

HOW ART HISTORIANS CONSTRUCTED “SWISS ART”

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During a conference held at Kunsthhaus Aarau in 2016 on the subject of “Swiss Pop Art”, one of the speakers made the following statement: “There is no Pop Art in Switzerland. [...] This cool, polished realism does not suit the country’s mentality. Pop Art is really a regional phenomenon [*i.e. a US phenomenon – R.F.*] which the art market has stylized into a global phenomenon.”¹ Leaving aside the question of whether or not Switzerland has any Pop Art,² let us focus here on the implications of the dictum: 1) a national reference framework, Switzerland, which had of course been prescribed or at least suggested by the conference; 2) the identification of art made in Switzerland with a purported national mentality; 3) the characterization of this mentality as the opposite of “cool” and “polished”; and finally, 4) the geographical claim that the only true Pop Art is that of the United States. The quote ultimately implies *ex negativo* the existence of a “Swiss art” with a particular essence – an essence that, for one thing, excludes Pop Art. But what does it mean to speak of “Swiss art”?

Basically, we need to distinguish between two different kinds of concept that have been used to define Swiss art: those which are supposed to designate a certain character, whatever that might be, and those of a formal nature founded on criteria such as the citizenship, birthplace or home of the artist, whittling the matter down to something like: “art by artists in Switzerland” or “art by Swiss citizens”. Concepts like these are used in the art market, for example. Auctions of Swiss art have been held regularly at Sotheby’s since 1979 and at Christie’s since 1991, and their catalogues are based on a simple factor: to come under the hammer, the work must be by a Swiss artist. Another field applying a formal concept of Swiss art is lexicography. The SIKART Lexicon on art in Switzerland currently applies the following rule: “Entries will be made for artists who held or hold Swiss or Liechtenstein citizenship, or who were or are active within the current borders of Switzerland or of the Principality of Liechtenstein for a protracted period.”³ In simple terms, formal concepts of Swiss art

¹ International Conference “Swiss Pop Art”, organized by Kunsthhaus Aarau and the Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA), held at Kunsthhaus Aarau from 8 to 9 April 2016.

² Works by Max Matter, Peter Stämpfli, Markus Müller, the early Franz Gertsch and Markus Raetz – to name but a few – could be considered as Pop Art.

³ See <https://www.sikart.ch/content.aspx?id=Q2>, accessed 10/3/2021.

serve a pragmatic purpose, because they stake out a field that can only be managed if it has defined limits. In the art market, then, the label “Swiss art” appeals to a specific target group of interested purchasers, as do terms such as “French art” or “English art”. While formal approaches to a definition seem broadly unproblematic, essentialist concepts inevitably entail inclusions and exclusions, hierarchies and the creation of a canon. It is precisely because of these questionable consequences that the history of such concepts merits particular analysis, especially in a discipline which has from the outset worked with the notion of “schools” and, whenever authorship is unclear, usually resorts to indicating a purported country of origin or, indeed, “school”, relying on traditional geographical, mostly national categories.

Biographical art history sows the seeds

How have art historians gone about constructing the idea of a “Swiss art” with its own essential identity? We can identify two major paradigms, at least for the period from the late 19th century until after the middle of the 20th century, and they stand at opposite ends of the discourse: one is the idea of “Swiss art” as a disparate complex shaped by transcultural exchange, while the other is the vision of a primarily homogeneous phenomenon defined to a greater or lesser degree by a “national character”. As far as research is concerned, there has not as yet been a comprehensive, systematic investigation into the genesis and influence over time of these identity constructs; however, the theme does play a fringe role in essays about the historiography of Swiss art history in general. Particular mention should be made of the seminal paper *Historiographie der Kunst in der Schweiz (A Historiography of Art in Switzerland)* by Oskar Bächtli and Marcel Baumgartner,⁴ Dario Gamboni’s approach to art history in Switzerland based on methods derived from geography,⁵ and the relevant essays by Georg Germann,⁶ Emil Maurer⁷ and Juerg Albrecht.⁸

Before looking in greater depth at the first substantial attempt to produce an art history of this country, Johann Rudolf Rahn’s *Geschichte der bildenden Künste in der Schweiz (History of the Visual Arts in Switzerland)* published in the mid-19th century, mention should be made of two contributions on the subject dating back to the previous century:

⁴ Bächtli, O., Baumgartner, M. (1987). *Historiographie der Kunst in der Schweiz. Unsere Kunstdenkmäler* 38, no. 3, pp. 347-366.

⁵ Gamboni, D. (1987). *Esquisse pour une géographie de l’histoire de l’art en Suisse. Unsere Kunstdenkmäler* 38, no. 3, pp. 399-413.

⁶ Germann, G. (1984). *Kunstlandschaft und Schweizer Kunst. Zeitschrift für schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte* 41, no. 2, pp. 76-80.

⁷ Maurer, E. (1987). *Drei Köpfe: drei schweizerische Kunstgeschichten: Bemerkungen zu Johann Heinrich Füssli, Jacob Burckhardt und Johann Rudolf Rahn. Unsere Kunstdenkmäler* 38, no. 3, pp. 367-381.

⁸ Albrecht, J. (2006). *Schweizer Kunst? – Eine Einleitung. Das Kunstschaffen in der Schweiz 1848-2006*. Bern / Zurich: Benteli, pp. 15-29.

The painter, collector and art scholar Johann Caspar Füssli (father of the painter Johann Heinrich Füssli alias Henry Fuseli) was the first to compile a comprehensive collection of all the available biographies of Swiss artists, which he called *Geschichte und Abbildung der besten Malern in der Schweiz (History and Portrayal of the Best Painters in Switzerland)*.⁹ Published for the first time in two volumes in 1755 and 1757, and followed by an extended five-volume edition between 1769 and 1779 (fig. 1),¹⁰ Füssli’s opus continues the great tradition of biographical art history cultivated by men such as Vasari and Joachim von Sandrart (on whose *Teutscher Akademie* Füssli lavishly drew). The entries are arranged chronologically and they contain details about the life and technique of each artist along with selected works. Füssli is full of praise for the qualities of artistic output in Switzerland and stresses the ability of these Swiss artists to compete with their colleagues in other countries, all the more so – he finds – because art in Italy, France and Germany is in a state of decline. What Füssli does not do, however, is to go beyond this purely biographical interpretation by offering any general thoughts on the history of art in Switzerland.

Christian von Mechel wrote his *Entwurf einer Kunstgeschichte Helvetiens (Outline for an Art History of Helvetia)* in the form of a lecture, which the copper engraver and art dealer from Basel delivered as President of the *Helvetische Gesellschaft* at an assembly that same year, 1791.¹¹ Of course, we cannot but prick up our ears at the title, especially as the author had undertaken a few years earlier to order the imperial art gallery in the Vienna Belvedere according to the criteria of art history, which set him up as a kind of expert in defining the historical categories. Mechel’s talk did not, however, live up to the promise of its title: it is above all a list with a cursory characterization of about thirty Swiss artists. Nevertheless, Mechel’s reference to the training prospects for artists in Switzerland is noteworthy: due to the lack of an art academy in their own country, they were obliged to study abroad – and in Mechel’s opinion this meant that they championed the taste of whatever school they had attended.¹² Towards the middle of the 20th century, the German art historian Fritz Schmalenbach drew the same conclusion from his half-outsider, half-insider perspective, likewise designating this, together with the absence of eminent cultural hubs, as the decisive characteristic of art in Switzerland.¹³

⁹ Füssli, J. C. (1755-1757). *Geschichte und Abbildung der besten Malern in der Schweiz*. 2 vols., Zurich: David Gessner.

¹⁰ Füssli, J. C. (1769-1779). *Johann Caspar Füesslins Geschichte der besten Künstler in der Schweiz. Nebst ihren Bildnissen*. 5 vols., Zurich: Orell, Gessner und Compagnie.

¹¹ Mechel, C. v. (1791). *Entwurf einer Kunst-Geschichte Helvetiens, an die zu Olten im Kanton Solothurn den 6ten Brachmonats des Jahres 1791 versammelte Helvetische Gesellschaft. Verhandlungen der Helvetischen Gesellschaft in Olten, im Jahre 1791*. Basel: Wilhelm Haas, pp. 15-41.

¹² See *ibid.*, p. 27.

¹³ Schmalenbach, F. (1955). *Die Struktur der Schweizer Malerei im 19. Jahrhundert. Neue Studien über Malerei des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*. Bern: Rota, pp. 70-77, see pp. 74-75.

Johann Jakob Rahn and the “cosmopolitan imprint”

The first in-depth reflection on the question of Swiss art comes from Johann Rudolf Rahn, from 1870 until 1912 the first professor of art history at Zurich University (fig. 2). In terms of methodology, Rahn pursued a strictly object-related, documentary approach, which was closely linked to practical activities such as cataloguing and preserving historical monuments. This focus on the works was coupled with an interpretation framed by the history of styles, where each documented object was assigned its place. From 1873 to 1876, Rahn published his 841-page *Geschichte der bildenden Künste in der Schweiz von den ältesten Zeiten bis zum Schluss des Mittelalters* (*A History of the Fine Arts in Switzerland from the Earliest Times until the End of the Middle Ages*).¹⁴ As the title suggests, Rahn’s history of art in Switzerland addresses an era before the sense of nationhood gradually began to emerge. This may seem surprising at first, but apart from the fact that the author originally intended to publish a sequel, the quality that Rahn identifies as typically Swiss (as it were) in Swiss art was already in place before any national consciousness was born. For Rahn, it was the geographical location in the interstice between the great cultures of the North, South and West that determined the nature of art on what is nowadays Swiss soil and lent it a “cosmopolitan imprint”¹⁵ from the outset. “Just as our country is in geographical terms a centre, where the paths from Romanic and Germanic countries brush and cut across one another from all directions, so the perusal of artistic monuments likewise indicates the great variety of currents which flow together here within a small space [...]”¹⁶ The effect of “manifold influences [...] from all sides” is to generate “a picture ridden with contradictions”. Consequently, “there can be no question here of a homogeneous development such as can be observed in other countries of a similar scale”.

The idea of a cosmopolitan cultural diversity – these days we would tend to speak of a transnational cultural diversity or of transcultural diversity – is the paradigm with which Rahn sets about his presentation of art in the region that now constitutes Switzerland. Jacob Burckhardt quickly pinpointed this as the underlying principle of Rahn’s art history. Soon after the book came out, Burckhardt wrote to Rahn: “With your work you are the first to summarize the subject and treat it as a whole [...]. The waves of everything that has ever moved art have at some time and in some way lapped against our mountains in the middle of Europe [...]”¹⁷ However, while the image chosen by Burckhardt relegates art on home territory to a pale imitation of the

¹⁴ Rahn, J. R. (1876). *Geschichte der bildenden Künste in der Schweiz von den ältesten Zeiten bis zum Schlusse des Mittelalters*. Zurich: Hans Staub.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. VI.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Letter dated 6 July 1873 from Jacob Burckhardt to Johann Rudolf Rahn, quoted in: Isler-Hungerbühler, U. (1956). *Johann Rudolf Rahn. Begründer der schweizerischen Kunstgeschichte* (Mitteilungen der Antiquarischen Gesellschaft in Zürich, 39). Zurich: Schulthess und Co. AG, p. 76.

creativity taking place all around it in Europe, the transcultural diversity expounded by Rahn by all means carries positive connotations. Rahn even comes up with a visual expression for the national (artistic) cohesion he wishes to convey: in his design for the first page of his Preface (fig. 3), he borrows the border detail from a woodcut included in Petermann Etterlin’s *Kronica von der loblichen Eydgnoschaft* (*Chronicle of the Laudable Swiss Confederation*) dating back to 1507 (fig. 4). With this text-and-image quotation, Rahn is referencing a tradition of patriotically minded chroniclers. He places his opening words where Etterlin had once displayed the coat-of-arms of the German Empire. This emblem of the Deutsches Reich as an overarching authority and a connective fabric is replaced by Rahn with his observations on art in Switzerland, and by analogy he attributes his commentary a function as a uniting factor.

A second characteristic derives from the idea that art in Switzerland is merely a secondary manifestation of something whose primary location – in both temporal and qualitative terms – lies elsewhere: the “usually unremarkable attitude”¹⁸ of domestic art, its “inadequacy” compared with products originating from cultural centres of greater political and economic power. Accordingly, the introductory sentence of his Preface reads: “Switzerland is poorly endowed with higher works of visual art.”¹⁹ What do these postulates – about a “cosmopolitan imprint” and qualitative “inadequacy” – signify for scholarship which, as in Rahn’s case, bases its logic above all on a history of styles? Assuming such a thing as transcultural diversity, allocating specific phenomena to a universal evolution of styles means that any stylistic attributions must always be combined with a reference to neighbouring cultural spaces. Indeed, Rahn’s descriptions make constant reference to the surrounding area, mentioning both formal connections and political or ecclesiastical links between inside and outside (such as the control over Swiss priories exercised by the Cluniac Order). Another consequence of this paradigm of cultural diversity generated from *outside*, however, is the notion of stylistic delay – “style lags”²⁰ or “anachronisms of art history”²¹ – a notion that helps to shore up the idea that development follows a stringent sequence of time and content, even though the obvious gap between production date and stylistic categorization ought to raise a few eyebrows.

From an *intradisciplinary* perspective, Rahn’s contribution to determining the identity of Swiss art should be seen as effectively filling a vacuum by tackling a field which had been practically ignored up until that point: art produced in Switzerland. And it combined two approaches to art history which were prevalent at the time: the object-centred documentary method and the history of styles. In *political terms*, Rahn’s attribution of identity pursues patriotic intentions: the paradigm of a Switzerland

¹⁸ Rahn (1876), p. V.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. XIX.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

whose identity is inherently determined by its “cosmopolitan imprint” drew evidence from art history for the belief that the essence of Switzerland lay in establishing national unity across linguistic boundaries. It also helped the conservative camp, of which Rahn can be considered part, to substantiate their federalist or anti-centralist demands. These political objectives are matched by Rahn’s institutional activities, for example, on behalf of the Patriotic Society for the Preservation of Historical Monuments and the Swiss National Museum; both are specimens of a blend consisting of regionally diversified inventories and a public message aligned to the nation. Moreover, he consistently advocated walking, an activity practised above all in rural areas, as the right way to discover art. In 1883, true to this purpose, he published a set of short texts entitled *Kunst- und Wanderstudien aus der Schweiz (Studies in Art and Rambling from Switzerland)*.²² A fair number of these are devoted to cultural monuments in Ticino, a Catholic region that remained marginalized within the nation until the late 19th century amid the political dominance of urban, Reformed Church liberals.

The idea that the true essence of art in Switzerland was its disparate quality induced by a “cosmopolitan imprint” remained influential well into the 20th century – notwithstanding some weak points in the line of argument, such as the assumption that multiple monodirectional forces were being imposed from the outside (those “lapping” waves described by Burckhardt), when it would be more appropriate to suppose greater parity in a process of active reception and reciprocal percolation. Its impact, not surprisingly, is especially evident in the field of stylistic history. Peter Meyer, for one, speaks in his *Schweizerische Stilkunde (Manual of Swiss Styles)* published in 1942 of the country’s “place in the middle between France, Germany and Italy”²³ and the “peculiar mixtures”²⁴ to which this has given rise. In the illustrated section, the captions refer again and again to styles in neighbouring countries. This approach is maintained even in that most complete of all accounts of fine art in Switzerland, the four-volume *Kunstgeschichte der Schweiz (Art History of Switzerland)* by Joseph Gantner and Adolf Reinle, published between 1936 and 1962 – or at least in certain segments, such as the descriptions of Renaissance and Baroque architecture, where the formulation is explicit.²⁵ The transcultural paradigm still reverberates in modified form in 1970 in Paul Nizon’s widely read *Diskurs in der Enge (Discourse in Narrowness)*. The art historian and writer considers that the state of being locked between the great powers and the “naturally formed close confines of the stage”²⁶ forge a landscape for art which can only produce major contributions by borrowing

²² Rahn, J. R. (1883). *Kunst- und Wanderstudien aus der Schweiz*. Vienna: Georg Paul Faesy.

²³ Meyer, P. (1942). *Schweizerische Stilkunde von der Vorzeit bis zur Gegenwart*. Zurich: Schweizer Spiegel, p. 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁵ See Gantner, J., Reinle, A. (1936-1962). *Kunstgeschichte der Schweiz*. 4 vols., Frauenfeld: Huber & Co, vol. 3, p. 8.

²⁶ Nizon, P. (1970). *Diskurs in der Enge. Aufsätze zur Schweizer Kunst*. Bern: Kandelaber, p. 5.

from movements abroad. “Switzerland lives in a cultural ‘Anschluss’²⁷ and is incapable of creating anything “which, as ‘Swiss art’, might have become an embodiment”.²⁸ Nizon even draws on the style lag concept: “Everything that spurs artists somewhere in the centres – from Pop to Minimal and Conceptual Art – happens here with a minor stylistic delay.”²⁹

The vision and sentiment of the art geographer

If the idea that Swiss art was transculturally defined took hold and exerted its primary influence in the context of scholarship that operated a documentary approach by focussing closely on the object and for the most part applying the logic of style history, a new paradigm emerged after 1900 in conjunction with a method explicitly identified with art geography – a method, in other words, that sought to explain artistic phenomena in terms of geographical factors such as climate, landscape and language, sometimes resorting to political and social circumstances as well or else to categories such as national character and mentality. Even elements of racial ideology found expression in art geography, which often adopted a comparative perspective. It gained a footing above all in German-speaking countries through advocates such as Josef Strzygowski, Wilhelm Pinder, Dagobert Frey and Nikolaus Pevsner.³⁰ Nikolaus Pevsner’s *The Englishness of English Art* is a specimen worth mentioning:³¹ the German art historian Pevsner, who had emigrated to England in 1933, sought in his Reith Lectures in 1955 to identify a national character in art while resolutely disowning both the logic of racial ideology and the political aspirations of nationalism.³²

Contemporary currents in comparative art geography³³ provided an endogenous spur within the discipline for the emergence of a new notion of Swiss art which now played its part in the construction of an identity (exogenous factors included interactions with political figures and with concepts such as “spiritual national defence”). Another point of reference was the “aesthetic of experience”, a

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27-28.

³⁰ Another influential book that expounds its core theses in terms of art geography is a late publication on Italian art by Heinrich Wölfflin: *Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl*. In his introduction the author argues: “But one need not reflect long and hard to realize that the various styles of a country share a common element which stems from the soil, from the race, so that the Italian Baroque, for example, is not merely different from the Italian Renaissance but also similar, because behind both styles there is the Italian as a racial type, changing only gradually.” Wölfflin, H. (1931). *Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl*. Munich: F. Bruckmann, p. 6.

³¹ See Pevsner, N. (1956). *The Englishness of English art: An expanded and annotated version of the Reith Lectures broadcast in October and November 1955*. London: Architectural Press.

³² See Whyte, Iain Boyd (2013). Nikolaus Pevsner: art history, nation, and exile. *RIHA Journal*, no. 75, 23 October 2013, <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/rihajournal/article/view/69832>, accessed 19/3/2021.

³³ Not to be confused with later forms of art geography, such as that of Dario Gamboni. See Gamboni, D. (1987). *Kunstgeographie (Ars Helvetica 1: Die visuelle Kultur der Schweiz)*. Disentis: Pro Helvetia / Desertina.

concept that had some impact in the early 20th century. As a deliberate antithesis to iconography and iconology, this approach made the subjective experience of an artwork its programmatic focus. For Gotthard Jedlicka, whose publication on Swiss painting is examined below, the essential theme was how the moment of subjective experience triggered by a work of art sparks insights and how contemplation and description enable the viewer to grasp the particular awareness of life it conveys.

Gotthard Jedlicka, born in 1899, was Professor of Art History at the University of Zurich from 1934 until 1965 – and his is the great unspoken name in almost all historiographical accounts of art scholarship in Switzerland.³⁴ In 1947 he published his book on contemporary Swiss painting: *Zur Schweizerischen Malerei der Gegenwart*.³⁵ It is a collection of 18 texts, all of them devoted to Swiss artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Jedlicka knew most of them personally, and some were even friends, like Max Gubler, who painted several portraits of the art historian (fig. 5). In other words, the method championed by Jedlicka – emotional immersion in the object to be explored – was matched in his social practice by fostering friendships with the creators of the works he discussed. As for the origination of his essays, they often appeared in exhibition catalogues and hence were written for a context partially determined by the interests of an institution and the exhibiting artist.

The *General Observations* which precede his monographs on different artists immediately affirm the existence of a specifically Swiss art. Jedlicka talks – arguing to some extent from the perspective of art geography – of a centuries-old Swiss *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, a community with a common destiny, and argues that the nation behind this community must inevitably create art that is the “multiple expression of its essence”.³⁶ However, in Jedlicka’s opinion, the difficult, ultimately abstract task of determining the substance of this essence, of ascertaining its common features, can only be achieved by subjectively formulating “what one believes this painting makes one feel”.³⁷ This yields “at least an inkling of what is there”.³⁸

Despite this declaration of intent, however, Jedlicka mostly interprets the “common features”³⁹ by resorting to certain aspects of social interaction in Switzerland. He claims, for example, that Swiss painting is characterized by a degree of uniformity and that this has something to do with a great readiness for achieving compromise and accepting responsibility in the socio-political culture of the country.

³⁴ Rudolf Koella’s biography, published in 2019, was the first work to consider Gotthard Jedlicka in depth since the obituaries from 1965 onwards. See Koella, R. (2019). *Gotthard Jedlicka. Kunst sehen lernen*. Zurich: rüffer & rub. Forthcoming: Fayet, R., & Krähenbühl, R. (eds.) (2023). *Gotthard Jedlicka* (Engramme, 1). Zurich: SIK-ISEA.

³⁵ Jedlicka, G. (1947). *Zur schweizerischen Malerei der Gegenwart*. Erlenbach-Zurich: Eugen Rentsch.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

The smallness of the place, which makes it especially risky to make a fool of oneself, provokes an emphasis on diligence, sobriety, conscientiousness and solid artisanship, which tends to be dry and rough-cut rather than perfectly polished. Besides, the great value attached to security encourages a preference for graphic rather than painterly technique, as the cautious artist feels a need to “secure as much as possible from the outset”⁴⁰ in a painting by tracing out the lines. There is a distrust of intuitive, rapid, light-handed working, in the belief that only deliberate, conscious effort can produce a sound result. As a consequence, Swiss painters often stick to convention – high-standard convention, but convention nonetheless – and are at pains not to sacrifice what they have already achieved, because they keep a kind of artistic savings account and do not wish to lose any of the credit they have accrued.

It might have been expected, given his dense tissue of relationships and conscious desire to forge links with the art world (fig. 6), that this determination of what was Swiss about Swiss painting would be primarily affirmative in spirit, all the more so in the climate of “spiritual national defence” that reigned before and during the Second World War. Instead, Jedlicka’s picture of contemporary Swiss painting is surprisingly critical and ambivalent. The critical distance reflected in this description tallies, however, with Jedlicka’s declared purpose, for he sees his task in independent exegesis and sets to work as if he and the artist would “never again meet in society or on the street”.⁴¹ Besides, the critical distance in the text has to be seen in the context of its particular genesis: the introductory synopsis was originally written for the magazine *Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, which adamantly opposed the Frontists, a political movement in Switzerland sympathetic to the German Nazis and Italian fascists. Jedlicka’s determination of the essence of Swiss art should thus be seen as an attempt to distinguish his views from a nationalistic rhetoric that interpreted contemporary Swiss painting as the expression of a “healthy, upstanding, male energy”⁴² in the ethnic character – the quote is from Hans Graber’s⁴³ book *Schweizer Maler (Swiss Painters)* of 1913, which was also widely read in Germany. With his critical depiction of Swiss painting, Jedlicka was, moreover, countering the adoring tones which had emanated decades earlier from the writer Wilhelm Schäfer in Germany, who ended his review of the International Art Exhibition in Düsseldorf in 1904 by concluding “that even in this imperfect assembly of German painting, the Swiss are revealed as the truly Germanic artists in the sense [...] that they would rather speak a harsh word than a sleek one [...]”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴² Graber, H. (1913). *Schweizer Maler*. Königstein im Taunus / Leipzig: Karl Robert Langewiesche, p. VI.

⁴³ In the 1920s Hans Graber (1886-1956) wrote art reviews for the *Basler Zeitung*, and from 1932 until 1937 for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. In the 1940s he withdrew from newspaper work and turned his attention to French art. Numerous publications on Pisano, Degas, Manet, Pissarro, Sisley, Monet, Renoir, Cézanne and Gauguin. Edited the correspondence between Van Gogh and his brother.

⁴⁴ Schäfer, W. (1904). Die Malerei der Gegenwart auf der internationalen Ausstellung in Düsseldorf 1904 (Fortsetzung). *Die Rheinlande: Monatsschrift für deutsche Kunst*, vol. 8, June 1904, p. 364.

Selectivity is the key

In the publications just mentioned, the examples chosen by the authors play a central role in both their argumentation and the visual strategy adopted to underscore its plausibility. The construction of an identity inevitably operates inclusions and exclusions as well as processes of canonization. Not only for Jedlicka, but usually for Hans Graber and Wilhelm Schäfer too, Swiss art that is to be defined by notions like graphic technique, solid artisanship and rough-cut sobriety must include artists like Ferdinand Hodler, Giovanni Giacometti, Cuno Amiet, Max Buri, René Auberjonois and Alexandre Blanchet. The extent to which this selection of artists is a decisive factor in defining identity becomes clear when we reflect on what Jedlicka's canon omits: there are, for example, no abstract works by artists such as Johannes Itten, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Le Corbusier, Paul Klee or Augusto Giacometti; and nor are there any Expressionists, artists like Otto Morach, Ignaz Epper, Albert Müller and Hermann Scherer. It is only by excluding positions such as these that Jedlicka and Graber can define identity the way they do.

The interplay between a definition of identity and a canon is demonstrated by a later example, which upheld this essentialist concept of Swiss art, albeit more cautiously: the exhibition *The Swiss Avant Garde* organized by the cultural foundation Pro Helvetia in 1971 and shown at the New York Cultural Center.⁴⁵ Above all, it brings together proponents of Concrete Art – Camille Graeser, Fritz Glarner, Richard Paul Lohse, Max Bill, Verena Loewensberg ... – and a younger generation of abstract, constructivist artists (Pierre Haubensak, Hans Jörg Glattfelder, Jakob Bill ...), not to mention a few Nouveaux Réalistes, like Jean Tinguely and Daniel Spoerri. This rather different canon results in a somewhat altered concept of identity: according to curator Willy Rotzler in his introduction to the catalogue, the principal hallmark of Swiss art is its “cool rationalism”.⁴⁶ This and a “perfection of execution [...] appeal to the Swiss propensity for precision which expresses itself elsewhere in the highly developed watch industry and the field of precision mechanics”;⁴⁷ moreover, “passionate emotional outbursts and daring flights of the fancy” are alien to the Calvinist mentality of the Swiss. However, Rotzler suggests, there is a second line embodying the “Other” in Swiss art, which includes, for instance, the Nouveaux Réalistes and proponents of Fantastic Realism like H. R. Giger.

A recent case to close with: at the Venice Biennale in 2015, the Fondazione Giorgio Cini exhibited Luciano Benetton's collection *Imago mundi*.⁴⁸ It consists of thousands of

<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/rheinlande1904/0110>, accessed 25/3/2021.

⁴⁵ *The Swiss Avant Garde*, exhibition in The New York Cultural Center, organized in collaboration with Pro Helvetia and the Swiss Center New York, 23 February – 15 May 1971.

⁴⁶ Rotzler, W. (1971). New Art from Switzerland. *The Swiss Avant Garde*. The New York Cultural Center, 23 February – 15 May 1971, Zurich: Pro Helvetia (exhibition catalogue), pp. 8-11, cit. p. 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Imago Mundi*, exhibition in the Fondazione Giorgio Cini during the Venice Biennale 2015, organized by the Luciano Benetton Collection, 1 September – 1 November 2015.

works of art from about 70 countries, most of them commissioned specially and all of them in a format of 12 x 10 cm. 69 country catalogues were produced for the Biennale in 2015, including one that was 538 pages thick entitled *Imago mundi Helvetia: Contemporary Artists from Switzerland*. The catalogue contains approximately 220 works arranged by canton, and basically they display no commonality at all in either form or content. Nevertheless, in his introduction to this catalogue the art historian Guido Magnaguagno more or less repeats the same notion of Swiss art printed 45 years earlier at the exhibition in New York: “Formal excesses are somewhat foreign to our artistic production [...]. Swiss art of the twentieth century turned instead to constructivism and often had a more intellectual than sensitive habitus. [...] But, naturally, the opposite also emerged, as if one were challenging the other.”⁴⁹ It is apparent from this that a notion can take on a life of its own, and that sometimes it is asserted even when the selection of works in no way endorses the essence of Swiss art that is being postulated.

Conclusion

Essentialist concepts of Swiss art have always been allied with particular interests and with the definition of specific canons. This relativity is at odds with the claim made by essentialist definitions to be per se unconditional, and from the perspective of art scholarship this renders them obsolete. However, the interactions that are part and parcel of these identity constructs make them fruitful terrain for art research. How desirable it would be to broaden the perspective, to embrace an interdisciplinary and comparative approach and consider the correlations between assignments of identity in art history with those undertaken by scholars of literature or music, to compare the view from inside with the view from outside, and to ponder on the relationships between Swiss identity discourses and those of other nations.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Magnaguagno, G. (2015). [Untitled.] *Imago Mundi Helvetia. Contemporary Artists from Switzerland*. Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 1 September – 1 November 2015, [without place]: Luciano Benetton Collection (exhibition catalogue), pp. 16–21, cit. p. 16.

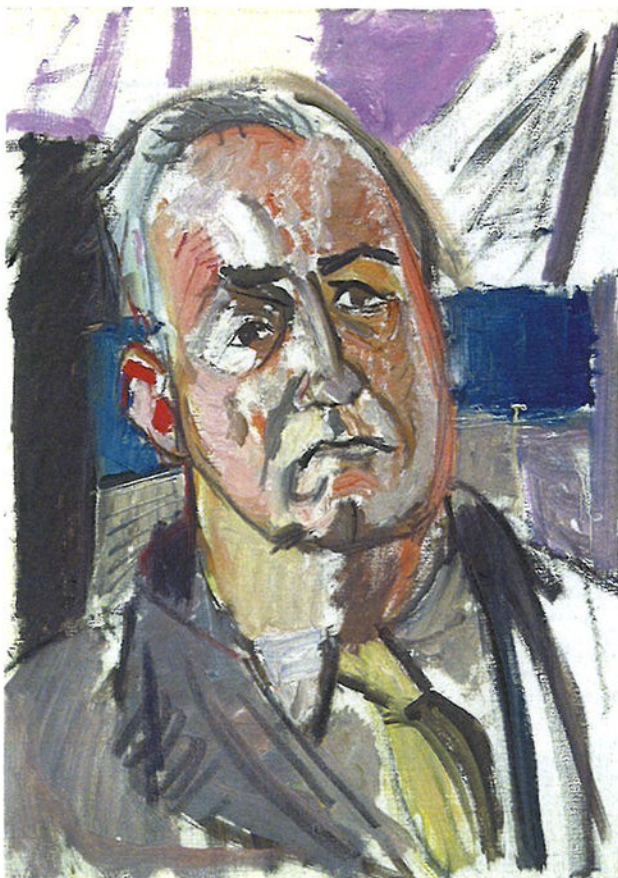
⁵⁰ This paper is an expanded version of a lecture given by the author in 2017 as part of the FUS Lecture Series at Franklin University in Lugano, Switzerland. Translation by Kate Vanovitch.



Frontispiece and title page of Johann Caspar Füssli's *Geschichte der besten Künstler in der Schweiz. Nebst ihren Bildnissen*. Second edition in 5 volumes, vol. 1, Zurich: Orell, Gessner und Comp., 1769-1779



Ernst Stückelberg – *Portrait of Johann Rudolf Rahn (1841-1912)*, 1877, oil on canvas. Private collection, photo: Zentralbibliothek Zürich



Max Gubler *Gotthard Jedlicka*
(1899-1965),
1958, oil on canvas, 73 x 54 cm
Swiss Institute for Art Research,
Zurich



Gotthard Jedlicka
and the painter *Maurice Barraud*.
Photo by Walter Dräyer, undated
Swiss Art Archives, SIK-ISEA

NOGUCHI/BRÂNCUȘI. DATE NOI DIN CORESPONDENȚA DINTRE ISAMU NOGUCHI ȘI BARBU BREZIANU*

Ioana VLASIU

Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) a fost adeseori invocat în bibliografia brâncușiană, nu numai pentru că în 1927 a lucrat un timp în atelierul lui Constantin Brâncuși (1876-1957), ci mai ales pentru că sculptorul american cu ascendență japoneză nu s-a dezis niciodată de învățătura primită, dimpotrivă, a văzut în exemplul brâncușian un reper constant al propriului destin artistic. Poate și o concepție despre trecut și tradiție de sorginte orientală, față de care cultul noului și al originalității proclamate de modernitatea europeană se plasa în răspăr, să își fi spus cuvântul în fidelitatea pe care Noguchi i-a păstrat-o lui Brâncuși. Cineva îi spune lui Noguchi în legătură cu o lucrare a sa din 1970: „Nu crezi că seamănă prea mult cu Brâncuși? Nu trebuie să îți îngădui să fii atât de influențat”. „Mie, îi răspunde sculptorul, dimpotrivă, mi-a făcut plăcere să fiu apreciat și văzut în acest fel, ca o continuare a trecutului, a propriului tău trecut, mi s-a părut un fel de recunoaștere”¹. În interviul pe care i l-a dat lui Friedrich Teja Bach în anii '80, Noguchi își recunoaște din nou datoria față de Brâncuși: „La început am făcut o mulțime de lucrări la Brâncuși, dar pe urmă mi-a fost rușine să fiu atât de influențat de el. Recunosc însă categoric că am fost foarte influențat de Brâncuși. Chiar atelierul meu semăna la un moment dat cu al lui, existau chiar și bârne vechi...”².

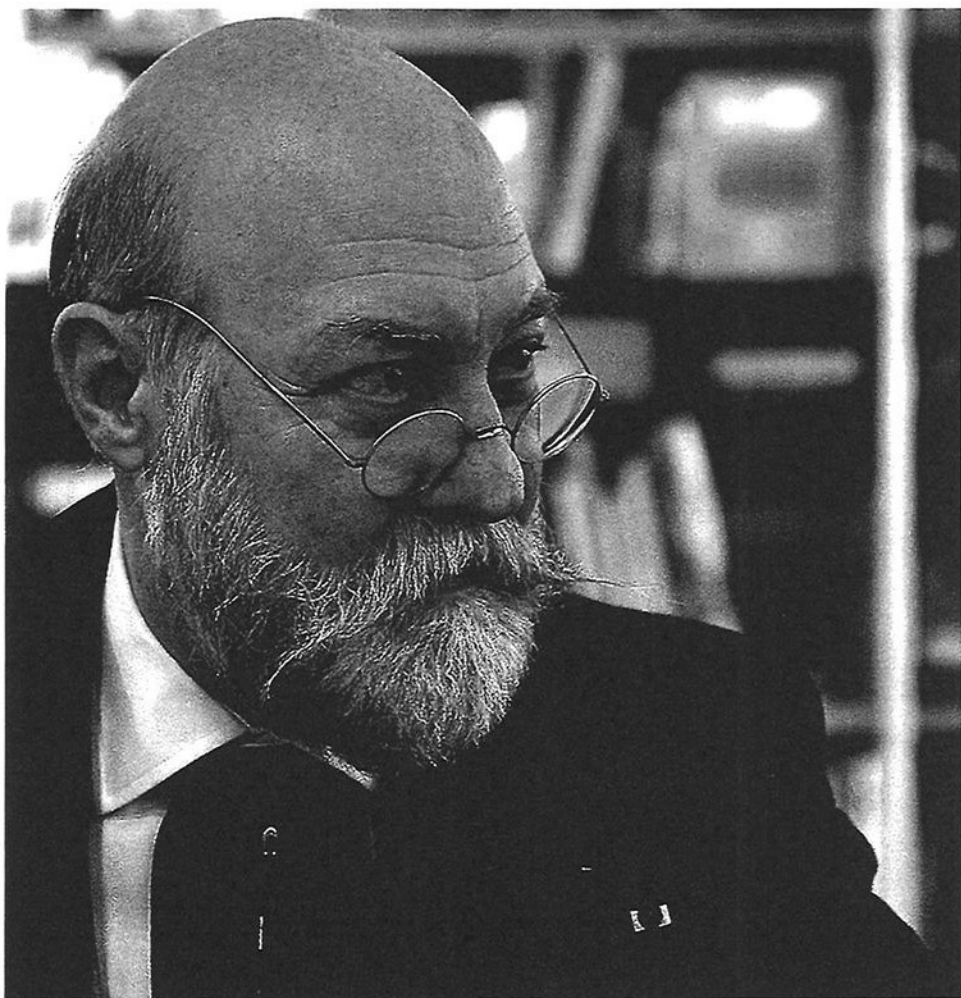
Noguchi identifică dintr-o dată, în numai câteva cuvinte, natura lecției primite de la Brâncuși, o lecție de moralitate a demersului artistic. Mărturisirea sa este lipsită de orice echivoc: „Am fost inițiat în piatră de Constantin Brâncuși în primăvara anului 1927, când am ajuns la Paris ca bursier Guggenheim. Mi-a arătat cum să tai blocul de piatră. Așa am învățat ce înseamnă onestitatea în sculptură, o condiție prealabilă pentru a putea depăși atracțiile facile ale modelajului în lut – o datorie morală pe care nu am uitat-o niciodată”³.

* Acest text a fost redactat în cadrul proiectului PN-II-ID-PCE-2011-3-0200 finanțat de Consiliul Național al Cercetării Științifice, CNCS-UEFISCDI, din România.

¹ Isamu Noguchi, *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1985, p. 104.

² Friedrich Teja Bach, *Constantin Brancusi. Metamorphosen plastischer Form*, Dumont Buchverlag, Köln, 1987, p. 285. Despre afinitățile dintre Noguchi și Brâncuși, vezi și Anna C. Chave, “Brancusi and Noguchi: Towards ‘A Larger Definition of Sculpture’”, în Alexander von Wegesack, Katarina V. Posch, Jochen Eisenbrand (ed.), *Isamu Noguchi: Sculptural Design*, Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, 2001.

³ Isamu Noguchi, *op. cit.*, p. 9.



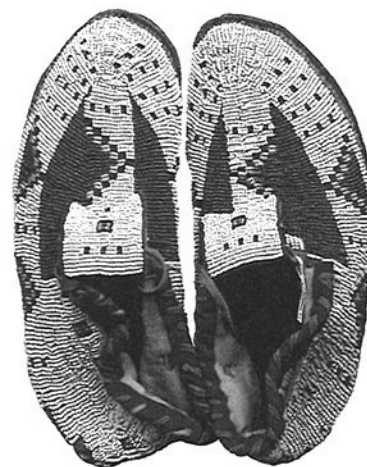
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