

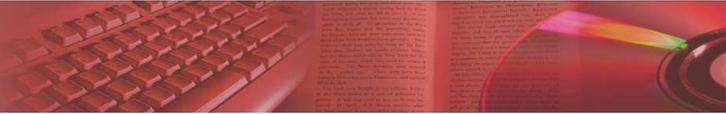


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Werner Telesko. *Geschichtsraum Österreich: Die Habsburger und ihre Geschichte in der bildenden Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts.* Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2006. Illustrations. 576 pp. EUR 79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-205-77522-5.

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Viennese History Painting is Booming

In June, two major exhibitions on Austria's most illustrious nineteenth-century painter, Hans Makart, will open in Vienna at the Lower Belvedere ("Makart: Maler der Sinne": June 5 - October 16, 2011) and at the Wien Museum ("Makart: Ein Künstler regiert die Welt": June 9 - October 9, 2011). These exhibitions have been long awaited and have already captured the public's imagination through two spectacular art historical interventions: the open-studio restoration of Makart's painting "The Triumph of Ariadne" (1873-74) and the spectacular loan of Makart's final canvas "Spring" (1884) from the Salzburg Museum where it has hung in the same spot for forty consecutive years.[1] It is hard to believe that Vienna's last serious curatorial engagement with historicism dates back twenty-six years to the groundbreaking exhibition "Traum und Wirklichkeit, Wien 1870-1930," which was staged in 1985 at the Historische Museum der Stadt Wien (now the Wien Museum). Since then, historicism has never completely vanished from the horizon—indeed, this seems impossible given the physical fabric of the city—but exhibition makers have dedicated most of their energies and financial resources to the critical reconstitution of "Vienna 1900." These have been productive endeavors, but the time might now be right to focus our attention back onto the entire scope of the "long nineteenth-century" and take inventory of its multifarious cultural, social, and political dimensions. Werner Telesko's book makes an important scholarly contribution to this reassessment of nineteenth-century Austrian art and given its publication date (2006), one might even suggest that he laid some of the academic groundwork for the current rediscovery of Vienna's historicist heritage.

Telesko's monograph focuses on nineteenth-century history painting, sculpture, and print culture

to explore how members of the Habsburg monarchy instrumentalized the past to legitimize their political ambitions in the present. Telesko relies on "reception history" (p. 13), which enables him to survey the diverse ways in which nineteenth-century artists and historians took up the theme of Austrian history, without ever losing sight of the complicated relationship between the past and the present. In this context, Telesko is keen to think about iconography not only as reflecting historical conditions operating at the time of production, but also as actively participating in the formulation of social hierarchies and power structures—a methodology clearly shaped by T. J. Clark's social art history. Viewed from this perspective, nineteenth-century history painting thus functioned as a "medium of social identification" between a ruler and his people that "simultaneously contained and produced history" (p. 13). The *Geschichtsbilder* encompassed by Telesko's monograph begin with the rhetoric of the Casa de Austria, or Domus Austriae, and conclude with the construct of the Habsburg nation-state or *Gesamtstaat*. Telesko thus covers Austrian history from Franz II to Franz Joseph I, although his narrative is not strictly chronological and revolves around themes as much as time periods.

Geschichtsraum Österreich is divided into ten chapters, with chapters 1 and 2 presenting Telesko's theoretical scaffolding that underpins his case-specific argumentation in chapters 3 to 10. Telesko's post-structuralist approach sets out a by now familiar discourse of "identity and alterity," "imagined communities," "canon formation," and "nationalism, tradition and patriotism." With these analytical concepts firmly anchored in one's mind, the reader then embarks on a scrupulously researched, archivally rich

journey through the maze of visual strategies employed by Habsburg rulers keen to justify their claims to power while bringing the empire's diverse ethnicities into the fold. In chapters 3 and 4, Telesko relies heavily on sculpture and print culture in his discussion of the predominant nineteenth-century iconographies of Maria Theresa as a unifying *mater patriae* and the more complicated vacillation of her son Emperor Joseph II between absolute ruler and beloved sovereign. But Telesko is quick to point out that even a fairly stable iconography like the one employed in the revival of Maria Theresa as *Landesmutter* experienced significant iconographic transformations throughout the nineteenth century. Chapter 5 returns to a more theory-driven mode of analysis when examining the interstices between dynastic and national identities that could not be fully contained in the imperial iconographies of Franz II (I), Ferdinand I, and Franz Joseph I. This chapter also brings into play new technological innovations that facilitated a more socially diverse dissemination of imperial iconography from cheap prints to fine art portraiture.

Chapter 6 functions as one of the book's key chapters in that it investigates the "rediscovery" of Rudolf I (1218-91) as the first Habsburg monarch, progenitor, or "Stammesvater" of the dynasty, and staunch defender of the Catholic faith. The chapter is driven by the theme of genealogical origins and ancestral lines. Seduced by the period's love affair with the Middle Ages, such key artists as the Nazarene Brotherhood painters Franz Pforr and Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld painted exquisite cycles of the Rudolf legend in the first part of the nineteenth century, while Ludwig Schwanthaler and Arthur Strasser produced evocative sculptural pieces later on. The diverse visual material in this chapter opens up exciting new venues for scholarly investigations. Chapter 7 follows naturally from these discussions because Telesko introduces two important historians behind this "rediscovery" of Austrian history, namely, Joseph Freiherr von Hormayr (1781/2-1848) and Joseph Alexander Freiherr von Helfert (1820-1910). Chapter 8 is entirely dedicated to the interpretation and circulation of an increasingly patriotic historiography in popular prints. Some of the visual material in this chapter represents wonderful discoveries, such as Karl Russ's magnificent 147 ink and watercolor drawings (in sepia) executed in 1847 for his series *Pictures of the History of Vienna*. The final two chapters, chapters 9 and 10, shift the discussion into the realm of

military iconography which dominated so many aspects of Austrian life in the second half of the nineteenth century. Here, Telesko uses a series of concrete examples, such as the conscious revival of Austria's great military hero of the Napoleonic Wars, Field Marshal Radetzky, to show how Franz Joseph I encouraged a staunch *Militärmythos* ("myth of the military" [p. 389]) to instill military virtues into his subjects. We are all familiar with Franz Joseph's many portraits in military uniform, but Telesko presents the fresco decorations of the Pantheon in Vienna's Armory (by Carl von Blaas) as a wonderful case study illustrating the artistic deploy of this *Militärmythos* in chapter 10. In the end, Telesko's multifaceted study reveals that the Habsburg Empire's *Geschichtsmalerei*—i.e., painting of history and for history—relied heavily on an iconography of dynastic lineages to justify imperial constellations of power. Telesko asserts that this "personality cult" was an effective and necessary strategy in a constant struggle to accommodate the Habsburg Empire's political and geographical realities of a *Vielvölkerstaat* to the prevailing ideas of a nation-state.

In the book's summary, Telesko concludes that his analysis of the "diverse reflexion on history in nineteenth-century Austria in the visual arts ... warranted a considerable expansion of the familiar material basis" (p. 417). And indeed, Telesko's sighting and subsequent contextualization of new, broadly scoped visual and textual sources represents one of his project's major achievements. But he does not stop here; Telesko uses this material to formulate new questions around the complicated relationship between political iconography, the monarchy, and the notoriously fractured Austrian state. Telesko demonstrates through a series of thoroughly grounded case studies how a canon of key events and subjects from this past performed the "central principle of collective identity-formation and [identity-] stabilization" (p. 419). For the first time—at least in the historiography known to the present reviewer—a study provides a sound theoretical platform for the complex interactions between the Habsburg dynasty and the representation of history in the visual arts. This is an ambitious undertaking and for the most part highly successful. However, a slight sense of discontinuity emerges between Telesko's introductory chapters and the proceeding case studies in that Telesko does not always explore the full potential of his post-structural methodology. For example, when working with notions of identity and alterity, it is cru-

cial to pay attention to the ways in which the visual cannot quite contain meaning and always offers spaces through which viewers/beholders can subvert its iconography. It would have been interesting to explore some of these ruptures and interstices in the examples provided by Telesko. To be fair, this would have directed the discussion into a different direction and threatened the book's coherence. But as a result, the book is very much a "history from above." And indeed, *Geschichtsraum Österreich* is the first of a two-part publication and the second volume (*Kulturraum Österreich: Die Identität der Regionen in der bildenden Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts* [2008]), also by Telesko, promises to delve much deeper into the kinds of regional and ethnic tensions that the Habsburg Empire tried to contain throughout its tenure.

Overall, Telesko's publication makes a vital contribution to the scholarship of nineteenth-century art

and culture. But let us not be fooled, this book goes beyond a mere analysis of Habsburg *Historienkunst* and gives pertinent new insights into the multifarious ways in which history was deployed in nineteenth-century art and historiography across a spectrum of media. Telesko's book is amply and beautifully illustrated, introducing his reader to many unfamiliar visual sources. Telesko's bibliography is extensive and attests to years of dedicated research in archives and libraries—an endeavor increasingly threatened by the current realities of academic life. Telesko is equally comfortable with historical, literary, and visual sources, and this book definitely warrants a place on the shelves of art historians and historians alike.

Note

[1]. See http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20110111_OTS_makart-schaurestauration-im-oberen-belvedere-bild and <http://www.salzburg.com/nwas/video/index.php?vid=65241ECA88F2255D290FF7DC81E95734>.

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