

first publication

»Aber nicht nur uns selbst gegenüber, sondern der ganzen Menschheit, der Wissenschaft, welche international ist, sind wir Oesterreicher eine endgiltige Erforschung und würdige Bearbeitung unserer heimischen Volkskunst schuldig.«
Alois Riegl, *Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie*

1 The *Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum for Art and Industry* (present-day *Museum für angewandte Kunst in Vienna*) was opened in 1864 with one of its primary goals being the promotion of the improved design of objects for daily use.

2 Riegl, Alois: *Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie*. Berlin: Georg Siemens 1894, p. 75f.

3 Ibid., p. 76f.: »Nur auf österreichisch-ungarischem Boden begegnen wir einer Mannigfaltigkeit, die fast alles, was an Volkskünsten in Europa existirt, in sich schließt.«

4 Ibid., p. 1.

5 Ibid., p. 5f.: »Insbesondere in Oesterreich-Ungarn, wo die Verhältnisse zur Erkundung der Volkskunst nach ihren interessantesten Richtungen selbst heute noch in verhältnismäßig günstigem Maße zu Lage liegen, wird man nicht länger zögern dürfen, die Ueberlebsel der in ihrem Wesen, Umfang und ihrer Bedeutung klar erkannten Volkskunst zum Gegenstande eines systematischen Studiums und genauester literarisch-artistischer Fixirung zu machen und damit eine Ehrendschuld nicht bloß gegenüber sich selbst d.h. den Völkern der Monarchie, sondern auch gegenüber der Wissenschaft, und somit gegenüber der ganzen Menschheit einzulösen.«

6 *Hausfleiß* is an older term that can be thought of work done within the household exclusively for and by its members; for example, Riegl discusses the development of household devices (*Geräthe*) in his brief treatment of the term – these would include objects such as wooden spoons, bowls used for mixing, hammers, etc.

7 This notion is similar to cultural situations Riegl discusses extensively in *Stilfragen*.

8 Ibid., p. 11.

With this statement Alois Riegl urges the documentation of folk art in the rapidly modernizing world of the late 19th-century. As curator of the textile collection at the *Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum for Art and Industry* between 1885 and 1897, much of Riegl's theoretical work was directly informed by his contact with folk objects in the museum's collection.¹ He specifically acknowledges this in the introduction to his seminal book *Stilfragen* (1893), in which he considers the history of ornamentation and strives to create a place for this understudied idiom alongside the »higher« canonical arts of painting and sculpture. While *Stilfragen* calls for a reconsideration of the decorative arts and the elimination of established aesthetic hierarchies, it does not include the political dimension of Riegl's 1894 treatise *Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie*. Building upon the issues he raises in *Stilfragen* about the underappreciated status of the decorative arts, Riegl considers the contemporary aesthetic climate, delineating his ideas about the centrality of folk art in the evolution of an international design aesthetic. His analysis of folk art production and aesthetic trends at the dawn of the modernist era leads Riegl to argue that traditional folk art could transform itself into an internationalized form of expression in a multinational context. Instead of speculating about historical cultures unfamiliar to him, Riegl focuses his study on his own cultural moment in an industrialized, multiethnic Austria-Hungary that is approaching the 20th-century.

In *Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie* Riegl sets out to construct a systematic method for considering the folk art idiom in a modern era, ultimately stressing its importance for all the peoples of Austria-Hungary. In his view the Austrians owe to themselves, to the various peoples of their empire, and, indeed, »to all mankind«, a scientific system of collecting objects of folk art and publishing their findings.² For Riegl, Austria-Hungary enjoys a unique position, as it is only on Habsburg soil that one encounters such a diversity that comprises nearly all the thriving European folk arts.³ He will ultimately call for the development of a »house industry« (*Hausindustrie*), a system that will allow for the transformation of these antiquated folk institutions into a form suitable for the modern era.

Riegl argues that, like the decorative arts, folk art has not yet found its established place within the field of Art History, likening these art forms to »einer Blume voll Duft und Farbenpracht, die bescheiden im Verborgenen blüht.«⁴ He loosely defines Art History as the history of international artistic development, and states this as the primary reason behind the absence of folk art in the art historical canon; as a non-international (i.e. culturally specific) mode of expression, folk art has not been included among the perceived »universal« forms of painting, sculpture, and architecture. In the foreword Riegl poses the question of where folk art stops and the realm of international art begins, arguing that the best way to approach this problem is through the respective economic structure and history of a given culture. He regards Austria-Hungary as the most interesting contemporary example, suggesting that an analysis of folk art production within the crown lands will not only benefit all the peoples of the empire, but will also be of great value to the international scholarly community, and therefore to the whole of humanity itself.⁵

The first chapter, *Hausfleiß und Volkskunst, ihr Wesen und ihr wechselseitiges Verhältnis zu einander*, looks at the production of objects for daily use within the context of the individual family unit (*Familienverband*), contemplating the transformation of *Hausfleiß* (work done within the household exclusively for and by its members) into what is deemed to be folk art.⁶ Riegl notes that without contact between different families or clans, the most important stimulus for the emergence of artistic forms is lost: »Damit fällt bei den Verhältnissen, unter denen der primitive Hausfleiß schafft, der erfahrungsmäßig wichtigste Hebel für die Hervorbringung neuer Formen, die Berührung von Fremdem mit Fremdem, hinweg.«⁸ Such inter-clan exchange, however, was more prevalent in peasant circles of the past, and Riegl implies that with the dawn of the modern industrial age these exchanges will not necessarily



9 Riegl 1894, p. 12f.: »Wo uns aber eine solche Summe von traditionellen Kunstformen, die sämtlichen Angehörigen eines Volkes ohne Ausnahme gemeinsam sind, entgegentritt, dort werden wir berechtigt sein, von einer **Volkskunst** im engsten und eigentlichsten Sinne des Wortes zu sprechen.«

10 Ibid., p. 13: »Die Tradition ist die richtige und unentbehrliche Lebenslust für die Volkskunst.«

11 Ibid., p. 15: »[I]m Osten hingegen und insbesondere innerhalb der Grenzen der österreichisch-ungarischen Monarchie finden wir stellenweise den Hausfleiß fast genau noch mit allen den geschil- derten wirtschaftlichen und künstlerischen Eigenthümlichkeiten als herrschendes wirtschaftliches System unter der bäuerlichen Landbevölkerung, wofür wir ein besonderes lehrreiches und charakteristisches Beispiel im weiteren Verlaufe unserer Unter- suchung des Näheren kennen werden.«

12 Ibid., p. 34.

13 Ibid., p. 44: »Namentlich in der österreichisch-ungarischen Monarchie, wo seit jeher westlicher Neuerungssinn und östliche Beharrlichkeit am engsten neben- einander wohnten, bietet sich uns heutzutage das Schauspiel des Ringens zweier ungleicher Kräfte, von denen die aggressive, moderne, alle äußeren Vortheile auf ihrer Seite hat, während die in der Defensive befindliche heimische, althergebrachte Weise fast ausschließlich durch ein Imponderabile, durch den schlechterdings konservativen Sinn der betreffenden Völkerschaften gestützt und geschützt wird.«

14 Ibid., p. 53.

continue to occur. As families expand in size and inhabit a larger geographical area, they disseminate their art forms; these unique forms are then associated with the respective territory they were conceived in, and thereby give birth to the folk art idiom.

When one comes upon a collection of traditional art forms that all members of a people have in common, then, Riegl explains, it is legitimate to speak of a »folk art« in the narrowest and most essential sense of the word.⁹ In this conception of folk art, two main characteristics must be present for it to be considered as such: 1) individual forms must be known, understood and used by all members of a culture, regardless of class distinctions; and 2) the forms of folk art must be associated with tradition, i.e. a practice that has continued and not changed over a long period of time.¹⁰ Folk art and the everyday character of *Hausfleiß* thus become inseparable from each other, and together they pave the way for significant developments in cultural production. Riegl concludes that in the modern Western factory one merely finds the basic remnants of *Hausfleiß*, although among the peasant majority in the East, especially within the borders of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, one finds *Hausfleiß* in its most original form, with all its unique economic and artistic characteristics.¹¹ Riegl's investigation of these Eastern examples will form the basis for his modern conceptualization of folk art.

The second chapter of the treatise focuses on the connection between folk art and artistic developments on an international level. Riegl remarks that over the course of history, where tradition, which is represented in its visual form by folk art, ceases, international fashion begins. He argues that the overwhelming process of inter-clan contact results in a break with, and subsequent dissolution of, folk art practice; in essence, folk art must cease to exist to the decline of tradition and the rise of internationalization. Without the exposure to different cultural traditions and peoples that this process allows for, Riegl argues, the flowering of monumental high art could never have occurred; but:

[W]ar aber einmal die Abgeschlossenheit der ursprünglichen autonomen Familien- verbände auch nur an einem Punkte durchbrochen, Fremdes mit Fremdem in nähere, nachhaltige Berührung gekommen, dann war der Fortbildungsprozeß eingeleitet, der mit Naturnothwendigkeit immer weitere Kreise ziehen, immer mehr Volkskünste zerstören oder assimiliren, zu immer höheren Organisationen führen mußte.¹²

In order for art to reinvent itself and continue to prosper, folk arts must either be destroyed or assimilated. For Riegl, Austria-Hungary exemplifies this development particularly well. In the monarchy, he explains, the western sense of renewal has forever lived in closest proximity to eastern perseverance. This situation affords the observers of history »the spectacle« in which two unequal powers »wrestle« in an act of obstinacy. The aggressive power is modern and seems to have all the advantages on its side, whereas the power that finds itself on the defensive is represented by a provincial manner that is supported by a strong sense of tradition.¹³ In this confrontation between a western modernist aesthetic and an eastern folk art, it seems as though the former should win. Riegl, however, presents an optimistic model of reconciliation, in which modern art maintains various folk elements in an abstracted form, thus eliminating the apparent antagonism between the two tendencies and allowing for cultural and aesthetic integration in both directions.

Riegl argues that one finds the best surviving example of *Hausfleiß* and its related folk art in the Habsburg-controlled territory of Bukovina, where people are extremely self-sufficient and have not yet been exposed to Western modernity; they make their own fabrics from hemp they have planted themselves, use their own folk motifs, and decline to sell their works for financial profit. He speculates upon what would happen if the Romanian peasant woman sold some of her handmade textiles along with eggs and poultry at the market in Czernowitz. He acknowledges that at first she might be skeptical about doing this and even actively resist the notion; he has observed this firsthand in his own travels to the Bessarabian border, where the locals stubbornly refuse to sell their goods. It is here, on the easternmost edge of Austria-Hungary that the true *Hausfleiß* ethic prevails: »Das ist eben *echter Hausfleiß*, der den Begriff des Kapitals nicht kennt, sondern die Arbeit um ihrer selbst willen schätzt.«¹⁴ Nevertheless, he contends that the rise of industrialism throughout the empire will soon take its due course, and those individuals like the woman in Czernowitz will soon participate in modern industrialism.

Riegl suggests that one previously thought of folk art in Eastern Europe merely as medieval depictions of Hungarian and Slavic kings; around the Arts and Crafts movement

15 Ibid., p. 57.

16 Ibid., p. 63f.

17 Ibid., p. 58f.

18 Cf. ibid., p. 69: »Wir modernen Kulturmenschen sind einmal neuerungsbedürftig, und die internationale Mode fordert wieder ihre Rechte.«

of the mid-19th century, however, people started to express interest in the visual culture of the eastern Habsburg territories in terms of both its aesthetics and economics. He attributes this wider interest in folk art to a lack of satisfaction with contemporary developments in international art. Folk art, he suggests, provides a refreshing drink of »fresh spring water« to a contemporary audience that has drunk too much of the »champagne« of the current style in the so-called high arts:

Man überließ sich der schwärmerischen Betrachtung dieser neuentdeckten Volkskunst-Erzeugnisse mit dem gleichen Gefühl, wie etwa ein vom Champagner Uebersättigter dem Genusse eines frischen Quelltrunks. Man glaubte eine künstlerische Panacee gefunden zu haben, und dachte nicht daran, daß man es doch bald wieder fad finden müßte, immer beim Wasser zu bleiben, und daß unsere geistige Natur, wie wir einmal schon historisch geworden sind, vielleicht schon am nächsten Tage wieder nach Würzigerem verlangen würde.¹⁵

Folk art will, like all the trends before it, eventually become boring in more »sophisticated«, presumably urban, circles. Indeed, Riegl notes, »our intellectual nature« may cause us to demand something »spicier«, maybe as soon as the very »next day«.

The growing interest in and demand for the forms of folk art produced by household artisans would cause the development of a »house industry« and an increase in the manufactured objects it produced: »Dieses geschilderte neue wirtschaftliche System ist nun in der That *Industrie*, und wenn ausschließlich in diesem neuen Sinne gebraucht, erscheint die dafür gewählte Beziehung *Hausindustrie* ganz glücklich gewählt.«¹⁶ Riegl defines this »house industry« as a »fein gestimmtes Organ«,¹⁷ one that would supply peasants with the appropriate materials needed to enable the technical transformation of old folk art traditions into modernized artistic production. A division of labor takes effect, and at various stages the intended product switches hands before it finally lands in those of the consumer; i.e. the raw material is at first in the hands of someone different from the dyer, who is not the same person as the weaver.

This process, in turn, would allow for greater distribution of this art throughout the empire, so that the objects in question, while retaining their unique visual features, would nevertheless become familiar to all other inhabitants of widely scattered regions. An acceptance of Riegl's framework would, for example, allow someone living in Bohemia can use »Galician« forms and motifs in their home and *vice versa*, and soon these objects would take on an international, as opposed to »foreign«, meaning. Seemingly traditional objects would be produced in an updated manner, and at the same time they could be used to enable a sense of both cultural and economic exchange across borders that are increasingly being defined by nationalism. This process would allow folk art to become an internationalized form of expression, and modern methods will save traditional folk art from its inevitable downfall; modern-made products would be close relatives of old-fashioned *Hausfleiß*. Such objects, derived from folk art and produced using industrial techniques, will attain a wider international circulation and greater status with their abstracted, modernized forms and motifs, achieved through a more efficient means of manufacture and distribution.

The simply-made, colorful objects from places like Slovakia, Croatia and Transylvania become desired in more sophisticated circles; modern people of culture are in constant need of renewal, and international fashion promotes their urban lifestyle.¹⁸ Riegl remarks that when people once again begin to find the same water boring, they will reach for the new and exciting champagne; in this case it does not necessarily taste like the organic motifs of folk art, which »house industry« has allowed to become a bit more sophisticated than it would under the auspices of original *Hausfleiß*. In the following statement, Riegl decrees the end of folk art in its purest form:

Denn wenn einmal der städtische Geschmack die stilisrten Nelken, Aepfel u.s.w. der Volkskunst überhaupt nicht mehr goutirt, dann wird auch die bäuerliche Hausindustrie sich dem veränderten Geschmack anbequemen, ihre Motive aus der internationalen Kunst holen müssen, und dann ist es mit der Illusion von der Volkskunst in der Hausindustrie schließlich und gründlich zu Ende.¹⁹

When traditional motifs are no longer suited to urban tastes, the original house industry in the provinces will adapt its own motifs to the international, citified market. This process of



20 Riegl, Alois: *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*. Wien: Österreichische Staatsdruckerei 1927, p. 15f.

21 *ibid.*, p. 20.

cultural transfer encourages house industry to deviate from folk art, and thereby create an international and modern design aesthetic, permanently altering the originating folk art from which it emerged.

1901 saw the publication of Riegl's highly influential *Spätromische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn*, in which he expanded upon the importance of intercultural contact in the development of entire art industries in a given historical moment. In this work he returns to the central concept of cultural exchange that he developed in *Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie*, applying it here to the more historical, classically-defined context he had treated in *Stilfragen*. As he had decreed the end of »pure« folk art in *Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie*, Riegl here considers the end of »pure« classical Roman art due to the Barbarian invasions. Different from others before him, however, Riegl does not view this conquest as the necessary downfall of Roman culture; like the aesthetic exchange between modernism and folk art he expounded in *Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie*, Riegl sees the interaction of Roman and Germanic cultures as one of reciprocal change: »Warum sollen wir nun nicht auch die spätromische Kunst in ihrer positiven harmoniespendenden Bedeutung für die Altchristen (und Spätheiden) verstehen und würdigen, bloß weil sie unserem modernen Geschmack nicht entspricht?«²⁰

According to Riegl, the late Roman art industry has been unfairly maligned due to its aesthetically idealized predecessor, and he concludes that the misunderstood roots of this period lie in the fact that its forms and motifs have been hidden beneath the terms »Barbarisierung« and »Völkerwanderungselemente«.²¹ It is, however, the very fact that outside influences have penetrated this particular visual culture that makes it so innovative and worth considering. This is not unlike Riegl's presentation of the diverse folk art production of Austria-Hungary and its potential to be transformed into something entirely new by welding together unique motifs from multiple cultural traditions. *Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie* thus presents a brief yet incredibly relevant moment in Riegl's work, one in which he considers the contemporary ramifications of his theoretical work in Austria-Hungary and sheds light on the productive, symbiotic relationship between urban and provincial, modern and traditional forms and aesthetics.

Sabrina K. Rahman, PhD candidate at the Department of German Studies, University of California, Berkeley. She studied German Studies, History and Art History at Oberlin College, UC Berkeley and the University of Vienna. Her dissertation concerns the implementation of the applied arts as a unifying force in the late Austro-Hungarian imperial program.
Contact: skrahman@berkeley.edu