

# Rhythm as Aesthetic Issue (Part 1)

Thursday 13 December 2018, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Experiential vs. Dialectic](#)
- [Harmonic vs. Metric Rhythm](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Georg Vasold has made a valuable presentation of the controversy between Schmarsow and Riegl, including between their respective followers. Beyond the academic and national competition, it not only involved two opposite conceptions of aesthetics but also two views on the economic, social, politic, as well artistic modernity (Vasold, 2010). I will here concentrate on the open divide between those two schools concerning the concept of rhythm itself.

## Experiential vs. Dialectic Rhythm (Schmarsow - 1905)

In 1905, Schmarsow published his very famous *Grundbegriffe der Kunstwissenschaft: am Übergang vom Altertum zum Mittelalter kritisch erörtert und in systematischem Zusammenhange dargestellt* - *Basic Concepts of the Science of Art: Critically Discussed at the Transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages and Presented in a Systematic Context*.

The extent of the shock caused by Riegl's work on Schmarsow can be assessed by the number and length of the sections of his book devoted to discuss it and, most of the time, refute it. Riegl is quoted, often at length, in all 23 chapters except in number 4, 5, and 11. Since this discussion concerned almost all points addressed by a theory that aimed at determining the *Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, I will limit myself to the sections addressing the subject of rhythm.

Chapter 2 was entitled "Critique of Riegl's First Examples" and dealt with his introductory analyses of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman temples (see [above](#)). Schmarsow agreed with Riegl each time the latter alluded to space. However, paying no attention to the dialectical aspect of Riegl's argument concerning the relationship between space and plane, he harshly criticized what he saw as a preference for the optical perspective because, he objected, it mistakenly disregarded the movement of the beholder within the space.

Riegl's method to reconstruct the artistic will of the time through an analysis of the monument [the Pantheon in Rome] is also limited, regarding the interior, to the optical viewpoint, and just as in the case of the porticoes, he disregards the fact that space encloses any person who enters the building and that, although he is in an artistically designed body [*künstlerisch ausgestalteten Umschließung*], the living human being can change many times his viewpoint and move within the space. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 25-26, my trans.)

Instead of concentrating on the conflict between two formal principals such as *plane* and *space*, Schmarsow insisted on the necessity to start from the experience of *man* within the *world*. Such analysis was the subject matter of chapter 3 and 4, respectively entitled: "Human Organization"; "Man's Mind and the Outside world," in which Schmarsow elaborated further the material and the concepts already presented in his two previous studies.

Art historian must first take the "human subject and his whole natural organization" into account. The relationship of man to architecture, and more generally to art, could not be reduced to his gaze; it had to be analyzed from his whole corporal and spiritual experience.

If we sum up the elements with which we had to complete and supplement Riegl's approach, we recognize that they all point to the same subject: the indispensable account of the human subject and his whole natural organization. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 29, my trans.)

Architecture was a "*Raumgestalterin* – creatress of space" because she grew out of the basic physiological and psychological features of the human being, i.e. "from his body" (*Leib*), from the "dispute" (*Auseinandersetzung*) of the latter with "the exterior world," and from the particular dynamic intuition of space that resulted from the experience and memory of this dispute (p. 33).

All three dimensions were, properly speaking, "constructions" and "extensions" of the human body through its movements: first, the vertical axis through its upright posture, its capacity to stretch the arms and look above head; second, the horizontal axis through its pair of feet, knees, shoulders, and eyes, its faculty to widen the arms and look on both sides; third, "*die Hauptrichtung* – the main direction" (p. 41), the depth axis through its hands, its aptitude to manipulate objects in front of him, to walk forward into the space and back, and simultaneously constantly vary the orientation of the gaze (p. 34-40).

This physiopsychology of the intuition of space enabled Schmarsow to derive the three main aesthetic values, "*symmetry, proportionality, and rhythm*," directly from the human body. Whereas Riegl considered rhythm as both a result and an origin in a dialectical movement concerning the forms of artistic perception and expression, Schmarsow contended that it directly resulted from the movement of the body into the depth, while being in connection "with the vertical or the horizontal axes, or both at the same time."

What we have just pursued is nothing else than the natural origin of the three main laws of all human creation, known by the names of *symmetry, proportionality, and rhythm*. From the joint activity of our two hands, our two eyes, comes the symmetry, the configuration principle [*Gestaltungsprinzip*] of breadth; from the perception of the vertical axis of our body and other bodies as the axis of growth, comes the proportionality of the parts on top of each other, that is, the configuration principle of the first dimension; but from the completion of movement, especially in connection with the latter, or the former, or with both at the same time, comes the configuration principle of the third dimension, the rhythm. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 41, my trans.)

## Harmonic vs. Metric Rhythm (Schmarsow - 1905)

The exploration of the relationship between man and world gave Schmarsow the opportunity to oppose Riegl's reduction of rhythm to metric by reshuffling his previous reflection about the contrast and relationship between *Regelmässigkeit* - regularity, and *Gesetzmässigkeit* - lawfulness.

Both principles resulted, he claimed, from two different kinds of reality: rule found its origin "in the living process and behavior of the subject," while law was "something objective" (p. 50).

Regularity is the contribution of the subject [*der Beitrag des Subjekts*], even if it results from the physical conditions of his organic body, his movement, his handling, his scanning vision, as well as his breathing, his heartbeat, and all other functions. It is the imposition of his way of doing and thinking [...]. Lawfulness, on the other hand, is the contribution of the outside world [*der Beitrag der Außenwelt*], the effect of natural forces which we respect as a fact. We consider them, even without understanding them, as a necessity and we worship the terribly powerful evidence of a superhuman system, whose elementary irruptions can overwhelm us humans. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 51, my trans.)

Therefore, when we look at, or think of "a square, a cube, a polygon, or a circle," we can do it in two ways: first, as an "immobile picture," or a "pure concept"; second, by "scanning the lines and surfaces of the figure," or by "a genetic procedure"—Schmarsow thought perhaps of the way, already suggested by Spinoza in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, of generating a circle by a mental rotation of a radius around a center point. We then "experience the genesis again"; we "recapitulate the way how to accomplish the figure" (p. 50).

However, Schmarsow argued, when this process reaches its end, we realize "the correspondence of the rule with the law or, conversely, of the actual existence with our postulate." Both ways are in fact complementary: "the law of human intelligence and the law of nature are in harmony"; "man and the world are in each other." There is, as it were, a pre-established "harmony" which is the frame of "all creative dispute [*aller schöpferischen Auseinandersetzung*] of man with the outside world," and consequently of "its success and lasting results" (p. 50-51). Schmarsow resumed here with Semper's and Wölfflin's conception of beauty (see [above](#)).

It is true, however, that this harmony is difficult to reach. Most often regularity and lawfulness "diverge and become alien."

The dispute can bring results only to the extent that nature and human spirit grow on the same foundations, that they are indissolubly related to one another and appear to be in harmony with each other. For all these cases, lawfulness and regularity would only be the two sides of one and the same thing. However, both jump beyond the concentric spheres: the closer we get to the exit points, the more human organization and way of thinking here, natural system and natural events there, diverge and become alien. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 51, my trans.)

The aim of the artist was to harmonize them. Indeed, a work of art reaches “style” only when this harmony between meter and rhythm is achieved. The task of the art historian could not, therefore, as Riegl, limit itself to metrics; it had to span between regularity and lawfulness.

The whole following analysis [in the next chapters] of the principles of creation must therefore move between that beginning and that end. It begins with regularity as the disposition of the internal system of the human subject and proceeds with the lawfulness of nature as an expression of its fixed structure and indissoluble connection, in whose objective existence we ourselves are included with both our life and creative work. In the work of art, however, the unity achieved between rule and law is called the style. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 52, my trans.)

This allusion to one of the most important problems of aesthetics indicated Schmarsow’s continuous sensitiveness towards an issue which was intensely debated in literature and music since the middle of the century but was hardly considered by Riegl: the role of *non-metric* rhythms in art.

[Next chapter](#)