Published on *Reviews in History* (http://history.ac.uk/reviews)

The Inspirational Genius of Germany: British Art and Germanism, 1850-1939

Review Number:
1414
Publish date:
Thursday, 9 May, 2013
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ISBN:
9780719087127
Date of Publication:
2012
Price:
£60.00
Pages:
320pp.
Publisher:
Manchester University Press
Publisher url:
http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780719087127
Place of Publication:
Manchester
Reviewer:
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As Jan Rüger suggested in his 2011 review article ?Revisiting the Anglo-German antagonism?, since 2000 almost every aspect of the history of Anglo-German relations has been reassessed and re-examined as a story not of increasing and inevitable antagonism, but of a much more complex process. Dozens of articles, monographs and dissertations have appeared to challenge Paul Kennedy?s influential *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, and to show how Britons did not conceive of Germany and the Germans as ?the Other? until comparatively late, and continued to hold Germany in very high regard well into moments of supposed diplomatic or military antagonism.(1) As such, Rüger (rather flippantly) claimed that we now know ?almost everything one could ever want to know about Anglo-German bakers and butchers, industrialists and engineers, professors and students, gymnasts and footballers, missionaries and musicians, hairdressers and waiters, bankers and managers, urban planners and architects, printers and publishers, poets and novelists?.(2)

To that list, Matthew C. Potter has added artists and works of art. He has therefore plugged one of the few remaining gaps in the literature, and has done so in excellent style, with a very good sense of the broader

intellectual history of his chosen period. However, in producing this admirable and entertaining work, Potter has essentially been working in parallel to the current trends in the historiography of Anglo-German relations identified by Rüger, rather than taking advantage of these to produce a more holistic history. Potter is well-informed on the current state of art historiography ? and frames his book in those terms ? but, beyond that, his bibliography is limited to the much older literature on British relations with Germany and the Germans in the chosen time-period. Works by Rosemary Ashton and Paul Kennedy (both first published in 1980) are taken as authoritative, despite the quite enormous shifts in the field since those foundational texts appeared over three decades ago. This does not overly detract from what Potter has produced, but it does make one wonder what he might have been able to achieve had he been more aware of work outside the confines of his ?home? discipline.

Potter begins with a simple, but very persuasive, premise; the kind of thesis which has animated so much of the recent literature on Anglo-German relations. This is that the turmoil of the two world wars of the 20th century (to which Potter adds the ?third? ? the Cold War) has blinded artists and art-historians to the sheer importance of the Anglo-German connections that existed before that period of antagonism, and particularly in the 19th century. In a well-crafted and critical appreciation of the historiography, he points to the way Germany and German art were written out of the mainstream story of artistic development in the modern period, in much the same way that the Victorians were deemed to be ?kitsch? (p. 2) rather than significant. He pins this deliberate neglect of German art on a few notable critics and historians of the mid-century ? notably Clement Greenberg and Roger Fry ? but also perceives the manner in which this dominant way of thinking has been problematised and destabilised by scholars of more recent times (Elizabeth Prettejohn and Paul Barlow). Potter takes up the methods discerned by these more recent scholars and extends them into a constructive historical project: simultaneously addressing the neglect of German art and aesthetic ideas, rather than simply pointing out this neglect and the reasons for it.

What is most impressive about this introductory chapter is the way Potter situates his appreciation of art history within the wider political, diplomatic, and intellectual history of Anglo-German interactions. As such, the reader is piloted through the various keynotes of Anglo-German intellectual history, with Potter?s skilled navigation of German Idealism, British periodical culture, Victorian empiricism and positivism, intermingling with the more solidly artistic of his concerns. This holistic approach is both useful to the specialist art-historian, and an important means by which non-expert readers can gain an entrée into the well-established intellectual company through which Potter moves so effortlessly. A brief but comprehensive foray into the importance of Thomas Carlyle, G. H. Lewes and George Eliot moves seamlessly into discussion of the prejudices which informed Victorian-era reception of German thought and art, before entering just as seamlessly into a discussion of what might be called ?the peculiarities of German history?, including an art-historical appreciation of the *Sonderweg* and its detractors (p. 8 ff). That this debate ? largely and to date confined to appreciations of socio-political and military understandings of German history ? should be observed from the perspective of art and the reception of art (each so quintessentially bourgeois) seems eminently reasonable and indeed refreshing. While Potter accepts that the exaggerations of the *Sonderweg* have rightly been ?revised away? (p. 10) ? and his key assumption is that Germany and Britain had much more in common in socio-political terms in the 19th century than many would care to admit ? he nevertheless pinpoints many of the ?symptoms? of the ?special path to modernity? as still being of worth to the art historian.

It is from this point that he proceeds to observe several case-studies in the appreciation and reception of German art in Britain, occupying seven substantive chapters, beginning with the pre-Raphaelites and concluding with the Weimar period. Each chapter therefore stands alone as a self-contained work of scholarship, as well as a part of the overall picture of British artistic engagement with Germany, 1850?1939. Short linking sentences and phrases keep the flow of the book together, though these would perhaps have been better positioned not at the end of each chapter (as they are), but at the beginning of the succeeding chapter. Potter pursues something of a biographical approach by focusing attention on one or two major artists or movements, which is useful, but perhaps unnecessarily circumscribes his dealings with each given period, and creates a periodisation that is perhaps a little too neat. But justifying this arrangement on his own

terms ? ?broadly sequential? (p. 13) ? Potter pursues his task very well in each case. That there is no overarching conclusion, and that broad conclusions are therefore squeezed into the last few paragraphs of chapter eight, is a disappointment. It would have been useful to tie matters together in a more concerted fashion, not least with a view to Potter signposting the avenues for future exploration, and encouraging further analysis of those questions still remaining, self-evident though these may be to the author.

The first substantive chapter (chapter two) continues the strengths of the introductory survey, and is a good indicator of the approach of the subsequent case-studies. Potter begins with a strong, if brief, investigation of the subject in context, with Ford Madox Brown?s 1840s emergence placed firmly within the social and political environment of the ?Young England? (1842?7) and Young Germany (1830?48) movements. A historiographical challenge to William Holman Hunt?s version of Brown follows (repositioning Brown as a central, rather than peripheral, influence on the pre-Raphaelites), interspersed with reflections on the secular-religious interplay of the mid-to-late 19th century. Potter?s reflective style ? asking leading rhetorical questions at the head of some paragraphs ? is initially somewhat off-putting. This is particularly the case when Potter openly admits to a need to ?re-orientate the argument slightly?, when already a third of the way through his chapter, but the reasoning that follows from such questions and reassessments is first-class, particularly when there is a need to reconcile the idealist and realist tendencies that Potter discerns in an artist like Brown (whom Potter refers to as ?Madox Brown?, rather than simply ?Brown?, despite the latter being more correct). The reader feels more a part of a free-form conversation, an exploration of different readings, rather than the recipient of an authorial and authoritative lecture on art history. Taking the story beyond simply Brown?s importance, and dealing with those he influenced ? such as William Bell Scott and Franz Hueffer ? leads to some fascinating insights and asides. The ?intimate character sketch of the future Kaiser Wilhelm II? given to Joseph Noel Paton in 1862 (p. 41) is one of these insights, which serve to make the chapter of broader interest to other kinds of scholar, not merely the art historian.

Potter moves on from the Ford Madox Brown context of Germanism into a very strong chapter three indeed. This focuses on the key role played by art critic Joseph Beavington Atkinson, who wrote for the *Art Journal* and *Blackwood?s Edinburgh Magazine*, in the important 1856?86 period. The importance of periodical culture in the spreading of Germanist ideals and fashions ? Atkinson was the foil to John Ruskin, who was ambivalent about, or even opposed to, Germanism ? is well-established by Potter. Indeed it is in chapter three that Potter revisits in more detail many of the interpretive and historical contexts he established in his introductory chapter, but uses them to shed light on Atkinson as a largely forgotten, but extremely important, critic in his own right. Indeed, Atkinson pursued a single-minded (and largely single-handed) ?mission to educate Britain in German art? (p. 69), launching a Samuel-Johnson-esque project on the lives of the chief German artists (for him) of recent times. These appeared in the *Art Journal* in 1865, and laid the foundations for Atkinson?s *Schools of Modern Art in Germany*, of 1880, as well as a more extended biography of Johann Friedrich Overbeck, in 1882 (which as Potter notes, remains the only English-language monograph on Overbeck to date). This chapter continues Potter?s trend of seamlessly integrating intellectual, political, and other strands of history within the framework of his subject. The frequent allusion to important cultural milestones ? such as the Munich exhibitions, the growing complexity of German art in the wake of Unification, and the xenophobia and Francophobia of many in the German art world ? add many layers to a rich portrait of a man in tune with his times.

Chapter four asks the rather bald question: ?Lord Leighton: Made in Germany??, which nevertheless leads into a deep and interesting analysis of German influence on Britain?s pre-eminent artistic arbiter of the late Victorian period. Again, Potter is picking up on another of the historiographical problems signalled in his introduction: the general dismissal (until recently) of the Victorian academic tradition as unimportant or unworthy. Potter is able to defend the epitome of Victorianism against his critics by not only focusing on Leighton himself, but treating his *Addresses* seriously (p. 118 ff.) for probably the first time. Drawing out the Idealist references made in those *Addresses*, Potter firmly locates Leighton?s education and emerging interests in the intellectual and cultural world established in his preceding two chapters, though providing a self-contained exploration of Leighton?s specific experiences. The same effortless integration of the political (e.g. the 1848 Revolution in Frankfurt, where Leighton was studying) with the artistic (realism versus

allegory) is evident here. The same rich evocation of a Germanist culture in British circles animates this chapter as it does the preceding ones, and Potter?s linking of Leighton with George Eliot ? not merely as illustrator of the latter?s *Romola* (1862?3), but as a kindred spirit and friend (p. 110) ? is a particularly compelling fusion of Potter?s artistic subject-matter and the broader (and better-known) intellectual and literary context. Leighton?s musicality (p. 155) ? which concept was inextricably linked to Germany in the 19th century ? is also dealt with here, bringing yet another cultural sphere into close analysis, and which is handled very well by the non-expert Potter. Our understanding of Leighton?s spiritual, emotional, and intellectual life as a Germanist is therefore confirmed by Potter, and extended to an admirable degree.

The centrality of Bavaria to what Britons imagined ?Germany? to be is handled in chapter five, the focus of which is Hubert Herkomer (1849?1914). This man was, in Potter?s mind, ?the ultimate personification of late nineteenth-century Anglo-German artistic relationships? (p. 144), and given his active working life spanned the 1860s to 1914 ? the crucial period of Anglo-German relations ? it is difficult to argue against this assertion. Potter makes Herkomer?s engagement with high politics ? and his willingness to paint portraits of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the managerial board of Krupp ?something of a focus of the later part of the chapter (pp. 162?3 ff.), and this does indeed illustrate the artist?s interconnection with the rising Anglo-German tensions late in the century. Even without this link, Herkomer?s life-story is fascinating to the uninitiated (this reviewer having heard little of him), and Potter again deploys his cultural and political knowledge to explore how Herkomer was equally preoccupied with ?the nature of beauty? and with national identity (p. 154). That Herkomer was ? like so many in the British art world of the late 19th century ? also an artist of black and white (he worked for *The Graphic*) is also a means by which Potter is able to firmly position him as a representative figure. In the discussion of etching, engraving, and other forms of black and white art, Potter is also able to draw out the issue of modernism and anti-modernism that characterised Herkomer?s ideas about art, though perhaps Potter here misses an opportunity to tie in his broader understanding of the *Sonderweg* debate. Similarly, Potter?s focus on Herkomer?s mixture of German *Blutgefühl* and English *Bildung* calls to mind another, cultural exploration of the same issues in the same period which is absent from Potter?s discussion: E. M. Forster?s *Howards End*. A re-reading of Herkomer?s life with that great work in mind would undoubtedly serve very well Potter?s desire to explore the individual within his cultural, political and artistic context.

One is struck again at the beginning of chapter six by the way that Potter?s individual case-studies fit so well together, and the excellent linkage between them provided in his introduction. Again he returns to a historiographical theme familiar from the introduction: the way the use of French (or Belgian) art historical models fails to fully encompass the British engagement with Continental art, and how essential it is to put Germany back into the story (p. 175). In this case, Potter focuses on British and German Symbolism. The reception of Arnold Böcklin (a Swiss-German), and his anti-modern response to modernity and modernism, is taken as a particularly important cultural moment that sat well with Victorian Britain?s reassessment of classical myth and scholarship. Moreover, in exploring the chief ?receivers? of Böcklin in Britain ? Walter Crane and G. F. Watts ? Potter is able to pursue something missing from his previous chapters, which is the return influence of British artists on Germany. Crane?s cover illustration for the important liberal journal *Jugend* (p. 199) is a fine illustration of ?the international appeal of the British arts and crafts aesthetic? merging with the local German tradition of graphic arts and illustration (p. 198). Just as in the analysis of Herkomer, Potter is also able in his detailing of Crane and Watts to show the interconnection between art and high politics. The difficulty in accepting Germanism that arose from Germany?s own commercial and military challenge to Britain in the 1890s is overplayed by Potter (p. 202 ff.), who does not seem to be aware of the broader historical scholarship that supports his own approach.(3) It is therefore perhaps a little ironic that in penning such a clear challenge to the Kennedy grand narrative of a rise in Anglo-German antagonism, he then relies on Kennedy (and the rather simplistic popular historian Robert K. Massie, among others) (p.216). Nonetheless, Böcklin?s reception does reveal that high politics and diplomacy did colour even critical reception of a key artist, and this is in keeping with Potter?s overall historiographical point.

Given the conclusion of chapter six, it is therefore more encouraging to see Potter begin chapter seven with a sounder grasp of the cultural-diplomatic interplay between Britain and Germany around the turn of the 20th

century. Despite diplomatic antagonism (or at least, ambivalence), ?artistic connections continued? between Britain and Germany (p. 219), and (for Potter) the person of Wassily Kandinsky is the best illustration of this. That Germanism was still possible even down to the eruption of 1914, is characterised as a form of ?repackaging? by Potter, evident in the *Burlington Magazine* and other publications, even as Anglo-German competition ?encouraged rather than prevented Germanism? (p. 222). Potter calls this ?perverse?, but again he is led to this conclusion by a lack of familiarity with the broader historiographical trends in Anglo-German relations of recent years (as opposed to art-historiographical, on which he is very strong). Despite this relative ignorance, he nevertheless pursues here the same very strong integration of intellectual, political, and art history that is evident in all his chapters. Discussions of Schopenahuer?s and Nietzsche?s reception in Britain (p. 224 ff.), and the way ?artistic Germanism was part of a wider cultural enthusiasm for Germany? (p. 227) are excellent, with key Germanist connections being discerned in literature as well as art-criticism. It is interesting to see Potter eschew 1914 as an absolute caesura, and depict it more as a moment of ?slippage?, as some ?good? Germanism survived, while associations with the ?bad? of Prussian militarism did not (p. 246). Thereafter, the First World War ?inhibited the free flow of Germanism? which had been evident in the previous half-century or more (p. 252).

Potter concludes his collection of case-studies by taking the story of British artistic Germanism past the upheavals of 1914?18 and observing how total war and the deliberate provocation of anti-German hatreds ?failed to enforce a moratorium on Germanism? (p. 260). In this, Potter again confirms what is already known from the parallel historiography of Anglo-German relations, and it is hoped that some future cross-fertilization with the likes of Colin Storer or Angela Schwarz will shed even more light on the 1918?39 period.(4) The important exchanges that were newly established (or re-established) in this period ? such as the Anglo-German Club (1931) ? are highlighted as important means of maintaining artistic and cultural interplay between Britain and Germany, and Potter also spends some time dealing with the unfortunate flirtation of the likes of Wyndham Lewis with ?the German ideology?: National Socialism. The eventual revulsion felt by Britons when confronted with Nazism and its anti-Semitic character did result in a retreat from unfettered Germanism, but Potter points out that ?one last defiant gasp? (p. 272) of enthusiasm for German art did occur, at the very end-point of this study: the Exhibition of Twentieth-Century German Art, in London (1938). Here, Potter completes his historiographical reappraisal, by challenging the consensus that the exhibition was not well-received, or that, if it was, this was owing to an officially-sanctioned policy of Appeasement that extended to the art world. In fact, he shows that the exhibition was ?a positive response to a specific type of German culture that was seen to be spiritually enriching? (p. 280). It is gratifying to see a book that has been dedicated to the study of that positive British attitude to Germany conclude on such a note.

It is also gratifying to encounter fully 50 figures (in black and white) throughout the book, and to find that these are not merely illustrations, but integral parts of the analysis. That these include the key painted and etched works of art, alongside such illuminating sketches and cartoons as John Hipkins?s ?Mr Ford Madox Brown and Dr Hüffer (St Patrick?s Day, 1886)? (p. 35), and F. Goedecker?s *Vanity Fair* portrait of Hubert Herkomer (p. 170) is a further testament to Potter?s breadth of scholarship, and ability to see beyond the still-present prejudice in his field in favour of ?high? art and against ?low? art. Perhaps my only criticism here is the positioning of some of the images in relation to the text in which they are discussed (always a problem) and the lack of emboldened text to assist the reader in identifying which artworks are included (as ?figure 31?, ?32?, etc...).

Potter has succeeded admirably in his stated aim: ?to bring to light the true importance of an international tradition that has been neglected in British art history for reasons of historiography and politics? (p. 14). This is a vibrant and engrossing work, and it is to be hoped that in future a fuller engagement by the author with his parallel historiographical fellow-travellers will assist in developing and integrating British artistic Germanism into the broader historical trends of recent years.

Notes

1. Jan Rüger, ?Revisiting the Anglo-German antagonism?, *The Journal of Modern History*, 83, 3 (September 2011), 579?617..Back to (1)
2. Rüger, ?Revisiting the Anglo-German antagonism?, 584..Back to (2)
3. Even P. E. Firchow?s excellent, though now somewhat out-dated, *The Death of the German Cousin: Variations on a Literary Stereotype* (London, 1986), does not feature in his bibliography. More recent works include: John Ramsden, *Don?t Mention the War: The British and the Germans since 1890* (London, 2006); Thomas Weber, *Our Friend ?The Enemy?: Elite Education in Britain and Germany Before World War I* (Stanford, CA, 2008); Petra Rau, *English Modernism, National Identity and the Germans, 1890?1950* (Farnham, 2009). Some are, admittedly, too recent for Potter to have been aware of: Philip Oltermann, *Keeping Up With the Germans: A History of Anglo-German Encounters* (London, 2012); Richard Scully, *British Images of Germany: Admiration, Antagnonism & Ambivalence, 1860?1914* (Basingstoke, 2012)..Back to (3)
4. Colin Storer, *Britain and the Weimar Republic: The History of a Cultural Relationship* (London, 2010); Angela Schwarz, *Die Reise ins Dritte Reich. Britische Augenzeugen im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933?1939* (Göttingen, 1993)..Back to (4)

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[1] http://history.ac.uk/reviews/item/46788