

Rhythm as Aesthetic Commonplace (Part 2)

Wednesday 12 December 2018, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Rhythm in German Art History](#)
- [Urban Spatial Rhythm \(Brinckma\)](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Rhythm in German Art History in the 19th Century (Russack - 1910)

In 1910, Hans Hermann Russack (1887-af. 1942), one of August Schmarsow's (1853-1936) students in Leipzig, published an essay entitled *Der Begriff des Rhythmus bei den deutschen Kunsthistorikern des XIX. Jahrhunderts - The Concept of Rhythm in the German Art Historians of the 19th Century*.

This study was far from complete: it barely mentioned Riegl and the competitors of the Viennese school; it referred only indirectly to Pinder and gave no account of Julius Meier-Graefe's (1867-1935) contribution on El Greco in his *Spanische Reise* published in 1910 (see Rößler, 2009). Surprisingly, it also—but probably on Schmarsow's own instructions and to avoid any accusation of complacency—did not mention Schmarsow's contribution except in a very few footnotes (p. 30, 50, 77).

But, despite its limitations, it traced, for the first time, the growing success of the concept of rhythm in a fair number of German-speaking art historians since the 1840s: Karl Schnaase (1798-1875), Gottfried Semper (1803-1879), Franz Kugler (1808-1858), Jakob Burckhardt (1818-1897), Georg Dehio (1850-1932), Gustav von Bezold (1848-1934), and Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945)—as far as I am concerned, I did not consider Dehio and Bezold because their contribution was actually quite limited. The mere idea of proposing such investigation for academic advancement showed that, a few years before WW1, the concept had already become commonplace in aesthetics and art history in German-speaking countries.

Naturally, the paradox, underlined by Russack in his conclusion, was that this new extension of the concept of rhythm, which was intrinsically temporal, aimed at describing art forms which, contrary to music, poetry and dance, were not *per se* related to time: mainly architecture, but also sculpture, plastic arts, and painting. He thus spotted a fierce debate developing between two perspectives throughout the 19th century: the first and most ancient one being derived from the immobile Vitruvian *eurhythmia*; the second being indexed on the more modern notions of *rhythmic sequence* and *regularity*.

As expected, Russack, who ended his dissertation by paying homage to Meumann's most recent

contribution concerning the psychological—and therefore temporal—foundation of rhythm (p. 71-74), clearly made the case for the former against the latter. Schnaase as well as Semper and Burckhardt—he did not mention Riegl—had mistakenly ignored “the reference to the succession of impressions as a necessary basis of any rhythm”—while Kugler, Wölfflin, and naturally Schmarsow had based their approach on it.

Of course, our presentation has shown that the reference to the succession of impressions as a necessary basis of any rhythm—a basis which must be effective and present in the aesthetic medium—is not superfluous. We found that Schnaase ignored this requirement and we immediately realized the damaging loss of clarity, that resulted from it, for his aesthetic concepts. In spite of [Semper’s reference to] “sequences of spaces,” we bumped into his appeal to an eye which sees, in an instant vision, everything at the same time. [Similarly] we had to reject Burckhardt’s concept of rhythm because the prerequisite of the movement was lacking. (*The Concept of Rhythm in the German Art Historians of the 19th Century*, 1910, p. 73-74, my trans.)

Another important point in Russack’s conclusion concerned the role of experience. He praised Pinder—implicitly criticizing Riegl—for having shown that the rhythm resulted from a “periodical succession of experiences” within the subject more than from a mere succession of visual impressions (p. 74). The specific rhythm of Romanesque architecture, for instance, could be described as resulting from the ordering of the intimate experience of the visitor, as he progresses into the church along its middle axis, by the “echoing” intersecting axes coming from his architectural surroundings.

The psycho-aesthetic concept of architectural rhythm induced by Pinder from a coherent series of Romanesque interiors, his account of the division of the direction of movement by “echoing directions [*Widerhaltrichtungen*]” according to the proportion and the symmetrical disposition of the construction, should be pointed out here. [...] The sequence of spatial representations arises in man on the basis of the movement through a sequence of spaces or parts of space. (*The Concept of Rhythm in the German Art Historians of the 19th Century*, 1910, p. 75, my trans.)

This emphasis upon experience led directly to the other side of the rhythm problem: what he called, following Meumann who had himself borrowed the concept from Aristoxenus (see above chap. 3 and vol. 1, chap. 3), the *rhythmizomenon* – the matter to be rhythmized. Against the theories that considered rhythm as a unified concept, Russack insisted on the fact that the concept of rhythm changes according to the matter to which it is applied. Just like Meumann had induced the characters of the musical and poetic rhythm from their respective raw material, the sound and the language, Kugler and Pinder had observed the rhythm specific to the architectural inner spaces (p. 74 and 77).

The last divide noted by Russack concerned the main philosophical assumptions behind the various theories of rhythm developed in the 19th century. Whereas Kugler saw the art work as “*Ausdruck* – expression” of a “*Lebensprozess* – life process” specific to the subject, Semper saw it as “*ein Eindruck* – an effect” similar to those observed by the natural scientists (p. 76). While the first considered the artistic form as developing according to a teleological drive, “*ein Bildungsgesetz* – a developmental law,” the second reduced it to its efficient cause. This resulted in an opposition

between the ever-open possibility of transforming a given artistic rhythm into another one and the stability of the eurhythmic figures which “Semper built out of elements as physicians recompose the world out of atoms” (p. 76).

Russack apparently favored the former side of the divide. In a long paragraph, devoid of any citation marks, he finally praised Kugler for having introduced into art history the concept of artistic ordering into harmonic wholes of the pulsating movements of life.

The mass of the pillar, of the bow lives, swings around [*schwingt sich um*], moves. And the living mass begins to *pulsate rhythmically*, to alternatively unfurl in ridges and sink into gorges, expressing its inherent vitality in stronger or weaker ways, through the forms that it brings to the surface, up to the sparkling pictorial works. But the vital swing [*der lebendige Schwung*] is tamed and shaped by the rhythmic law of this life, which results in a rhythmic and determined form of the total mass of construction and orders the individual forms according to the rhythmic swing [*dem rhythmischen Schwung*] of the whole, in the sense of the rhythmic euphony [*des rhythmischen Wohllautes*], the satisfying passage from one part to the other. Here again we have the main points of our concept: from the rhythmically determined form and limited movement to the intimate interrelation of the neighboring parts. (*The Concept of Rhythm in the German Art Historians of the 19th Century*, 1910, p. 78, my trans.)

Urban Spatial Rhythm (Brinckmann - 1911)

Albert Brinckmann (1881-1958) studied art history under Wölfflin in Berlin. He published in 1911 an innovative study on *Deutsche Stadtbaukunst in der Vergangenheit – German Urban Design in the Past* (for this section I used the 1921 edition). As Pinder, who replaced him in Berlin in 1935, he was a staunch supporter of the Nazi regime and became a member of the NSDAP as soon as March 1933.

The new discipline called *Stadtbaukunst* – art of urban design had already developed during the second half of the 19th century with scholars such as the Austrian architect, city designer, painter, and theoretician Camillo Sitte (1843-1903). The latter had published in 1889 *Der Städte-bau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen – Urban Design According to its Artistic Principles* which was highly successful: it had five editions between 1889 and 1922 and was translated into French as soon as 1902. Sitte was mainly concerned with the increasingly technical way European cities were being designed at the expense of traditional artistic methods. Through his travels in Italy, France and Germany as well as his native Austria, Sitte observed how these cities had gradually developed and established a set of principles by which he believed cities should be planned.

Nowadays, a difference is often made between *urban design*, which aims at designing and shaping the physical features of cities, and *urban planning*, which is a political process concerned with the development and design of land use and the built environment. The difference was not as marked at the end of the 19th century and one can find both concerns in Sitte’s work even if urban design was probably the most important to him.

Except in one instance, Sitte did not use the concept of rhythm. However, throughout his book, he

criticized the excessive “*Regelmässigkeit* – regularity,” or “impeccable symmetry” which had been introduced in the modern cities through large and straight avenues, standardized facades, and defended the necessity to keep a certain *Unregelmässigkeit* – irregularity in the urban design of the streets, the public squares, as well as the buildings. He devoted a full chapter to “The Irregularity of the Ancient Public Squares” (chap. 5) where he argued that the cities which had slowly developed as natural organisms were much more beautiful and pleasant to live in than those born out of the dry and rationalistic imagination of one or several city planners.

Technicians of today take more trouble than is necessary to create interminable rectangular streets and public squares of impeccable symmetry. These efforts seem misdirected to those who are interested in good city appearance. Our forebears had ideas on this subject quite different from ours. Here is some evidence of it: the Piazza dei Eremitani and the Piazza del Duomo at Padua (Fig. 29), the Cathedral Square at Syracuse (Fig. 31), and the Piazza S. Francesco at Palermo (Fig. 30). The typical irregularity of these old squares indicates their gradual historical development. We are rarely mistaken in attributing the existence of these windings to practical causes—the presence of a canal, the lines of an old roadway, or the form of a building. Everyone knows from personal experience that these disruptions in symmetry are not unsightly. On the contrary, they arouse our interest as much as they appear natural, and preserve a picturesque character. Few people, however, understand why irregularity can avoid giving an unpleasant appearance. (C. Sitte, *Urban Design According to its Artistic Principles*, 1889, p. 55-56, trans. Charles T. Stewart)

Brinckmann criticized Sitte’s views as “romanticizing.” Instead, he developed a vision that gave more room for Classical and Functionalist concerns by substituting the mere opposition between regularity and irregularity with the concept of “city space rhythm.” The latter was defined—following Wölfflin and Schmarsow—not as pertaining only to surfaces but mainly to the grouping and ordering of the three-dimensional sections of the city and, naturally, to the effect of that arrangement upon the movements of the city dweller. More than symmetry and proportion, which were respectively limited to the horizontal and vertical dimensions, rhythm, which in fact integrated them both, was the highest “level of relation,” that is, the most significant category for urban design in its ordering of the city. To practice urban design was more or less equivalent to correctly and beautifully “rhythmize” the city.

This movement [of the city dweller] adopts a certain rhythm depending on the way the sections are ordered and grouped together [*durch geordnete Gruppierung der Abschnitte*]. Rhythm can plastically and spatially appear on surface sections as much as in three-dimensional structures—by which I do not want to ignore the fact that there are important differences between surface and solid rhythm, which explain why we should perhaps better restrain the word rhythm to solids and speak of proportions only in relation to surfaces. Rhythm is a higher level of relation, so to speak, the crystalline phenomenal form [*die kristallinische Erscheinungsform*] of the amorphous building mass [*der amorphen Bautenmasse*]. (*German Urban Design in the Past, 1911-1921*, p. 63, my trans.)

Since Brinckmann did not want to theorize only about architecture but more largely about urban design, he had to specify the concept of city space rhythm. A city was composed of both edifices, houses, and streets and public squares. The city space rhythm was therefore determined by the

alternation and proportion between architectural structures and free spaces. The “highest architectural task in urban design” was to pay as much attention to the empty spaces as to the built ones in order to integrate them both into a harmonious rhythmic whole, which resembled—Brinckmann did not care about the contradiction with his previous comparison with a crystal—a “living organism.”

Now, the rhythm of individual architectural structures [*Baukörper*], within the city as well as their relation [to each other], does not make urban design itself, that is, it certainly works within the city but it does not make yet a beautiful city. For the latter is not a collection of beautiful particulars, it does not only result from the sum of its architectures, or built-up parts, but also from the free spaces lying between them, the streets and public squares. It is through and through a living organism, a plastic and spatial body. The highest architectural task in urban design is to regard streets and public squares as positive constructions, to consider them as precisely delimited air volumes rather than formless residues left between building blocks, to design them in good proportions [with their surroundings], finally to express rhythmic functions in their spatial distribution [*Raummasse*]. (*German Urban Design in the Past, 1911-1921*, p. 64, my trans.)

Naturally, there was a subjective side to this city space rhythm. It directly affected, through the more or less harmonious ordering of their movements, the mood of the inhabitants, who could feel, in the best cases, “happiness, pride, and power.”

This expression of the art of urban design most directly affects the inhabitant of a city, for his own corporeality, the basis of all spatial sensibility, is itself drawn, when it moves, into this rhythmic movement, and filled with happiness, pride, and power. (*German Urban Design in the Past, 1911-1921*, p. 64, my trans.)

But the inhabitants were not entirely passively determined by the rhythm of the objective city arrangement, they also recreated it, most of the time unconsciously and according to their own desire. This was, actually, the reason why “many”—Brinckmann did not mention Sitte by name but the allusion was clear enough—could “prefer the irregularly disorganized, ancient cities to the clear [modern] ones,” and “stay in the narrow limits of gothic tableaux.”

The inhabitant not only performs the rhythm, but recreates it, perhaps even without being conscious of the one contained in the [city] art work. Indeed, one can evoke rhythmic sensations—in our case, those of the city planner—merely by compelling someone else to physically and functionally replicate their effects. Many will always prefer the irregularly disorganized, ancient cities to the clear [modern] ones, for they will lack the courage to embrace a grand view. They prefer to stay in the narrow limits of gothic tableaux. But this does not prove that their aesthetic judgment on regular and irregular constructions is in any way conclusive. (*German Urban Design in the Past, 1911-1921*, p. 64-65, my trans.)

Brinckmann concluded the chapter devoted to urban space rhythm by a Classical praise of

“intentionality,” “planning”, artistic vision, and a critique of the “so-called picturesque design”—i.e. of Sitte’s Romantic viewpoint. The irregularity of Medieval or Baroque city rhythms was to be rejected to the benefit of clearer arrangements rationally and intentionally determined.

Rhythm certainly requires some regularity but also intentionality. It will therefore present itself mainly in urban arrangement, which have developed from a pre-designed development plan or were strongly corrected in later time. Rhythm is the artistic law of intentional work in urban design; it does not have to fight, like the so-called picturesque design [*die sogenannte malerische Gestaltung*], a constant and anxious struggle between planning and expansion. He only needs a moderate steering to realize the intentions laid down in the development plan. (*German Urban Design in the Past*, 1911-1921, p. 97, my trans.)

[Next chapter](#)