

Carl Justi: Modern Errors

Review of:

Carl Justi. Moderne Irrtümer, Briefe und Aphorismen, edited with introduction and commentary by Johannes Rößler, Matthes & Seitz, Berlin, 2012 (© 2011), ISBN 978-3-88221-863-3, 590 pp., 8 black/white images.

By publishing a considerable body of archival material for the first time, this thick volume supports scholarship on the German art historian Carl Justi (1832-1912), the historiography of art history, and the reception history of modernism. Justi is best known today for his monumental biographies of Winckelmann, Velazquez, and Michelangelo, his ground-breaking work on Spanish painting, and his critical dismissal of Impressionism.¹ The editor, Johannes Rößler, currently a researcher at the Klassik Stiftung Weimar, has established himself as an important scholar of nineteenth-century art history with a study of Justi and his contemporary Anton Springer (1825-1891) and several essays.² He brings extensive knowledge of the archival sources and the intellectual context to a publication that succeeds quite well in serving both the general reader and the scholar.

Although the title highlights Justi's infamously negative views of modernity and modernist art, this edition also provides insight into his work as an art historian and the cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic concerns of his time. It joins previous editions of Justi's letters to his mother and sister from travels in Italy and Spain and of his correspondence with the librarian Otto Hartwig (1830-1903).³ Unlike these, however, it is not a complete edition, but rather a representative selection of letters, written between about 1880 and Justi's death in 1912, to two principal correspondents: 33 of 46 known letters to Charlotte Broicher (1851-1917/18), a leading social and intellectual figure in Wilhelmine Germany, and 44 of 117 known letters to Wilhelm von Bode (1845-1929), curator and later director of the royal museums in Berlin, interspersed with twelve letters from Bode to Justi. Also included are four of 14 known letters to Justi's nephew Ludwig Justi (1876-1957), art historian and later director of the Nationalgalerie, Berlin; and one letter each to the

¹ *Winckelmann: Sein Leben, seine Werke und seine Zeitgenossen*, Leipzig, 1866-1872; 1898. *Diego Velazquez und sein Jahrhundert*, Bonn, 1888; 1903. *Michelangelo: Beiträge zur Erklärung der Werke und des Menschen*, Leipzig, 1900; *Michelangelo: Neue Beiträge zur Erklärung der Werke und des Menschen*, Leipzig, 1909. Several of the essays are collected in *Miscellaneen aus drei Jahrhunderten spanischen Kunstlebens*, Berlin, 1908. His assessment of Impressionism was published as *Amorphismus in der Kunst. Ein Vortrag*, Bonn, 1903.

² Johannes Rößler, *Poetik der Kunstgeschichte: Anton Springer, Carl Justi und die ästhetische Konzeption der deutschen Kunstwissenschaft*, Berlin, Akademie, 2009; other publications are listed in the bibliography, 569-570.

³ *Briefe aus Italien*, ed. Heinrich Kayser, Bonn, 1922; *Spanische Reisebriefe*, ed. Heinrich Kayser, Bonn, 1923. Carl Justi and Otto Hartwig, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Rupprecht Leppla, Bonn, 1968.

philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), the musician Sigismund Blumner (probably born 1826), and the art historian August L. Mayer (1885-1944).

The final text, 'Observations on modern errors in art' (*Betrachtungen über moderne Irrtümer auf dem Gebiet der Kunst*) is published here for the first time in its entirety. Rößler's edition is based on a typescript prepared around 1932 by Justi's colleague Paul Clemen (1866-1947) after a now lost manuscript written between 1906 and 1912. Clemen published only a few excerpts with a lecture commemorating Justi's hundredth birthday, apparently fearing that Justi's ideas would be taken up by the National Socialists.⁴

A tall octavo (ca. 21 x 12 cm), the book fits easily in the hand, and the good paper and generous margins further signal that it is meant to serve the joy of reading. Justi, whose writings are widely recognized as a major contribution to German literature, is a natural fit for the publisher, Matthes & Seitz, who specialize in accessible but high-quality editions of intellectually provocative authors. The concise but thorough scholarly apparatus is tucked away at the back of the volume, with only explanatory footnotes in the texts themselves. The notes identify references to persons and to works of literature and art (drawing on current art-historical sources); by citing previous letters and outside sources, they fill in gaps necessary to follow the thread of the correspondence.

The apparatus includes a thumbnail biography of each correspondent, with essential publications, secondary bibliography, and archival references. A brief note (*Zu dieser Ausgabe*, pp. 547-553) explains editorial principles and the guiding rationale for Rößler's selections. The goal, he writes, is to give 'a nuanced picture' (*ein differenziertes Bild*) of Justi: 'The edition emphasizes pointed judgments of contemporaries, cultural- and intellectual-historical contexts, the history of the museum and the university, and discussion of art-historical methods' (p. 547).⁵ The letters to Broicher present Justi's views on the culture of his time and portrait sketches of major personages, while those to Bode document his scholarship and his conception of his own art-historical methods. The edition does not avoid expressions of anti-Semitism (in letters 53, 62, 71, 95), which Justi evidently shared with Bode, but it does exclude letters primarily concerned with the minutiae of museum work and publishing or with purely private matters. The bibliography gives a list of Justi's principal publications and individual essays mentioned in the letters and notes, as well as secondary literature cited in the notes. The index captures persons mentioned in the letters and in the biography (pp. 483-546) that constitutes the major portion of the scholarly apparatus.

Titled 'Carl Justi: a contribution to his intellectual biography' (*Carl Justi: ein Beitrag zu seiner intellektuellen Biographie*), this well written essay paints its own 'nuanced picture'. As Rößler states at the outset (p. 485), it would be wrong to

⁴ Paul Clemen, *Carl Justi. Gedächtnisrede zur hundertsten Wiederkehr seines Geburtstages*, Bonn, 1933.

⁵ Die Edition legt Schwerpunkte auf pointierte Urteile über Zeitgenossen, auf kultur- und wissenschaftshistorische Zusammenhänge, auf die Universitäts- und Museumsgeschichte und auf die Discussion von kunsthistorischen Methoden.

discount Justi's "polemical furor" (*polemischer Furor*) as the angry ranting of an old professor. Instead, he seeks to create a 'productive tension' (*produktives Spannungsverhältnis*) between Justi's scholarly activities and his unsparing cultural criticism (*Gegenwartskritik*), which also encompassed Prussian militarism, the Arts and Crafts movement, Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and Franz von Lenbach's old-master painting style. Keyed to the letters and the aphorisms, the biographical essay provides a foundation for understanding them as significant historical documents that provide insight into a time of profound social and cultural change. Rößler manages to promote a deeper appreciation of Justi's work and scholarly methods without seeming to excuse or justify positions that are now indefensible.

The first section of the biography (*Leben und Werk*, pp. 486-497) provides a concise, orienting overview of Justi's family background, training, and career. Rößler deftly situates him among the first generation of university art historians, outlining initial training in theology and philosophy and tracing a largely autodidactic path to art history. He grounds the critical empiricism of Justi's scholarship in an early, and at the time widely shared, skepticism toward speculative thought and rejection of the philosophical system-building exemplified by Hegel. While the earlier books on Winckelmann and Velazquez were largely biographical, supplemented with supporting cultural-historical essays, the late volumes on Michelangelo took the form of essays promoting direct engagement with discrete aspects of the artist's work. This, too, was a move against the continuing dominance of developmental histories of art, now exemplified by the history of form propounded by Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945). In the letter to Dilthey (No. 96) Justi disparages Wölfflin as having a propensity for the proclamation of unsupported ideas and for fanatically following the mistaken theories of the sculptor Adolf Hildebrand (1847-1921).

The next section, 'Art history as scholarship and as art' (*Kunstgeschichte als Wissenschaft und als Kunst*, pp. 498-515), more specifically situates Justi's work in the intellectual contexts of his time. While Justi, like the earlier historicists, sought to unite critical evaluation of sources and effective presentation (*Darstellung*), he rejected the historicists' self-contained comprehensive account in favor of episodic narratives and an essayistic style, which he found more successful in promoting direct engagement with historical figures and works of art. Acknowledging the much-lauded literary aspect of Justi's writing Rößler demonstrates that the supposedly 'fictional' elements in the biographies (sometimes denounced as either outright falsifications or literary and thus non-scholarly) functioned as a poetic means toward that same direct engagement. Connecting Justi to Dilthey through their similar readings of Francis Bacon (1561-1526) demonstrates a shared turn to an experience-based method and a rejection of universalist models of explanation. This manifested itself especially in Justi's continued emphasis on direct examination of original works and their detailed description, even as photography (which Justi saw as of limited use) became more and more important in art-historical practice. Rößler also positions Justi over against the popularising art history of the late nineteenth

century, demonstrating his many original contributions to the history of Spanish, Portuguese, and Netherlandish painting. At the same time, Justi largely avoided writing the general surveys many of his contemporaries produced, preferring to stress the singularity of the creative individual. When he did attempt a synthesis, he emphasized cultural exchange and the amalgamation of different styles rather than linear histories of autonomous national styles. Not surprisingly, Justi had a particular appreciation for portraits, which Rößler connects to both Justi's own interest in the individual and increasing critical interest in portraits in the nineteenth century.

Surveying Justi's career as a professor in Bonn from 1872 to 1912 (pp. 515-520), Rößler documents an active avoidance of teaching, minimal interest in administrative duties, and a distaste for writing reviews or attending scholarly conferences. Justi had only two doctoral students, Ludwig Scheibler and his own nephew Ludwig Justi.

The last three sections of the essay focus on Justi's relationship with each of the main correspondents, Broicher and Bode, and on the personal and cultural context in which Justi composed his 'Observations on modern errors in art'.

Rößler aptly describes the correspondence between Justi and Bode as a collegial exchange between two professionals with shared goals, from which a friendship developed only over time (p. 520). The two had known each other since at least 1874, when Justi sought Bode's opinion on a painting by El Greco, but the correspondence only began in 1876 and became regular only from 1880. While Bode sought out Justi for his expertise in Spanish painting, Justi found in Bode a link to the Berlin collections and a highly useful intermediary with the Prussian culture ministry. Rößler acknowledges the all-too easy contrast between Justi the eccentric university professor, focused on the cultural-historical dimension of art history, and the object-oriented museum connoisseur ever on the hunt for new acquisitions. He rightly argues, however, against too sharp an opposition, noting that for Justi cultural history remained but one, often-distracting aspect of art-historical work. Against this background, as Rößler notes (p. 524), it is not surprising that their correspondence focused on questions of connoisseurship and attribution. One dominant theme was the acquisition of Spanish paintings for Berlin. Supplemented with Rößler's detailed notes, the letters provide valuable insight into the history of connoisseurship and museum practice, mostly in a general sense, since Justi's advice led to only a very few actual acquisitions. The letters show a difference of opinion on the relative merits of Giovanni Morelli's (1816-1891) artist-focused method, which Justi defended against Bode's preference for the work of Joseph Archer Crowe (1825-1896) and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle (1819-1897) with its emphasis on regions and schools. Justi and Bode did, however, share an interest in filling in art-historical gaps with the identification of unknown masters and the association of known works with names in the archival sources.

Justi had become acquainted with Charlotte Broicher in Bonn, likely through connections to the family of her husband Otto Broicher. Their correspondence

began when Otto moved the family to Berlin in 1885. There Charlotte ran a prominent salon frequented by disciples of the symbolist poet Stefan George (1868-1933). She enjoyed some fame as translator of works from English and author of a three-volume study of John Ruskin (1819-1900); she also played an active role in the women's rights movement within the Protestant church. Broicher seems not to have shared Justi's anti-modern sentiments, and Rößler sees her as having pushed him to nuance and moderate his extreme views (p. 534). Still, in his letters to Broicher, Justi gives full voice to his growing unease with modernity and the modernist avant-garde. Recounting an amusing anecdote of Justi leaving a reading of symbolist poetry with the remark, 'Let me go, I can bear the opium no longer' (Lassen Sie mich gehen, ich halte das Opium nicht länger aus), Rößler crystallizes Justi's conception, evident throughout the letters, of the modern, in its artistic and social manifestations, as an intoxicant, as collective madness and mass hysteria. He also shows how Justi employed a current umbrella term for these phenomena: degeneration (*Entartung*), drawing on Max Nordau's (1849-1923) polemical work of the same title. (p. 532-533). Brief comparisons between Justi's anti-modern views and his scholarship (e.g. similar critiques of Wilhelm II and Philip IV, Mannerism and El Greco as degeneration) do little to redeem Justi's anti-modernism (p. 535-537). More compelling is Rößler's discussion of Justi's critical stance toward the cult of Wagner. In Bonn this was represented forcefully by the art historian Henry Thode (1857-1920), who was married to Wagner's step-daughter, Daniela von Bülow. Rößler cites key passages from Thode's *Habilitationsschrift*, showing how it applied Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and an exaggerated notion of the artist as saviour to the life and work of Giotto, and in ways decidedly at odds with Justi's conception of art and scholarship. Against this background, Justi's pointed criticism of Thode and Wagner appears grounded in deeply held intellectual convictions.

In the final section, 'Rescued by aphorism' (Rettung im Aphorismus, pp. 540-547), Rößler provides essential background for the 'Observations on modern errors in art', focusing on Justi's earlier Impressionism essay (*Amorphismus in der Kunst*, 1903). Originally delivered to a gathering of academics in Bonn, the text came to be privately published and circulated in the highest circles in Berlin, including the Imperial Court, where Wilhelm II repeated the arguments as his own. At the time, public debates about art had split between a progressive and a conservative camp, neither of which, Rößler notes, Justi was inclined to join. Still, he did not entirely abandon his critical engagement with modern art, beginning the 'observations' in 1906. Rößler speculates that Justi turned to the aphorism, with its open-endedness, as a way to avoid claims to absolute truth. If the title 'modern errors' was indeed assigned by Justi (which is far from certain), it may be a reference to Bacon's empiricism, and to Bacon's equation of 'errors' with 'idols'. This assertion needs further development, as does the identification of these often extended 'observations' as aphorisms. Still, Rößler is certainly justified in his reasons for publishing the text in its entirety: 'These private notations show an attempt, upon the exhaustion of all affective capacities, to overcome the shock of the modern. The

at-times aggressive, hate-filled tone and lack of coherent argumentation should thus be published in full as a historical document' (p. 545).⁶ As such, the text is now available for other scholars to study in greater depth.

Like the letters to Bode and especially Broicher, the 'Observations' make for an informative if occasionally disturbing read. The text is divided under seven headings: A. Against Impressionism and the like (Gegen Impressionismus und Verwandtes), B. Subject matter (Gegenstand), C. Causes of the decline (Ursachen des Verfalls), D. Essence of art (Wesen der Kunst), E. Sculpture in the round (Rundplastik), F. Empire – Orient. End of antiquity (Kaiserzeit -- Orient. Ende der Antike), G. Ruin of the galleries (Galerie-Verwüstung). Many of the views expressed are not at all surprising. For example: 'In the end, Impressionism depends upon the decline of vision, of focus, which the art of the van Eycks, Dürer, an extraordinary self-control, presupposes. Impressionist sketches are simultaneously stuck halfway from imagination to the true picture' (p. 428).⁷ Or: 'The Muse of modern painting is Manet's *Olympia*, a courtesan used up with sin – the Picnic [*Luncheon on the Grass*] the manifesto of shamelessness' (p. 434).⁸

Readers approaching the text with their own interests in mind are likely to find intriguing surprises. For the present reviewer one such is Justi's recourse to medium specificity arguments in his condemnation of modern art. For instance, Impressionism is denounced as a reversal of the laws of art, since music makes an impression, while the plastic arts create clear form; consequently it is self-deception to think that an unfinished work reveals the artist's locus of feeling (p. 438; see also p. 427, with a reference to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing). Another comes in the final section on 'the ruin of the galleries' (pp. 464-474), which Justi ascribes to the move away from the earlier practice of filling the whole wall with symmetrically, artistically arranged paintings. He rejects the historical hang by schools, or even reserving one room for a single master, with pictures placed in a single row at eye-level, finding this monotonous, deadening of aesthetic appreciation, and inappropriately like the display of goods in a shop window. The modern hang thus reduces pictures to the demonstration of a historical schema and forecloses free engagement with them as works of genius. For Justi, it does not make individual paintings available for close study, which is the advantage one might expect a scholar so devoted to direct engagement with works of art to find in it.

⁶ Die Privataufzeichnungen zeugen von dem Versuch, unter Ausschöpfung aller affektiven Kapazitäten den Schock der Moderne zu bewältigen. Der bisweilen aggressive, hasserfüllte Ton und die fehlende argumentative Stimmigkeit soll deshalb als Zeitdokument vollständig wiedergegeben werden.

⁷ Der Impressionismus beruht in letzter Instanz auf der Abnahme der Sehkraft, Schärfe, [die] die Kunst der van Eyck, Dürer, eine außerordentliche Haltung, voraussetzt. Die Impressionistischen Skizzen sind gleichsam auf dem halben Weg vom Phantasie zum wirklichen Bild stehen geblieben.

⁸ Die Muse der modernen Malerei ist Manets Olympia. – das Picnic das Manifeste der Schamlosigkeit.

Indeed, this whole volume is full of such intriguing discoveries. Rößler can rightly expect the thanks of both scholars and general readers for making more of Justi's fascinating, if sometimes infuriating, texts readily available.

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