

# DIE STIMMUNG ALS INHALT DER MODERNEN KUNST.



Auf einsamem Alpengipfel habe ich mich niedergelassen. Steil senkt sich das Erdreich unmittelbar zu meinen Füßen, so dass kein Ding vor mir in greifbarer Nähe bleibt und die Organe meines Tastsinnes reizen könnte. Dem Auge allein bleibt die Berichterstattung überlassen und von vielem und mannigfaltigem hat es zu berichten. Da wölben sich zunächst grasige Bodenwellen bunt gesprenkelt mit Blumen, die von der Jahrzeit gezeugt, mit der nächsten Jahrzeit schwinden werden. Schranke ist den Wiesen weiter unten der dunkle Fichtenwald mit seinen zahllosen emporstrebenden Spitzen; aber ein leichter Schimmer liegt einem Hauche gleich darüber, denn es ist Frühsommer und die neuen Triebe brechen mächtig hervor und vermehren täglich den Cubikinhalte des Forstes. Am Rande des Gehölzes weiden Kühe; keinen Augenblick halten sie still, wie ich weiss, aber jetzt sind es nur winzige weisse Punkte, die ihre Existenz verkünden. Hebe ich aber den Blick nach der Felsmauer gegenüber, so trifft er vor allem den Wasserfall, der über haushohe Wände herabstäubt und vor dessen zornigem Donner kein Laut bestehen kann; so sah ich und hörte ich ihn kürzlich in der Nähe, und scheue Ehrfurcht empfand ich damals vor der ungeheuren Kraft, jetzt aber wirkt er nur ein versöhnend helles Silberband durch das dunkle Geschroff. Taucht endlich das Auge ganz hinab in den grünen Thalgrund, so trifft es ein Häuschen mit schimmernd weissen Mauern und ein Rauchwölkchen schwebt daneben als Zeuge der Geschäftigkeit derjenigen, die darinnen wohnen.

Indem ich nun das Ganze überschau — überall Zeugen rastlosen Lebens, unendlicher Kraft und unaufhörlicher Bewegung, tausendfältigen Werdens und Vergehens, und doch eine vereinigende Ruhe darüber ausgegossen, aus der auch nicht eine Regung dissonierend

„Nach einer Zeichnung von M. Suppantšitsch.“

“Reproduction of a drawing by M. Suppantšitsch.” Max Suppantšitsch. *Cypressen* (Cypresses). From Alois Riegl, “Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst” (Mood as the Content of Modern Art).

# Mood as the Content of Modern Art

**ALOIS RIEGL**

TRANSLATED BY LUCIA ALLAIS AND ANDREI POP

I have settled onto lonely Alpine peaks. The earthly realm sinks precipitously right before my feet, so that no object is left within my reach to excite the organs of my sense of touch. The task of reporting is left to the eye alone, and it has many and varied things to report. To start with, grassy waves of earth bulge with colorful dappled flowers, begat by one season to disappear with the next. At the boundary of this meadow, far below, is a wood of dark spruces with countless upwardly striving points. But a light like a puff of air shimmers right atop it, for it is early summer; and new impulses break out powerfully to multiply daily the cubic content of the forest. At the edge of the wood, cows pasture. I know well that they do not hold still for even an instant, but for now their existence is announced only by tiny white points. When I lift my gaze to the cliff across, it first meets the waterfall, which sprays down over walls the size of houses and whose furious thunder drowns out every sound. While I saw and heard it recently from up close, and felt diffident awe before its monstrous force, now it seems but a soothing bright silver band through the dark, rugged wilderness. When the eye finally dives into the green bottom of the valley, it encounters a hut with shimmering white walls and a little cloud of smoke floating beside it, witness to the bustle of those living within.

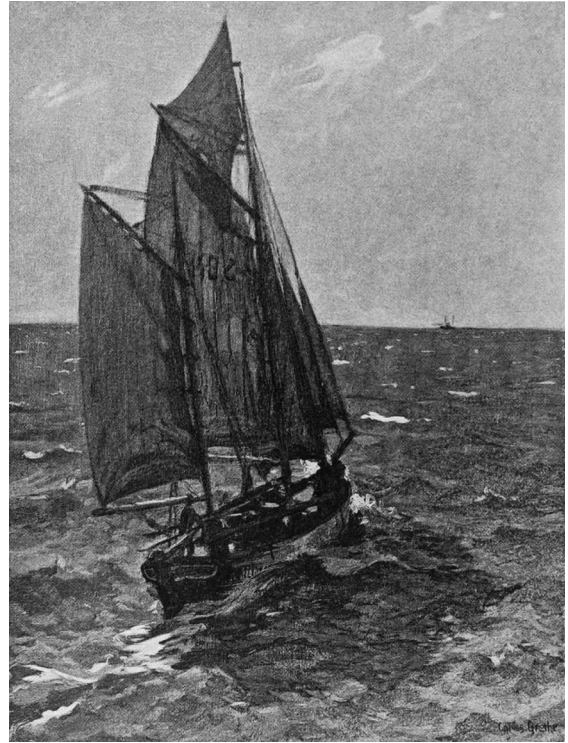
When I thus survey the whole—everywhere signs of restless life; endless force and unceasing motion; thousandfold becoming and perishing; yet also a consolidating peacefulness poured all over, letting not a single dissonant impulse break out—there awakes in me an ineffable feeling of animation, reassurance, harmony. It is as if some oppressive weight were lifted from me, a persistent longing finally fulfilled. What is that oppressiveness that casts dark shadows on our mental life, and why does it waver when a sunlike effect is brought out by a glimpse into the endless universe—even a mere sliver of it, barely as much as imperfect human sense is able to grasp in one instant?

The oppression springs from what we know, from the ripe fruit of the tree of knowledge. We now know that a law of causality pervades all of Creation. Every becoming determines a disappearing, every life requires

a death, every movement takes place at the cost of another. In this endless and restless struggle to survive, man, so richly endowed with feeling and reason, suffers infinitely more than the modest living things that he destroys by the hundreds with just one move. For thousands of years, all of the work of human civilization has aimed to banish the natural but brutal right of the stronger and to replace it with an emancipatory world order. Today, at the end of these great and protracted efforts, our fate seems inescapable, inevitable. Instead of restfulness, peace, and harmony: an endless struggle, destruction, discord, at least as far as life and motion hold sway.

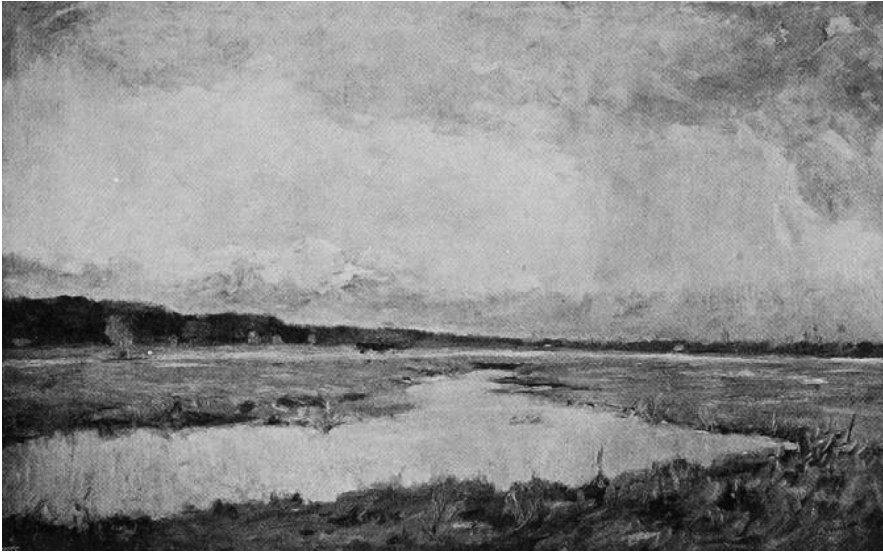
What the soul of modern man craves, consciously or unconsciously, is fulfilled for that solitary seer on his mountain height. What surrounds him is not the peace of the graveyard, for he sees life blossom thousand-fold. But what is pitiless struggle from up close seems from a distance a peaceful side-by-side existence, concord, harmony. Thus he feels himself saved from the distressing oppression that never leaves him for even a day in ordinary life. He senses that, high above the oppositions, his imperfect senses generate the illusion of something unfathomable in his vicinity, a world-soul penetrating all things and uniting them in perfect accord. It is this presentiment of order and legitimacy over the chaos, of harmony over the dissonances, of rest over movements, that we call mood [*Stimmung*]. Its elements are restfulness and far-sightedness [*Fernsicht*].

My devout seeing is disturbed by a noise. A chamois has sprung into my vicinity, then hurried on with considerable leaps over neighboring slopes. With a start, my whole attention has turned from the peaceful landscape to the goat. Involuntarily my right hand twitches, as if after a shotgun. The predator presents itself, wanting to bring the weaker creature, as prey, into the domain of its organs of touch. The walking stick—my sole weapon—is in any case insufficient for the purpose; but the gaze follows with greedy satisfaction every movement of the animal, until it disappears behind a crag. And now? The fine mood is gone, scared off, vanished. This mood is such a subtle thing that a sign of life in the vicinity suffices to blow it away. A single bird's cry in the air can have the same effect; just as a sharp blast of wind makes me shiver and bids me tighten my coat, or a powerful ray of sunlight burns my neck. These are not organic life forms but movements that call forth my own movements. It



Above: "Marine scene. Reproduction of an oil painting by Carlos Grethe." Carlos Grethe. *Frachtsegler* (Cargo ship). From Alois Riegl, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst" (Mood as the Content of Modern Art).

Opposite: "Reproduction of a charcoal drawing by Sion Wenban." Sion Longley Wenban. *Landschaft* (Landscape). From Alois Riegl, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst" (Mood as the Content of Modern Art).



is a cross-checking of those elements—restfulness and far-sightedness—from which emerges mood: movement and near-sightedness have pulled me back into the existential struggle.

The redemptive mood does not welcome us only on commanding alpine heights, however much modern humanity seeks them out so happily, in significant contradistinction with our ancient and medieval ancestors who sought out the struggle in the valleys. Mood can also approach us where the level of the dry earth is the lowest—on the sea beach—if restfulness and far-sightedness lure it out. Preferably in quiet bays, where the pebbles are softly licked just so by the waves, where a rowboat lies propped half out of the water, and where sunlight filters through the branches of the trees on the shore, twinkling on the water below with a thousandfold life. Yet a mood can take hold even on open beaches, when we manage to turn our gaze away from the breakers (surging forward with ceaseless force and drawing back ever again, impotent and fruitless, a clear mirror image of the world's machinations in the near distance) toward the wide surface beyond—transfigured by a light dazzle of sun, edged by a colorful ribbon on the horizon, with a band of smoke above that reveals a steamship, no longer visible, pulling away. For even among tremendous elemental waste, the human bustle does not stand still.

And so there is no thing in Creation whose appearance categorically excludes mood. It is not at all about subject matter, for even the greatest enemy of mood—the human being—can convey it to us: necessary are only restfulness and far-sightedness.

What nature grants man only in rare moments, art is expected to conjure up at his every whim. As soon as visual art advanced beyond utilitarian and decorative motives, an achievement we are accustomed to label “higher” art, from this very beginning visual art has ultimately had no other calling than to provide man with the consoling certainty that there exists an order and harmony. He finds it lacking in the narrowness of the world-machinery, and he pines for it constantly, for without it his life seems unbearable. Of course, in earlier times, man sought harmony elsewhere; for this reason the highest goal of art was not to arouse

mood. This highest goal has changed as many times as the worldview of humanity (by which I mean the respective portion of humanity that led culture in each phase). Until now we have had three such changes to chart. Let us try, in short broad strokes, to recall their repercussions on humanity's need for harmony.

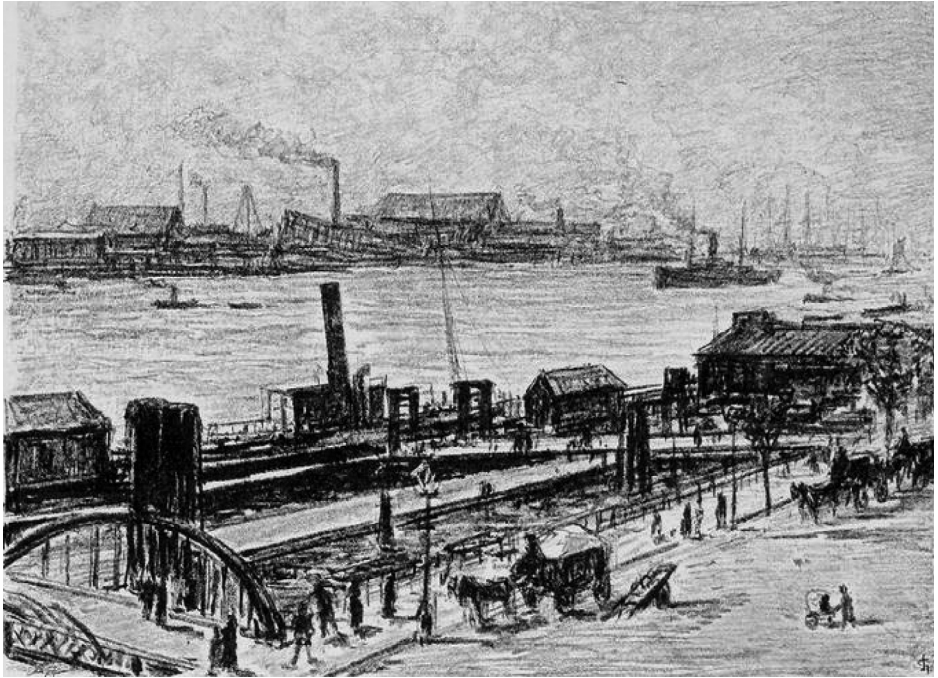
The oldest, most primitive stage is that of the struggle of all against all. Man can rely only on his personal physical strength; but he perceives that there are unfathomable natural forces for which his own strength is no match. He constructs for himself a visible carrier of those hostile forces—the fetish—and pays it a tribute of veneration. With this he thinks himself protected, and his discomfort gives way to harmony. The fetish thus marks both the beginning of religion and of all higher art.

The second stage is distinguished by the proposition that might makes right. The struggle is no longer of all against all, but rather, a great number of those who are weaker prostrating themselves before one who is physically stronger. This strikes the humanity of that epoch as the natural order of things in the world. This stage comprises all of antiquity. The process ends naturally with the victory of one who is strongest over all others; that is, the Roman emperor. This is how the antique ideal was reached. Its reasoning was: struggle is surely disharmony, but one that ends the moment the stronger triumphs. For this reason, the art of antiquity celebrates the physically strong, the victorious, the important, the vitally mobile, the physically beautiful. The gods, of whom there are always fewer and fewer, are strong and beautiful. This is why they are above all anthropomorphic, for among organic natural beings there is nothing stronger or more beautiful than the human being. The human figure as such therefore plays the principal role in ancient art. But because the anthropomorphic gods are strong and beautiful, they grant victory also to the strong and beautiful person. Even the weak participates in this victory, for he trustfully subjugates himself to the stronger.

This naive trust in the gods is, as I said, the foundation of the art and culture of antiquity. The harmony it seeks lies entirely in physical superiority. However, as there is a mind [*Geist*] along with the material body, so there is also moral strength and authority [*Gewalt*] alongside physical strength and authority. This is a factor that only gradually enters human culture and comes to determine its further destinies. It is obvious that for the ancient Egyptians moral authority had no validity yet; we encounter no trace of moral expression in their art. The pre-Alexandrian Greeks, we already see, embark upon it; but their gods gaze indifferently and the affects their art represents are only the most elementary, like joy and sorrow. Far greater was the attention to the mental (spiritual) in the art of Hellenism and the Roman Empire: here we encounter elementary out-

bursts of immediate affect as in Laocoön, and also idyllic designs in which we may recognize the direct precursors of our modern art of mood [*Stimmungskunst*]. In order to explain this latter, we must remember that the beginning of the Roman Empire coincides with the birth of Christ. The rise of Christianity is, however, from the standpoint of cultural history, nothing but the expression of an already-awakened unease, on the part of ancient humanity, with the acknowledged inadequacy of the pagan belief in the gods. The craving for a moral world order becomes ever more pressing. From now on, not physical but mental—that is, moral strength—is to guarantee humanity’s peaceable enjoyment of life’s goods. This worldview—which was longed after by all but inevitably fought by the Roman Empire, which long felt its existence threatened by it—this worldview was preached by Jesus Christ.

The third stage can be dated to the victory of Christianity: the Christian Middle Ages. Trust in the divine is still where one seeks harmony from the discord of life, and security from the hostile powers, whether physical or spiritual; however, this protection is no longer assured by a plurality of physically strong gods, but rather by one single, morally strong God without any physical substance—pure spirit. Christian art never tires of exalting God’s spiritual attributes and the moral virtues of the saints. In the process, and despite the purely spiritual essence of God, not only the saints but also the three divine persons are clothed in the form of organic natural creatures, indeed primarily in human form. From the beginning, this inner contradiction reveals the inseparability of mind and body and with it the practical insufficiency of the Christian worldview, which is built solely on morality. As in antiquity, so, too, in the Middle Ages the human figure remains the central object of art. But since it is no longer a matter of embodying physical beauty, but rather of spiritual perfection, the part of the human body that is predominantly handled with more care and affection is precisely the one where inner, spiritual impulses are revealed to the outside with especial clarity: that is, the face. Among the three worldviews sketched so far, all expect harmony to be manufactured by the personal intervention, so to speak, of an infallibly greater power. All are therefore founded exclusively on trust in divinity, yet the Christian view is undoubtedly the most perfect and satisfying to mankind, because it guarantees the protection of the moral person by a moral power [*Gewalt*]. But everything here depends on faith. As long as I trust unconditionally that God will protect me, a just person, from a bolt of lightning, the Christian worldview provides me with complete harmony. But this changes as soon as I install a lightning rod on my house: from this moment on, I trust more in my knowing that I can safely expect the protection I desire from that device, than in my faith, which

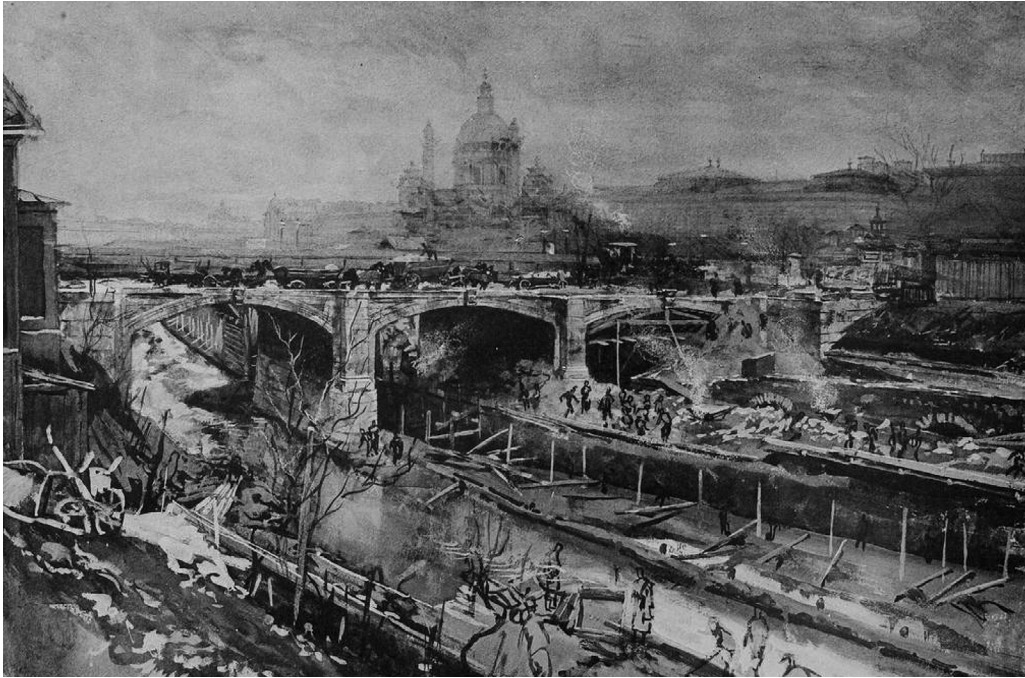


should have made the lightning rod seem dispensable. Which is to say that faith alone, at least in earthly material things, no longer guarantees me full harmony. Thus the Christian worldview appears abandoned and overpowered, especially in those domains that are decisive for art—in the apprehension of natural law. From now on, I may hope for harmony only through knowledge.

With this opens the fourth stage, perhaps best described as the natural-scientific worldview. By analogy to the polytheistic and monotheistic worldviews, one could call it the pantheistic, but it would be misguided to see in it a principled opposition to the monotheistic worldview. Such an opposition does not apply; as a matter of fact, for most educated Europeans today the two worldviews go hand in hand. The natural-scientific worldview is indeed based on the emancipation of knowledge from faith, but not on the elimination of faith. For insofar as we can see, at least today, no form of knowledge can illuminate the ultimate causes [*letzte Ursachen*] of Being, and the need for harmony alone forces us to ultimately accept the clarification of causes and effects from revealed religion. As for the causal relations between all natural phenomena—physical and, more recently, also mental—only a few rigorously pious souls among us expect illumination to proceed exclusively from knowledge. The insights of science [*des Wissens*] are often embarrassing to us; we are often overcome by the thought that the pious races of the past must have been generally happier than we are. Pessimism is, not coincidentally, a specific symptom of our modern intellectual life. But the same knowledge also provides us with redeeming harmony by allowing us, over and above the narrowness of conflicting individual phenomena, to see a whole chain of those very phenomena as if from a distance. The more phenomena we thus grasp with one look, the more certain, liberating, edifying becomes for us the conviction that an order balances everything for the best. On this harmony, which is at the same time pro-

Above: "Hamburg motif. Reproduction of a graphite drawing by Ch. Storm van der Saeghe." Carel Nicolaas Storm van der Saeghe's *Gravesande*. *Motiv aus Hamburg*. From Alois Riegl, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst" (Mood as the Content of Modern Art).

Opposite: "Demolition of the Elizabeth Bridge, by Carl Pippich." Karl Pippich. *Demolierung der Elisabethbrücke*. From Alois Riegl, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst" (Mood as the Content of Modern Art).



voked and offered by knowledge, is based modern art, the art of mood.

Just as our modern knowledge no longer observes natural phenomena in their isolation the way pagan antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages had (as individual utterances of a personal deity) but rather ties them causally to their immediate and extended environment: so does modern art proceed in the reception of those natural impressions. It cannot surpass them, but re-creates them with its own peculiar means. This makes it clear, above all, why the modern need for mood is directly fed and fully satisfied only by means that rely on a purely optical reception and is thus inherently far-sighted: painting. In contrast, the other genre of “high” art that dominated classical antiquity, sculpture—which challenges the sense of touch and is thus inevitably near-sighted—owes its continued maintenance today essentially only to the conservative tendencies of our cultural tradition and to the needs of decoration. What do we demand in contrast from painting; that is to say, from two-dimensional pictorial representation in the broadest sense of the word? Neither the beauty of proportion nor of line, as classical antiquity demanded, nor spiritual elevation, as did the Christian Middle Ages: rather, truth to life at any cost. The strict observation of the law of causality constitutes the core of the visual arts’ modern aesthetic, and especially in painting. We allow ourselves to be challenged by the most unusual imagery (even red trees or green horses), as long as their lighting and reflections seem cogently motivated. What we will never put up with from the artist is the naked miracle, by which I do not mean poetry born of fantasy, but an earnestly performed abrogation, by “supernatural” personal forces, of the experientially based causal law.

Mood as the goal of all modern painting is thus in the end nothing but the soothing conviction of the unshakable dominion of the law of causality. It is difficult to show this in individual concrete examples. For when closely observing [*nahsichtiger Betrachtung*; i.e., observation involving





“nearsight”] individual pictures, the fundamental law always seems bogged down by blurring contingencies and only opens itself with the desired clarity to those who can survey a whole group of individual phenomena from a distance. Before the individual picture, it is sensed and felt rather than clearly seen. For this reason, the reproductions attached to this article are not intended to somehow illustrate the character of modern mood painting exhaustively, but meant rather as pure experiments at random, as they were found in the editors’ portfolio. Perhaps more success can be expected from a compilation of individual observations, such as impose themselves particularly often on the spectator of modern pictures. At this point we must content ourselves with a few examples.

The essence of mood reveals itself most immediately in the creations of masters like Max Liebermann or [Carel Nicolaas] Storm van ’s Gravesande, who reproduce an extract of their environs with all optically perceptible contingencies in silhouette and movement, light and color. These contingencies are necessities to the painter, however, for it is precisely through them that the rule of causal law is expressed, penetrating and binding all natural things. The greatest difficulty here comes in representing a change in place; for instance, a human figure represented in the midst of walking violates the law of causality, because the law would demand an immediate continuation of the movement, which it is naturally impossible to ask of painted figures. In such cases the impressionist masters are happy to avail themselves of multiple and, as it were, moving outlines for their figures, rather than simple, firm ones. But in general the goal of modern painting is not so much to represent motion, as the capability of motion: the figures should seem capable of every organic manifestation of life, without actually manifesting it. This attitude proves,

“Reproduction of an oil painting by R. Konopa.”  
Rudolf Konopa.  
*Winterlandschaft* (Winter landscape). From Alois Riegl, “Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst” (Mood as the Content of Modern Art).

understandably, quite fruitful for the representation of vegetal and inorganic nature (rocks, water, clouds) whose movements do not proceed from free will but result from physical laws. This explains why landscape occupies pride of place in modern art.

But the modern artist does not let his right to free invention shrivel away. [Arnold] Böcklin does not make his mermaids, nor [Hans] Thoma his satyrs, as “extracts from nature,” but rather more as products of fantasy; their intelligibility is grounded in our inclination for nature poetry. The artist does not want to make us believe in the real existence of such hybrids, but he does want to convince us that, had they existed, they would look and behave just so and not otherwise. They too must obey the law of causality, for which the forefathers of the antique-pagan mythology, the ancient Egyptians, would not have given a handful of figs. And the same is true of those works whose problem is constituted by the psychic manifestations of life of the genus *Homo*. The essential role that landscape seems to play usually in that context (Max Klinger) is a decisive hint in the direction sketched above.

Is this art of mood really a fruit of the most recent epoch, however—that is to say, of our times? Must its beginnings not reach back at least as far as the separation of faith from knowledge? It is true that mood generally constitutes the final goal of all of modern art since the end of the Renaissance. To be sure, we have been able to trace some of its precursors as far back as Hellenistic times: that is, a time when pagan antiquity began to lose its former devotion to its beautiful, strong world of gods, and when the pursuit of natural science experienced also its first great flowering. But in place of the categorical pagan faith in the divine, soon enough there followed the no less categorical Christian one, and the natural sciences cultivated with such dazzling results in post-Alexandrian antiquity became as good as superfluous for another millennium. Only at the conclusion of the Middle Ages did the knowledge of nature once again begin to dominate human intellectual life, and its separation from faith could no longer be prevented. It is just that the process that ensued did so at an uneven tempo, and by no means continuously, but with repeated setbacks. What is most self-evident is that in Protestant countries, where the Reformation had accomplished that separation suddenly, at least with respect to physical nature, the process took place more quickly than in Catholic countries, where the Church famously, to this day, rejects the separation of faith and knowledge on principle. For the first time among the Dutch of the seventeenth century we encounter painting that is founded exclusively and simultaneously on restfulness and far-sightedness. And right away we see that another peculiarity of modern art makes its appearance: at the center of artistic production is

"Reproduction of a charcoal drawing by Sion Wenban."  
Sion Longley Wenban.  
*Landschaft* (Landscape).  
From Alois Riegl, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst" (Mood as the Content of Modern Art).

no longer the human being, but rather the whole breadth of nature, in whose midst the artist moves. Man is no longer the ruler, as in antiquity and even still in the Middle Ages, but only one link in an endless chain. Thus a leveling social tendency comes to expression; Christianity created its first precondition, and it gives our contemporary culture a large part of its character and direction. But close beside Dutch art there bloomed, at the same time, a Catholic art: that of Rubens. It was full of life and movement, but it took on at the same time a decisive inclination toward far-sightedness, smoothing down or blurring the drastic, violent character of motions and thus removing what is inharmonious in them. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the separation of faith and knowledge, though not admitted on principle was de facto complete, even in those countries that remained Catholic. At this point the full breakthrough of the art of mood faced no more obstacles, even here [in Austria]. However, man has always found it uneconomical to seek out the new, as long as something old but serviceable was at hand: this we learn not only from the Renaissance, with its carefree borrowing from antiquity, but even from antiquity itself, which plundered ancient oriental motifs just as unscrupulously. And thus began the cycle of repetition of past styles. Styles become historical, from pre-Alexandrian antiquity onward, and are brought back into circulation not for their own sake, as one might think, or out of sheer helplessness, but with the more or less conscious intention of gathering up, from the existing supply of earlier centuries' artistic monuments, whatever seems to satisfy the more or less clearly felt needs for mood. It is from this point of view that the history of the past century of European art will one day have to be written. For it is not by chance that among all the ancients we have fallen for Attic art with its Olympian repose, rather than for the Laocoön, for instance, which Bernini still praised as the most perfect work of sculpture. Not by chance does the Venetian painting of daily life [*Existenzmalerei*] still appeal to us, and not the bombastic manner of the Roman Baroque masters, who still tended toward ancient near-sightedness [*Nahsicht*]. It is not by chance that we have taken as our model the tranquil, detached Velázquez, the only secular painter of those Habsburgs who sat on the Spanish throne, but not his rutting, enraptured countrymen.

Mood and devotion live close to one another. For devotion is after all nothing but religious mood. There are therefore deep reasons for the fact that, insofar as we are able to survey the cultural history of mankind, mood always becomes the highest goal of art in periods also characterized by a deep religious excitement. The first time was in late antiquity, when belief in the pagan gods was shaken, preparing the ground for the emergence of Jesus Christ. A second time came in modern times, as a



result of that tremendous movement of spirits that we call Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Lastly, today we see that parallelism return for a third time. For no one can doubt that we live in a spiritually deeply excited time. Even Catholicism has rejuvenated itself, unfolding in recent years a power of persuasion that many would not have thought possible sixty years ago. But the great majority of minds can no longer reassure itself in the moral world order, just as it has long been unable to in the physical world order, with a devoted faith in the supernatural. They await enlightenment from the many newly founded disciplines occupied with the intellectual side of human nature: psychophysics, ethnology, social science, and so on. Yet art remains loyally by its side: as in all other times, it once again helps the soul find that salvation, that liberation, that it needs imperatively, if the will to live is not to be denied. So it is our artists who draw the last, highest, most decisive gain from modern knowledge, and thus bring the solace-seeking humanity of our time [*Zeitgeschlecht*] relief, if not salvation.

**Note**

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