
Historein

Vol 5 (2005)

Empire(s)

The Visibility of History – Bridging the Gap between Historiography and the Fine Arts

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doi: [10.12681/historein.78](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.78)

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To cite this article:

Rüsen, J. (2006). The Visibility of History – Bridging the Gap between Historiography and the Fine Arts. *Historein*, 5, 130–141. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.78>

*The Visibility of
History – Bridging
the Gap between
Historiography and
the Fine Arts*

History differs from all other academic disciplines in that it is art at the same time. It is science insofar it collects, finds, gets insight; art, insofar as it reproduces what it has found. Other disciplines are content to present what they have found; history needs the ability for reproduction.

Leopold von Ranke¹

Is history visible? In a first attempt to answer this question, historical paintings come to mind. Is it really history, however, that we see in those paintings or in historical monuments for that matter? Does, for example, Manet's famous *Shooting of Emperor Maximilian* show a piece of history? (Figure 1) This article argues that this is certainly not the case. What we see are simply facts and the painting reminds us that Maximilian I was shot on 19 July 1867 by Mexican troops. What the viewer sees is a politically significant event or an important individual in his political context, but he or she does not see that the facts visualized in the painting have a *historical* meaning, represent *historical* events or a *historical* personality.

Events are not historical simply because they actually happened. They are historical only insofar as they have a significant and meaningful temporal relationship to earlier and later facts and events.²

Thus, facts become 'historical' when they are interpreted in the context of other facts.

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This occurs with the help of specific patterns of interpretation, by applying *the mental procedure of narrating a story*.

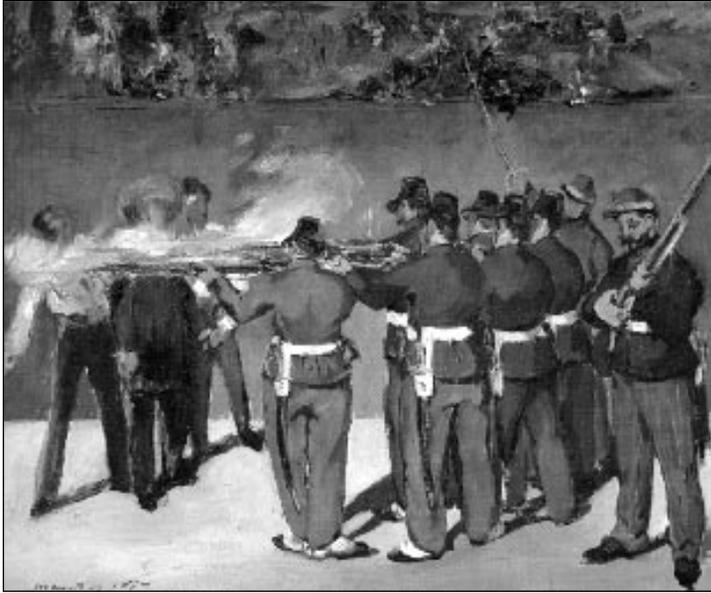


Figure 1: Édouard Manet:
Execution of Emperor Maximilian (1868/69)

However, the question arises: is it possible to actually 'see' this specifically historical meaning? Can the narrative creation of historical sense be carried out visually? Can the meaningful temporal relationship in which facts of the past – like the execution of Maximilian – become historical by being presented pictographically? Can the patterns and processes of interpretation which have given rise to the historical consciousness be formed into sensual awareness? Can art, founded on sensual perception, set into motion those interpretative patterns which evoke a consciousness of history?

The Lack of Historical Visualization

In attempting to answer this question, some material and pictorial phenomena usually taken for granted in representing 'history' will be analyzed here.

First of all, the past is sensually present in the form of artifacts: historical objects, relics, ruins, traces, or items displayed behind glass in historical museums. The objects discussed below symbolize meaningful events. The key to the Bastille in Paris, for example, represents the famous event of 14 July 1789. On its own, this key has no significance in regard to the French Revolution. The historical meaning has to be assigned to it and only by doing so does the key gain

the aura of authenticity and originality (in a metonymic representation). Thus the historical sense of the remains of the past lies beyond their materiality. This intrinsic historical senselessness manifests itself in the boredom generated by many museum display cabinets.

The historical sense that relics have beyond themselves is (in most museums) ascribed on a meta-aesthetical level in the form of accompanying explanatory texts.

Of course, this begs the question whether the remains of the past can have their historical sense within themselves as well.

Remains which signify tradition symbolize a certain time or era. In their concrete presence, they stand for the era in the past which they represent. The coronation insignia on view in the Hofburg of Vienna (from the second half of the tenth century), for example, point to the Middle Ages. (Figure 2) In our historical memory of symbols, a crown represents a different time, mainly the Middle Ages, and a different system of power, that of kings and emperors and not of presidents and prime ministers.



Figure 2: Insignia of the Holy Roman Empire, Vienna

Even in this traditional quality of meaning, however, the objects do not present a historical meaning in the strict sense; they only indicate it on a pre-historical level. As visible objects they signify a historical quality of the presented past, but in doing so they do not explicitly bridge the temporal gap between past and present. This can only be achieved by an interpretative connection which furnishes the past with a specifically historical quality.

Among the objects of the past traditionally regarded as historical, monuments are in a category of their own. They present a historical relationship insofar as they explicitly express a historical meaning for later generations. For this reason they develop a special pictorial language. They bridge the temporal gap between past and present (and even the future). They transmit a particular story to the present, a story that the creators of the monument want to tell about themselves or one which they hope to transfer to posterity. Monuments visually signify the temporal bridge necessary for the creation of historical meaning. This is a temporal bridge, however, in which 'history' from the past is made for the present. Yet, history can only be constructed backwards in time, from the present into the past. Thus monuments do not have historical but rather *semi-historical* meaning.

The Aesthetic Constitution of Historical Sense

Is there an aesthetic way of creating a narrative of historical meaning that transforms the past into history? The experience of temporal difference is a necessary condition of historical interpretation which can be easily realized aesthetically. This difference is not a simple chronological one between the 'earlier' and the 'later', between the past and present, but a qualitative temporal alterity. It is a very simple fact that the 'then' is different from the 'now' in its mode of temporality. Therein lies the crucial point. This difference can be perceived through a genuinely visual experience. Take, for example, the famous building in Philadelphia in which Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence and which is visually very different from the adjacent modern car park. (Figure 3) The two buildings stand for two different eras



Figure 3: Declaration (also Graff) House, Philadelphia
Photograph: Jörn Rösen, 1988

This sensual quality of temporal difference does not yet have a specifically historical sense however. It becomes historical only insofar as it is thematized as such, i.e. when the different times are connected by a narrative. Here, the narrative bridge is constructed through the process of sense generation of the historical consciousness.

As has been shown above, temporal alterity can be thematized by way of aesthetic experiences. Therefore, historical consciousness can initiate the visual perception of temporal difference on the

Interventions

aesthetic level. Examples which prompt the making of historical sense can be found everywhere. These can take the form of accidental constellations, such as when a tourist observes a Coca-Cola bottle on top of an ancient relic, for example. (Figure 4) These constellations can also be strategic, as in commercials (Figure 5), or as consciously aesthetic performances. (Figure 6)



Figure 4: Coca-Cola bottle among the ruins of Ancient Egypt
Photograph: Jörn Rüsen, 1987



Figure 5: Furniture advertisement. The inscription states:
"Would you like to live according to old customs? Or in the way you would like to?"

Die Zeit, 24 October 1986



Figure 6: Postcard of 'Greece'.
Edition Dimitri Haytalis, 1986

Just as the experience of temporal difference as a necessary presupposition for historical perception can be aesthetically formulated, it can also form the starting point for the bridging of historical eras on a visual level.

The Natal Museum in South Africa is a good example. Here the visitor is presented with a street scene. The pedestrians on this street are wearing clothes of their respective eras, symbolized by the typical buildings behind them. (When I photographed this in 1990, all of the pedestrians were white. This has since changed.) The street symbolizes the temporal change; it is a street that leads from the past to the present. Watching this from behind the glass, the visitor moves along this street, following the flow of time. In the process, his or her eyes 'tell' him the story of history. (Figure 7)



Figure 7: Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Photograph: Jörn Rüsen, 1990

Another example, which makes the change of time even more apparent, is taken from a school-book. In a series of images of Greek sculptures, a genuinely historical development is visualized. (Figure 8) The aesthetically guided narration is charged with a historical sense construction that can easily be identified as the process of anthropomorphisation in Greek sculpture from the abstract to the concrete. This visual presentation of a historical development transports the traditional educational package of the ancient world, namely its humanization of people.



Figure 8: Figure from the Cyclades (end of third millennium BC),

Young Man (ca. 550 BC), Young Man (ca. 340 BC).

Wolfgang Hug et. al. (eds.), *Unsere Geschichte. Bd. 1: Von der Steinzeit bis zum Kaiserreich des Mittelalters*, Frankfurt am Main: Diesterweg, 1987, p. 53.

Although history as a narrative bridge between times becomes visible in these examples, its power of generating historical sense is rather weak. There are pictorial representations, however, which explicitly thematize the meaningful historical relation between historical periods and therefore possess a strong historical sense. I am referring to three examples from an East German collection of etchings entitled “On the 450th anniversary of the German Peasants’ War” (1975): Werner Henning’s “Looking Back” (*Rückblick*), Heinz Plank’s “Knowledge and Experience – the Wealth of Man” (*Wissen und Erfahrung – der Reichtum des Menschen*), and Alexandra Müller-Jontschewa’s “Renaissance Landscape in Central Germany” (*Mitteldeutsche Renaissancelandschaft*) give a clear but mostly ideological message of historical sense. (Figures 9, 10 and 11)



Figure 9: Werner Hennig, “Looking Back” (1975)
Sammlungs- und Dokumentationszentrum Kunst der DDR, Beeskow



Figure 10: Heinz Plank, “Knowledge and Experience – the Wealth of Humankind” (1974)
Sammlungs- und Dokumentationszentrum Kunst der DDR, Beeskow



Figure 11: Alexandra Müller-Jontschewa,
 “Renaissance Landscape in Central Germany” (1975)
Sammlungs- und Dokumentationszentrum Kunst der DDR, Beeskow

Vividly, Henning’s piece presents as progress the historical sense that connects past and present. Plank’s piece is somewhat more differentiated: it presents progress as a man-made development. Yet, the image of history as a learning process, as suggested by the title, is not visible and must be added meta-aesthetically and thus with a didactically raised forefinger. Finally, Müller-Jontschewa’s piece, a composition in which the figures represent different eras, accentuates a remarkable kind of historical sense generation, that of mourning.

Aesthetics and Historical Sense

The principles of historical sense which determine the historical consciousness are well known. These have been worked out in elaborated form by the philosophy of history or are evident in the conventional historical categories. They make sense of time by distinguishing the specific realm of historical experience, outlining an overarching connection of past, present and future and regulating the use of historical memory as a source of orientation. The important question for the aesthetics of historical consciousness is namely whether there is an aesthetic concept of sense capable of providing such a categorical meaning? This question puts history and art into a new and substantial relationship to each other.

When works of art are considered as historical documents, their aesthetic qualities which may also be referred to as ‘beauty’ in the classical sense of the word are usually excluded. When interpreting this aesthetic quality, art historians only regard history as an iconological general

factor when it accentuates and exhibits artistic quality but not as something related to the intrinsic aesthetic substance (or “iconic” according to Max Imdahl) of pictorial works of art.³ This substance has always been thematized meta-historically as something which is constituted synchronically when the work of art and the observer meet.

In discussing the potential of historical sense generation in art, we are confronted by the problem whether and how the aesthetic quality of a work of art – in Max Imdahl’s words the “achievement of iconic density of sense”⁴ – can be used as a source for making sense of history? This question corresponds to the inner logic of creating aesthetic sense as this specific form of ‘making sense of art’ can be analyzed in direct analogy to the work of historical consciousness in making sense of history. Referring to Giotto, Max Imdahl explained this in detail: “The aesthetic understanding of the visible world is the transformation of the accidental and contingent occurrences into a necessary event; it is a principal form of coping with contingency.”⁵

Aesthetic and historical sense generation processes involve the same act, namely the transformation of contingent moments into meaningful time. What is achieved by art could also be realized by history. Therefore historical sense generation can vitalize the sense potential in terms of time realized by art.

Art transforms a single moment into meaningful time. Historical thinking must build on this achievement when dealing with the time in which the artwork was created. In such a process, the time in which the work of art was created would not only get its historical significance retrospectively by its integration into a narrative bridging the past and the present. Rather the past itself would contribute to this significance by its works of art.

There are many different ways of historical interpretation capable of achieving this. In any case, however, historical thinking should consider art seriously as a source for and a contribution to the sense and meaning which we call historical. If the aesthetic value of art and the historical sense criteria were connected, historical culture could enforce its own aesthetic dimension. Aesthetics as we know and view it would not be merely a means of presenting cognitive or political historical messages. Instead art would gain its own historical sense. Historical experience would be aesthetically enriched and the memorial work of historical consciousness would gain a new perspective and cultural richness.

Before concluding, it is necessary to take a short look at one of the most difficult problems of historical sense generation in our time. We are now at the brink of historicizing the Holocaust as an event which not only denies but even destroys every sense of history instead of becoming integrated into it. The potential of making sense of history in our historical culture has come to its limits when confronted with the unavoidable task of placing the Holocaust in the history of the world. How can it be possible to place an essentially senseless event in sense-bearing and meaningful history?

There is no historiographical paradigm available of integrating senselessness into the sense of history without depriving it of its unique traumatic character. However, modern art can hint at ways of solving this problem. Modern art has its meaning and significance in presenting the

absence of sense in a sense-bearing way. This is true for Kafka's novels as well as for many paintings, such as the works of Anselm Kiefer, to mention an example. (Figure 12)



Figure 12: Anselm Kiefer, "The Order of the Angels" (1983/84)
Art Institute of Chicago

Peter Eisenman and Richard Serra's proposal for the Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe (Figure 13) represents this sense-bearing absence of sense.⁶ Its power of persuasion comes at a price: its meaning is meta-historical and it does not refer to any temporal sequence of events.

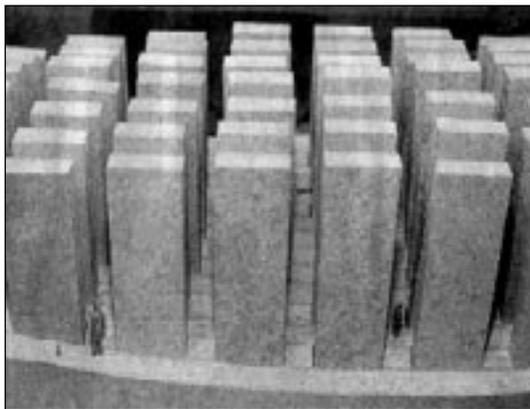


Figure 13: Richard Serra and Peter Eisenmann,
First Draft for the Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe
Die Zeit, 21 November 1997, p. 64

It is necessary for us to introduce this kind of significance into the cognitive work of historical culture. If we do not recognize the challenge posed by fine art, we will fail.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Leopold von Ranke, *Aus Werk und Nachlass. Bd. 4: Vorlesungseinleitungen*, [Volker Dotterweich und Walther Peter Fuchs (eds.)], München: Oldenbourg, 1975, p. 72. Author's translation.
- 2 See Jörn Rüsen, *Zerbrechende Zeit: über der Sinn der Geschichte*, Köln: Böhlau, 2001, chaps 1 and 2.
- 3 Max Imdahl, *Giotto: Arenafresken. Ikonographie, Ikonologie, Ikonik*, Munich: Fink, 1980.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 6 A substantially moderated version has been erected in the center of Berlin. See Ute Heimrod et. al. (eds.), *Der Denkmalsstreit – das Denkmal? Die Debatte um das 'Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas'. Eine Dokumentation*, Berlin: Philo Verlag, 1999, pp. 881–882.