



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Paul Schultze-Naumburg and the *Domestic Appreciation of Art* (1900)

The improvement of everyday life was a prominent concern among educators in Wilhelmine Germany. In 1900, Paul Schultze-Naumburg (1869-1949), a teacher, architect, graphic artist, and critic, led the charge to improve German society, according to his own views, through good painting and interior design in his book *Häusliche Kunstpflege* [*Domestic Appreciation of Art*].

We are confronted with a seemingly remarkable phenomenon. After years of struggle, the art of painting has entered into a calm period; attractive, modern paintings are being created in large numbers; these works have attracted the interest and emotional responsiveness of many people; yes, there are, relatively speaking, many buyers – and yet, one cannot really speak of a general participation in artistic matters by the common man. One constantly hears only complaints from painters about the general situation of the arts; the status of their art becomes more precarious every day, and it seems as though an invisible stone were lying in the path of progress and preventing a healthy further development of the art of painting.

Invisible? No, whoever has eyes can see it.

The development of painting as an art has been so rapid and accelerated that, as a result, it has left all the related arts behind, in a state of atrophy, upon which it depends and in relation to which its own development is actually measured. Now at the height of its development, painting has lost its balance. It is as though a single tree branch had grown by itself to a commanding height and is now exposed and shaken back and forth by the storm. If all the branches grow to the same height, then they will hold their own against the strongest storm.

Today we have modern painting, but, from an aesthetic viewpoint, we lack a cultured, modern house. Where should these countless works of art produced by the paintbrush find a resting place? In the galleries? That is not the purpose of their creation; instead, they demand as a harmonizing framework a home that can be experienced as something just as artistic as the artwork itself. Such a house, however, does not yet exist.

The stylistic turmoil of the ancient Germans, of the Renaissance, of the Rococo did not produce this house. By the same token, just as the spirit of the Middle Ages is hardly alive in us today, we can hardly expect to fit into the space that this spirit created for itself. In all of this, there was no real concern for the development of realistic ideals, about which the words of Otto Ludwig are as appropriate today as they were forty years ago: what counts is the production of realistic ideals, and that means the ideals of our time. It is completely off-target to imitate the ideals of a past era that found their most beautiful possible realization in the creations of the poets and painters of that very era. The task is rather to give to the ideals that are still without form – trembling as mere longing in the hearts and minds of those striving anew towards the present –

a genuine form, in which every contemporary person immediately recognizes that which he or she was nourishing, too, but could not configure or visualize.

Everywhere we are dealing with circumstances that have changed completely. Only when these circumstances are mediated to the fullest extent by art, can art itself progress towards a genuinely healthy condition. And in no single sphere have these changed circumstances taken on such significance as they have in the area of the applied and decorative arts.

Up until the culmination of the Empire style, the Biedermeier style, everything followed its logical, normal path of healthy development. Until that point, aesthetic sensibility was in harmony with the demands and technical state of the times. The strange confusion generated by the dawning of a new era also generated stylistic chaos. The sad monuments of this interregnum without a style will stand for centuries as documents of the artistic sensibility that reigned during the century of the great inventions. This period of deliberate, historical stylistic turmoil finally had to be recognized as a lamentable aberration. First in England, and then everywhere, the realization dawned that we had sinned gravely in the cause of human creativity. And now we experience the grand moment of birth of the style of the twentieth century.

One can begin only at the point where the development was interrupted, however, and for this reason even our most modern art is in the first instance reminiscent of the Empire style and attempts to transfer this style onto our changed circumstances, onto the results of our tremendous scientific progress.

The average dwelling, as it presented itself at the beginning of this century, was not all that bad. It was, in fact, golden, compared with what our advancing era later produced. Even if it lacked a great deal in terms of hygienic conveniences, and was in many respects still very primitive, we still find broad, gradually and comfortably ascending stairways, broad corridors, and sparsely draped, bright windows in the well-conserved buildings of that time: in the simple patrician houses in the city, and those built in the country in the style of the garden house; in a word, we encounter everywhere the "wasting of space." In the crassest contrast to our imitated luxury, we see merely an unbelievably solid simplicity, furniture built to last for centuries, appliances that are practical above all, and everything is tied to a purpose, such that the overall arrangement seems to our contemporary sensibilities to be bordering on an almost impoverished simplicity. In its authenticity and clarity, however, it is actually a very congenial simplicity.

Today, all the basic circumstances of the house have been entirely altered. The wasting of space is over, once and for all. And the hygienic demands placed on the house, although adversely affected by the need to conserve space and economize, are amply accommodated through the high technical standards of the day.

Water, electricity, and heat are all at the disposal of the inhabitants through a flick of the switch or a turn of the knob. And an excellent plumbing and sewer system renders harmless the concentration of many people into a relatively limited living space. But heavier demands are also being placed on the individual inhabitant of these new homes; he would be worn down more quickly if conveniences and facilities unimaginable in earlier times were not provided for him, for they now create balance to some extent. This – if I may use the expression – altered soul of all material objects also requires a different aesthetic design for its physical form, and it is here that aesthetic elements have not kept pace with technical progress. It may be that it was simply impossible to adapt so quickly, that the technical innovations were so overwhelming that they allowed mankind to concentrate only on the purely practical goals. They affected us, to be sure, not just in a technical sense, but also in economic and social relations. In earlier times it

was the single-family home that represented the standard of the well-to-do classes who aspired to higher status in the society; now this standard has become the rented flat, whereas the single-family home is only the privilege of a very wealthy few.

Source: Paul Schultze-Naumburg, *Häusliche Kunstpflege* [*Domestic Appreciation of Art*]. Leipzig, 1900, pp. 1-5.

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