arts

In his review of Sweeney’s book, Panofsky reminded his readers again of the rightful practice of an art historian: “The scope of art history is: to *understand* a work of art with respect to its essential structure (formal and iconographic), to *evaluate* this structure under the aspect of its historical significance, and to *connect* phenomena so as to gain an insight into what is called ‘evolution.’”¹⁴ Any good art historian “applies to artistic creations what seems to be a system of abstract categories and, in addition, considers them in connection with as many other facts as are available.”¹⁵ This approach to “evolution” is indeed one of the things Panofsky could have appreciated in respect to the work of James Johnson Sweeney. In the first paragraph of the book, Sweeney responds to doubts of historical distance and emphasizes the importance of looking at the modern “plastic arts” in relation to previous events. In the field of aesthetic concepts he detects a considerable change with the past, especially evident in the plastic arts: “And, while the event is still too close to us to admit an unprejudiced critical consideration, its character has never been ambiguous: an attempt at complete severance from all the dominant trends of the preceding century—a break and a new beginning.”¹⁶ Sweeney describes a growing need for a “break,” a resentment to the rationality as developed in the Renaissance, which caused new modern art forms to object and deviate from this rational standard. “It was realized that a new epoch could grow only out of a new archaism.”¹⁷ Sweeney’s remarks echo Panofsky’s description of alternating “advances” and “reversals” of direction and that every so often return back to “primitive” or “archaic” modes of representation, as expressed in his famous essay “Perspective as Symbolic Form.”¹⁸

¹² Panofsky, “Review of *Plastic Redirections*,” 3.

¹³ James Johnson Sweeney, *Plastic Redirections in 20th Century Painting*, published in the “Studies of Meaning in Art” series (Chicago: The Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934). Little has been written on the life and work of Sweeney. Recent interest has resulted in a symposium: “The Poetry of Vision: James Johnson Sweeney and the Twilight of Modernism” April 25, 2008 at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center. For more information on Sweeney, see James Johnson Sweeney, *Vision and Image: A Way of Seeing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968); Denys Sutton, “Obituary for James Johnson Sweeney,” *The Burlington Magazine* 128, no. 1004 (November 1986): 809-810; Eric de Chasse, “J.J. Sweeney, passeur entre l’Europe et les Etats-Unis,” *Connaissance des arts* 600 (2002): 72-77.

¹⁴ Panofsky, “Review of *Plastic Redirections*,” 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sweeney, *Plastic Redirections in 20th Century Painting*, 3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books; Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed by MIT press, 1991), 47.

Sweeney’s approach to the history of modern art as “breaks and new beginnings” must have appealed to Panofsky, as did Sweeney’s attempt to find the impetus for a process of redirection in the arts. “When we discover what demands or interests gave its peculiar character and to what particular directive it is a response, it will take its place with a surprising—almost bathetic—ease.”¹⁹ In his book, Sweeney contended that one could even come to understand the “contribution of our contemporaries” by “an analytic consideration of both a work and its background-tradition.”²⁰ Indeed, for Sweeney, the interpretation of contemporary works is all together possible: “Time effects its clarifications for us painlessly; at close quarters a conscious effort is required to compass similar ends.”²¹ Sweeney suggests a general, all-encompassing impetus for change, a driving force that oscillated between the polarities of objective and subjective form production. The examples of paintings in *Plastic Redirections* thus become a procession of advances and reversals on this larger scale of development. This diachronic account, a series of solutions linked by the same “problem,” stands out in *Plastic Redirections* and must have been favorable to Panofsky, who was much influenced by the diachronic approach of Alois Riegl.²² The Rieglian approach was similarly present in Alfred Barr’s famous exhibition and book *Cubism and Abstract Art*, (accompanied by a well-known art historical chart), a project that was much influenced by Sweeney’s *Plastic Redirections*.²³

Precisely because Sweeney’s account emphasized diachronicity over a consideration of the contemporaneous context of the artworks, Panofsky could evade a detailed evaluation of Sweeney’s analysis of “both a work and its background-tradition,” to use the words of the latter. Hence, in so far as Sweeney had supplied twentieth-century “redirections” in art with an impetus for change, his account could fit Panofsky’s framework. Sweeney’s book lacked a thorough analysis of the relationship between artistic developments and historical events and did not accord to Panofsky’s three-step model of art historical interpretation. Therefore, to understand Panofsky’s encouraging appraisal of Sweeney’s book, we must discern a second, and more important reason why Panofsky regarded the book as valuable as an example of a scholarly approach to modern art. The careful classification of “reversals” and “advances” he recognized in Sweeney’s account of art (i.e. the necessary quality of an *art historian* of contemporary art) was not by accident exhibited by an *American* author, according to

¹⁹ Sweeney, *Plastic Redirections in 20th Century Painting*, 42.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Riegl’s theoretical influence on Panofsky’s work is profound and too complex to be accounted for in this paper. As Michael Ann Holly has pointed out, both Riegl and Panofsky alternated between “synchronic” and “diachronic” models for art history. In Panofsky’s eyes, Sweeney’s book might have read as an attempt to balance these models, although the latter approach evidently stood out. Michael Ann Holly, “The Origin and Development of Erwin Panofsky’s Theories of Art,” (PhD diss, Cornell University, 1981), 69.

²³ Susan Noyes Platt suggests Barr had borrowed Sweeney’s conception of “analytic” and “synthetic” cubism from *Plastic Redirections*. Susan Noyes Platt, “Modernism, Formalism, and Politics: The ‘Cubism and Abstract Art’ Exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art,” *Art Journal* 47, No. 4 (Winter 1988): 284-295. Marcia Brennan mentions the similarities between Sweeney’s and Barr’s catalogues and exhibitions (although she is mainly interested in the gendered dimension of their canonical accounts) in “The Multifaceted Masculinity of Canonical Modernism: James Johnson Sweeney and Alfred H. Barr, Jr. in the 1930s” in *Partisan Canons: Discursive and Institutional Sites*, ed. Anna Brzyski (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 179-201.

Panofsky. "It is possibly a privilege of American scholarship to construct the history of an art which in itself is not yet a 'historical phenomenon,'" Panofsky would conclude his review.²⁴

Temporal Distance and Intellectual Distance

In the review, Panofsky praised Sweeney's scholarly "detachment" from the works under scrutiny. While "European publications on contemporary art are often either mere manifestoes 'for' or 'against,'"²⁵ as an American art historian, Panofsky argued that Sweeney was able to construct the history of contemporary developments in Europe with more objectivity. Panofsky's review of Sweeney is an early instance of an argument that he would frequently repeat: American historical scholarship is less biased because it is not entangled in the risky web of national politics in Europe. Especially when it comes to modern art, Americans like Sweeney are particularly capable of reliable scholarly analysis. From their position in America they are able to replace historical distance, generally needed for the analysis of art objects, with a cultural and geographical distance from the art movements in Europe.

Hence detachment, for Panofsky, is not only the necessary temporal distance from a work in order to place it within a history of traditions, but it can also refer to the cultural or intellectual detachment that, compensating for a lack of temporal distance, fosters the ability to understand the work within a history of traditions. Before examining the implications of Panofsky's stance towards American scholarship in the arts, a closer look at Panofsky's conflation of temporal and intellectual distance is necessary, for which we must return to his famous text "Perspective as Symbolic Form" of 1927.

In "Perspective as Symbolic Form," Panofsky did more than just outline a theory of perspective. Perspective both constitutes and structures our visual apprehension of the world and can thus be regarded a symbolic form because, as Keith Moxey has pointed out, "the means by which the process of making knowledge characteristic of each period cannot be divorced from the knowledge it produces."²⁶ Although at first Panofsky seems to have a cultural relativist conception of this process of knowledge production, he nonetheless grants the Renaissance use of perspective a privileged status in its way of constructing and gaining knowledge of the world. For Panofsky, it seemed Renaissance perspective represented the most objective view of the world, as it exemplified the ability to conceive of a distance between itself and the past by developing a geometric system that permitted a convincing representation of space. As the spatial rationality of the Renaissance became a metaphor of objectivity, it made way for an extension of Italian perspective into a metaphor for the production of knowledge itself and above all, a metaphor for the role of the historian. Keith Moxey adequately explains the metaphorical fusion of "perspective" and "history":

History, like perspective, is not only a means of representing knowledge but a means of constituting or becoming knowledge. Just as the word "history" can refer either to what happened in the past or to accounts that purport to tell us what happened in the

²⁴ Panofsky, "Review of *Plastic Redirections*," 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Keith Moxey, "Perspective, Panofsky, and the Philosophy of History," *New Literary History* 26 (1995), 778-779.

past, so the word "perspective" can mean either one point of view among many, or the point which organizes and arranges all the others.²⁷

For Panofsky, it was the Renaissance perspective that, due to its particular construction of distance, afforded genuine access to interpretation of past events. Panofsky hence related the ability to interpret history to a particular cultural situation. After his move to the United States, he would become increasingly forthright and confident of the superior position of the culture of the Renaissance in the history of perspective, a shift most palpably expressed in the publication of *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art* (1960), in which there is no trace of the cultural relativity of perspective and the gaining of knowledge.²⁸ In his review of *Plastic Redirections*, Panofsky attributed a particular ability for distance and access to knowledge to American scholarship; similar to the way he privileged the Italian Renaissance. This association of the American academia with the objectivity of the Renaissance and the superiority Panofsky thus granted to the field of American art history must be understood in light of the political context of the 1930s. Panofsky was much concerned with the influence of biased, nationalist tendencies on the practice of art history. During his stay in New York in 1933, Panofsky reflected upon the political developments in his home country and touched upon the role of distance:

The present situation in Germany, . . . (that is to say the international nationalism) is a mere reaction against the modern means of communication which have narrowed the distance (both physical and intellectual) between the various nations too much and, above all, too suddenly, so that they have an opportunity of fighting . . . and are anxious about their 'individuality'.²⁹

According to Panofsky, international nationalism dangerously impinged on the decrease of physical and intellectual distance by glorifying particular national artistic achievements. Modern art, because of its close temporal relationship to the nationalists, was especially vulnerable to such a biased interpretation, as was the case with the aforementioned Franz Marc's work *Der Mandrill*, a painting that was included in the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* in Munich in 1937.

Panofsky's Praise for American Scholarship of Modern Art

Because of its special vulnerability, modern art was particularly instrumental for Panofsky's emphasis on American intellectual and cultural distance. One year after his review of Sweeney's book, in 1935, Panofsky's high esteem of American scholarship in the field of modern art resulted in a proposal for the establishment of a professorship of modern art at the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS), where Panofsky himself was based. In a memorandum to the university staff, Panofsky argued that although

The post in the Institute for an authority on Modern Art may seem to bring the Humanistic School rather dangerously up to date as a school of research . . . the fact is that American scholarship is peculiarly fitted to exercise perspective over modern art in a way that is quite impossible for the European student thereof, the reason

²⁷ Moxey, "Perspective, Panofsky, and the Philosophy of History," 779.

²⁸ Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell 1960).

²⁹ Erwin Panofsky to Margaret Barr, 9 March 1933, *Korrespondenz* vol. 1, 574.

being that what perspective is lacking in time is made up by geographical distance, enabling the American students of the subject to view the process as a whole.³⁰

In 1944, Panofsky raised the issue again and rallied for the appointment of Alfred Barr for the position of professor in a chair of Modern Art at IAS. At the time, Barr had been forced to step back as the director of the MoMA.³¹ According to Panofsky, research in modern art was fundamental not only to counterbalance the emphasis on classical and medieval studies in Princeton and "to establish a vital yet disinterested contact between humanistic research and life of our own day," but also because:

it is only in this country that the art of the present can be studied and interpreted with the same scholastic detachment and strictness of method as can that of the past. . . . On this side of the Atlantic, the European developments [in art] could and can be registered and coordinated both comprehensively and impartially, the distance in space and traditions serving as an equivalent of that 'historical perspective' which in Europe can be engendered only by time; it is no accident that the very idea of a Museum of Modern Art . . . could be conceived and realized only in the United States.³²

It was about time, according to Panofsky, that IAS enabled the most knowledgeable scholar of modern art to write a long awaited book on the history of modern art.³³ Ultimately, Panofsky did not succeed in convincing the IAS staff. Barr would take up a specially created position at MoMA, in which he advised the new director and mainly devoted himself to research.

Panofsky's statements against nationalist and biased art history would become most acute in his famous text "Three Decades of Art History in the United States: Impressions of a Transplanted European," written for a collection of essays on European scholars in America (1953).³⁴ For Americans, Europe could merge into "one panorama," Panofsky said, whereas European scholars were preoccupied with questions of which country was the first to invent the cubiform capital or the rib-vault.³⁵ Unbiased by nationalism, detached from the cultural and intellectual roots of the objects, the Americans were not only more apt to look at the past, "so were they able to see the present in a perspective picture undistorted by personal

³⁰ Erwin Panofsky and Charles Rufus Morey, *Memorandum on Immediate and Future needs for Research in Art and Archeology in the School of the Humanities of the Institute of Advanced Study* (October 1935), partly reprinted in *Korrespondenz* vol. 2, 539.

³¹ Barr was forced to resign from the MoMA in 1943 due to the influence of Stephen C. Clark, new chairman of the MoMA Board of trustees and Mrs. Rockefeller. The reason for Barr's resignation was the fact that he still had not published his book on modern art, although he argued this was part of the agreement at the time of his appointment (according to Wuttke, *Korrespondenz* vol 2, 464).

³² Panofsky, "Report of Mr. Panofsky on Mr. Alfred H. Barr, JR." Erwin Panofsky to Frank Aydelotte, 27 February 1945. *Korrespondenz* vol. 2, 536.

³³ *Ibid.*, 536.

³⁴ Panofsky, Erwin "Three Decades of Art History in the United States: Impressions of a Transplanted European" first published as "The History of Art" in *The Cultural Migration: The European Scholar in America*, ed. W. R. Crawford (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953). Reprinted in *College Art Journal* 14, No. 1, (Autumn, 1954): 7-27.

³⁵ Panofsky, "Three Decades," 13.

or institutional *parti pris*.³⁶ In Europe, the "direct impact" of art movements such as French Impressionism, international Surrealism, and Bauhaus, forced either defense, attack, or silence. In America, in contrast, Panofsky saw that there was acceptable scholarship of contemporary art. "'Historical distance' (we normally require from sixty to eighty years) proved to be replaceable by cultural and geographical distance."³⁷

With his remarks on the American ability to come to a more objective evaluation of what happened in tumultuous and violent Europe, Panofsky yet again expressed the redemptive and humanistic qualities of the discipline of art history. His repeated trust in the American capacity for cultural distance reads as an appeal to the exercise of scholarly analysis of what had happened, but more importantly, what was then happening in Europe. Departing from a philosophical account of perspective in his "Perspective as Symbolic Form," Panofsky's conflation of intellectual, cultural, historical, and geographical distance takes on a clear-cut political dimension in his review of Sweeney and other writings. The political reasons for Panofsky's emphasis on America's ability to distance itself were part of a larger agenda of American cultural politics. According to Keith Moxey, Panofsky's confident attitude and trust in the sound methodological foundation of art history practices in America was "symptomatic of a deeper philosophical and cultural change in his way of thinking," caused by an across-the-board atmosphere of positivism in American universities.³⁸ Moxey sketches a situation of unprecedented economic growth and national confidence after the Second World War. America pulsated with a new feeling of "manifest destiny," an eagerness to lead the world. Within this climate the academic field of the humanities tried to live up to the very apparent successes of their empiricist, scientific colleagues in other departments, by emphasizing the objectivity of sound (art) historical research methodology. Yet Panofsky's outright trust in the abilities of American scholarship would be tempered during his later years in the United States. The dominant climate of positivism was both a "blessing" and a source of "conflict," said Panofsky in 1953.³⁹

Distrust of German Art History

While art historians in exile were first hauled in for their particular erudition and cultivation, Panofsky had already experienced distrust of his "German" ideas on methodology upon his arrival in the United States, when he had been dubbed the "Hitler of art study" by art historian Bernard Berenson.⁴⁰ In 1943, Panofsky's study of the iconography of the "blind cupid," published in *Studies in Iconology* in 1939, was critiqued in the *New York Times* as:

³⁶ Panofsky, "Three Decades," 13.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Moxey, "Perspective, Panofsky, and the Philosophy of History," 777.

³⁹ Panofsky, "Three Decades," 14.

⁴⁰ According to Wuttke, Berenson considered Panofsky his worst enemy. He thought Panofsky and other immigrated German scholars tried to spoil his reputation. Of all people, it was to Margaret Barr he called Panofsky a "poseur" and the Hitler of art study. See March 17, 1934. *Korrespondenz* vol. I, 722n3.

pedantic scholarship . . . imbuing all but the initiate with a sense of ignorance and unworthiness and erecting a wall of erudition between the ordinary citizen and the praetorian guard of Germanic art specialists.⁴¹

Panofsky was appalled by the vicious and bigoted tone of the article. Behind it, he suspected the guiding hand of Francis Henry Taylor, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art since 1940, who had, according to Panofsky, "initiated a movement to protect the American museums from foreigners."⁴² Taylor had published his book *Babel's Tower: The Dilemma of the Modern Museum* in 1945, which read as a particular attack on German scholarship. According to Taylor:

More than ever before the American museum will be called upon to fulfill a social function. . . . Our soldiers and sailors, who have learned the lesson of world geography so bitterly, will be the first to return once more to the humanities. . . . Unless, of course, we want to see these veterans peddling the golden apples of the Hesperides on the street corners of Chicago and New York, we must give them something more rewarding than iconology. Our job is to deal straightforwardly in human values. Had our German colleagues been more concerned with these in teaching their Nazi pupils, they might not find themselves in their present situation. The veteran will want something more than empty vessels. Like Odysseus he will not be content with the ghosts of past civilizations but will want their flesh and blood. To give him this will require a better and more fundamental teaching, a teaching concerned with human values rather than with accumulation of statistical knowledge.⁴³

Taylor thus argued the methods of German iconology were not apt to the social tasks of post-War art history, but had instead driven art historians into the arms of Hitler. These hostile reactions towards German scholarship and ostentatious examples of biased historical analysis must have gradually tempered Panofsky's trust in America's intellectual distance and objectivity. The American world of art appeared to be hardly the distanced and objective refuge Panofsky had hoped it to be.⁴⁴ In retrospect, Panofsky's praise for Sweeney's American distance becomes all the more ironic, since Sweeney would become one of the main propagators of the "great American artists" of the Post-War era. It was Sweeney, for example, who first championed Jackson Pollock together with other American artists in his

⁴¹ Howard Devree, *The New York Times*, Sunday, December 26, 1943, 9. Partially republished in *Korrespondenz* vol. 2, 444-45.

⁴² Erwin Panofsky to Wolfgang Stechow, *Korrespondenz* vol. 2, 195. Panofsky also vigorously expressed his concerns about the reception of his methods in the United States in a letter to Henri van de Waal, professor of art history at Leiden University. Erwin Panofsky to Henri van de Waal, 20 November 1946, *Korrespondenz* vol. 2, 770. Taylor had also become the opponent of Alfred Barr, director of MoMA, by publishing the article "Modern Art and the Dignity of Man" in *The Atlantic Monthly*. According to Taylor, contemporary artists only communicated to an "intellectual elite—the fashionably initiated." In Irving Sandler, *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishers, 1986).

⁴³ Henry Francis Taylor, *Babel's Tower: The Dilemma of the Modern Museum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), 50, quoted in a review by Meyer Schapiro, "Review of *Babel's Tower: The Dilemma of the Modern Museum* by Henry Francis Taylor," *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945), 273.

⁴⁴ On national politics related to art in America after World War II, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago and London: University Of Chicago Press, 1985) and Irving Sandler, Introduction to *Defining Modern Art: Selected writings of Alfred H. Barr. Jr.*

article “Five American Painters” in 1944: “each of these men in this vitality, individuality of outlook, and present freedom from obvious debts to his predecessors, holds the promise of a new and encouraging phase of American art.”⁴⁵ Sweeney would come to embody a certain ambiguity of American scholarship towards Europe in the 1950s, mapping out the pre-eminent direction of American artistic developments and its duty as an intellectual leader and at the same time re-evaluating the importance of European roots and European lessons.⁴⁶ In 1952, he co-hosted a famous symposium by the American journal *Partisan Review*, entitled “Our Country, Our Culture,” which proposed that America had now become the protector of Western civilization, not only in the military and economic sense but also as a new, historically unprecedented, cultural exemplar.

Conclusion

A close analysis of Panofsky’s relation to contemporary art in this paper has revealed the extent to which methodological discourses concerning the study of contemporary art are particularly bound up with political perspectives. The paper demonstrated how access to the past and the practice of sound art historical methods depended, according to Panofsky, on cultural and geographical distance. Succeeding this theoretical argument, the article shows how national politics are entangled in Panofsky’s contention that America could exercise art history from a more distanced and nuanced point of view. His plea for a distanced American evaluation of art was part and parcel of his own identity as a Jewish refugee from Germany, a famous scholar in exile affected by the war and removed from the European scene after 1936. This analysis emphasizes Panofsky’s complex engagement with the rise of new approaches to contemporary art in mid-twentieth century America. Writing about art of the present from the viewpoint of America could be a redemptive and political, scholarly act. At this particular moment in history, the concept of “contemporaneity” in relation to the discipline of art history occupied a specific polemic position that was itself vulnerable to political instrumentalism after the Second World War.

⁴⁵ James Johnson Sweeney, “Five American Painters,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (April 1944): 126, cited in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 87. The article featured Milton Avery, Morris Graves, Roberto Matta, Jackson Pollock and Arshile Gorky and came with a large color reproduction of Jackson Pollock’s *The She-Wolf* (1943), which was purchased about a month later by Alfred Barr for The Museum of Modern Art.

⁴⁶ Edith Kurzweil, *A Partisan Century: Political Writings from Partisan Review* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 115-118.



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