



**Alexandre Kostka, Françoise Lucbert.** *Distanz und Aneignung: Kunstbeziehungen zwischen Deutschland und Frankreich 1870-1945.* Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004. 413 S. EUR 49.80 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-05-004061-5.



Reviewed by Elana Passman

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## A. Kostka u.a. (Hgg.): *Distanz und Aneignung*

At a moment when the French perceived themselves as militarily, economically, and indeed spiritually weak relative to their hereditary enemy across the Rhine, they pointed to the visual arts as a point of national pride. If the Germans seemed to excel in science, music, and philosophy — as attested to, for example, by the French fascination with Nietzsche even as he was dismissed by his compatriots — On the reception of Nietzsche in France, see Forth, Christopher E., Nietzsche, Decadence, and Regeneration in France, 1891-1895, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54 (1993)1, pp. 97-117. — they did not represent a threat to the French artistic genius. Indeed, in the late 19th century, German collectors not only appreciated French modern art more than they did German modern art, but they even admired it more than did the French themselves. German museums amassed large collections of impressionist art even as it was dismissed in its country of origin.

This collection approaches the issue of national identity from multiple directions, at times to dizzying effect. At its most basic level, it is concerned with the interpenetration of the French and German art scenes. More par-

ticularly, it explores the ways in which critics, galleries, and museums interpreted art through the lens of the nation from 1870 through approximately 1930. The book charts the propensity of critics and the broader public to attribute national labels to artistic styles and then to place artists within those national categories — often regardless of, or indeed despite, their national origins or place of residence. According to this warped logic, then, Max Liebermann's art (and therefore Liebermann himself) was deemed "French" for its accessibility and subtlety, whereas Gustave Moreau, as a symbolist with a "powerful" and "obscure" sensibility was clearly "German" (p. 47). By appropriating these artists into the national canon — or by casting them off as representative of a foreign canon — not only did critics underscore their own patriotism (or cosmopolitanism) but also they defined and reified these nation-based categories.

This is the third volume in a beautifully designed series dedicated to French and German artistic relations from 1870-1945. The scope of the larger series helps explain the rather misleading title of this volume, whose coverage does not extend beyond the late 1920s. By and

large “Distanz und Aneignung” looks to painting, with a couple of articles on the decorative arts and none on monuments, architecture, sculpture, sacred art, or photography. As the authors duly note, the contents reflect the fact that Germans were far more interested in French art than the reverse; the book is thus heavily weighted toward German perceptions of the French. The articles are half in German, half in French, with article abstracts in English only. Although seemingly narrow in focus, the volume approaches the Franco-German art world from so many angles that portions of the book will most certainly draw the attention of those interested in Kulturtransfer, cultural critics, reception theory, and a multitude of artists from Dürer to Picasso.

The volume opens with two thoughtful pieces that carefully lay out the scope of this project undertaken by the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte/ Centre Allemand de l’Histoire de l’Art in Paris. The Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte/ Centre allemand d’histoire de l’art is also compiling an ambitious (if admittedly not comprehensive) searchable online database of French and German art criticism from 1871-1940 with a focus on Franco-German cultural transfer and perceptions of the other. A search for “Manet”, for example, yields 371 references and excerpts from (by and large German) art journals, cultural reviews, newspapers. For access to this database, along with descriptions of other Franco-German projects undertaken by the organization, see <http://www.dt-forum.org/projekte.html>. The first article, by Thomas W. Gaehtgens, sets out the broader historical context by contrasting the fraught nationalist tensions between France and Germany with the closely intertwined artistic worlds of the two nations. In the second article, Alexandre Kostka and Françoise Lucbert define mediation as a process that includes “discovery, knowledge [connaissance], interpretation, then transmission” (p. 17). The emphasis of the volume, they explain, lies in demonstrating the “diversity of mediation” not in providing an overarching theory (p. 16). Accordingly, the authors underscore the multiple varieties of cultural mediation – through journals, galleries, and museums – as well as its multiple valences from fascination to appropriation to condemnation.

The first section of “Distanz und Aneignung” concentrates on artistic networks as agents of cultural transfer; examples include French cultural reviews (Lucbert) and the circle around Max Liebermann and Antoine Proust (Knut Helms). Alexandre Kostka then widens the volume’s binational gaze to pursue the notion of

“triangular transfer.” By examining the ways in which French neoimpressionism filtered through Belgium before reaching Germany, Kostka complicates our understanding of the mechanics of transfer in terms of both time and space. Due to the late and indirect arrival of Georges Seurat’s art into Germany, German critics initially interpreted it much differently from their earlier French counterparts: they associated it with the decorative arts movement centered in 1890s Brussels. Sabine Beneke and Martin Schieder discuss obstacles barring successful Franco-German mediation. Beneke describes how Otto Grautoff and Frantz Jourdain’s efforts to promote French provincial and Bavarian arts and crafts abroad met overwhelming resistance from other critics, who insisted upon the national foundations of taste. Schieder argues that gallery owners’ commercial rivalries and competing interpretations of the work of Fernand Léger (i.e. expressionist or cubist) undermined their efforts to popularize his art in Germany.

The second section, framed around the concept of mediators, considers critics’ engagement with art from across the Rhine. At once attracted to and repulsed by foreign art, these mediators familiarized the public with art from across the border; in so doing, they also transmitted their own interpretations – often replete with biases – to their fellow countrymen. Articles on Apollinaire (Michel Décaudin) and Antoine Rous Marquis de la Mazelière (Rachel Esner) assess their ambiguous attitudes toward German culture and a modernizing Germany. Uwe Fleckner explores the ways in which three German critics shaped German opinion of Claude Monet. Isabelle Dubois contends that despite his attempt to promote medieval German art in France, critic Louis Réau remained bound to national categories; she condemns his “retrograde” view of Germany and “astonishingly narrow mind (esprit)” (p. 171). Christina Kott moves beyond an analysis of perception to demonstrate how the Belgian Paul Colin acted as a “double cultural mediator at the European level” (p. 259). In the hope that cross-cultural knowledge would help reconcile France and Germany, Colin both promoted expressionism in France and Belgium and advanced French culture in Germany. An article by Catherine Kraemer offers a riveting case study of exactly the slipperiness of identity addressed by the book as a whole. Under a series of French and German pseudonyms – with each persona championing a different set of arguments rooted in his own national context – Julius Meier-Graefe pursued his artistic agenda for an industrially-produced decorative arts in both countries.

Entitled “Identifikationsfiguren”, the third section ex-

amines the reception of an array of French artists in Germany, with particular focus on how they were linked to various national artistic and intellectual traditions. Some critics and art historians manipulated their portrayals of artists to champion a certain agenda. To accommodate his favorable reception of Jean François Millet and indeed, Millet's general popularity in Germany critic Richard Muther, for example, depicted a thoroughly Germanic-seeming artist. All photographic evidence to the contrary, Muther described Millet (whom he dubbed Franz) as having blue eyes, curly blond locks, and a moody disposition. According to Andrea Meyer, the critic categorized Millet as a Norman and thus of the Germanic race, rather than as a Frenchman. German critics also underscored the affinities between German sensibilities and the art of Eugène Delacroix (Gaehtgens) and Paul Cézanne (Friederike Kitschen), whereas they believed Georges Rochegrosse epitomized Frenchness (Philip Ursprung). Annegret Rittmann contrasts those critics who emphasized Marie Laurencin's personal ties to Germany with those who condemned her feminine "French" style. Finally, Andreas Holleczek dissects three critics' divergent readings of Pablo Picasso, each of which considered his cubism an expression of particular national tendencies.

Running through the text is an important undercurrent about what it meant to be modern. Most explicitly, the authors analyze mediators' own understanding of the modern, such as their views on periodization, the status of crafts and the industrial arts, and the relative merits of academicism versus the avant-garde. Implicitly, a number also touch upon the question of the construction of the modern nation-state. Historians may wish the authors had pushed this line further to tease out more consistently how the crossing of borders — by art, ideas, and cultural mediators — helped shape each nation's evolving identity.

By focusing on the reception of art without an obvious national agenda, the authors underscore the degree to which thinking in national terms dominated cultural criticism. Concentrating on the politicized reception of such art calls for creative and subtle readings of the sources; here, the authors succeed admirably. In choosing these subjects alone, however, the authors miss a substantial aspect of both French and German art of the era. A glimpse at the cross-national reception of state-commissioned, nationalist, and/or martial art, such as depictions of the Franco-Prussian War, could have helped

fill in the blank spots on the canvas.

The volume in general could have benefited greatly from a more consistent disclosure of critics' and journals' political orientations. Even if, as is often implicitly the case here, the ways in which French and German art were viewed belied (or even defied) general political categories, the explosion of these categories would be all the more clear if it were dealt with head-on. In this way, too, the cosmopolitan arguments of a René Schickele, the raging chauvinism of a Camille Mauclair, and the more ambiguous positioning of many of the more obscure figures could be put in perspective. Furthermore, such disclosures would help differentiate nationalist appropriation from cases of appropriation aimed at taming a foreign product to make it more accessible or to market it to the masses at home. In a similar fashion, it would be helpful to have some sense of the reception and readership of these critics. Kott's article on Paul Colin is one of the few pieces to engage such knotty issues. Did critiques in 'elite' academic or other fachspezifisch journals differ from art reviews in newspapers and magazines intended for mass consumption? How representative — and how influential — was one critic's voice versus another? To this end, a biographical registry along with a brief synopsis of the various art journals, their readerships, and their circulation would have been enormously helpful.

Ultimately, this is a book on Kulturtransfer, with art as its theme — not a book on art (or Franco-German relations) with Kulturtransfer as its approach. This organization makes sense, but it leads to a frustrating amount of repetition and the perhaps equally frustrating lack of appositives by which to introduce new critics into the text (woe to the casual reader with passing knowledge of French and German art critics). Moreover, the thematic organization makes for a rather confusing chronology with an article on a 1928 Leichter exhibition in Berlin situated almost 200 pages before an article on the (now forgotten) 19th century historical genre painter Georges Rochegrosse. The reader is certainly not pulled along a narrative of evolving relations or evolving perceptions between the two nations. At the same time, however, the unusual juxtaposition of articles yields the volume's greatest rewards. For specialists, it provides a multi-layered, fascinating look at questions of identity formation, nationalism, the construction and resonance of stereotypes, and the role of the intellectual in cultural transfer that would be impossible in a straightforward narrative.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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