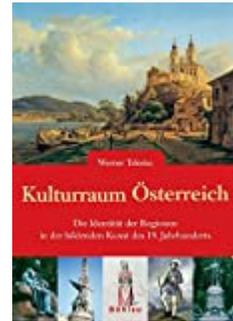


Werner Telesko. *Kulturraum Österreich: Die Identität der Regionen in der bildenden Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts.* Wien: Böhlau Verlag/Wien, 2008. 632 S. (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-205-77720-5.



Reviewed by Daniel L. Unowsky

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2008)

W. Telesko: Kulturraum Österreich

This lavishly produced and illustrated book is the second and concluding volume of Werner Telesko's encyclopedic study of art and identity in Habsburg Austria. The first volume, *Geschichtsraum Österreich* published in 2006, centered on Habsburg dynastic iconography and the projection, interpretation, and (re)construction of Austrian history in painting, literature, and monuments, celebrations, and so on. Werner Telesko, *Geschichtsraum Österreich. Die Habsburger und ihre Geschichte in der bildenden Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Wien 2006. See: The volume under review here concentrates on the meaning of regional and supraregional historical events and myths in the nineteenth century, on the one hand in the Vienna center and on the other in the regions, the Austrian (Cisleithanian) crownlands (in part identical with the federal states of the present-day Republic of Austria) (p. 15)

In both volumes, Telesko argues that identity is a process, not a fixed fact of history, and that nineteenth century historical art (*Historienkunst*) in the form of painting, literature, monuments, sculptures as well as mass-produced art depicting historical personages and

events did not simply reflect historical reality, but was constitutive of that reality. Nineteenth century historical art simplified and personalized the past, and by so doing used this refined memory to give meaning to the present and make claims about the future. By establishing a canon of symbols, images, and heroes, historical art of the nineteenth century created the framework within which identification with land, town, province, monarchy, and nation was constructed. In *Kulturraum Österreich*, Telesko seeks to explore how the memorialization of regional history complemented or competed with dynastic strategies for bolstering cultural connections between subject, state, and dynasty. He argues that the works of art he studies reflect the historical interpretation of those who initiated its production.

After an all too brief introduction (readers must consult the first volume for Telesko's theoretical framework for contextualizing nineteenth century historical art), the first five chapters examine the ways nineteenth century artists memorialized key events in Austrian history, from the battle against the Turk in the late 17th and early 18th century to the revolutionary year of 1848 to the rooting

of specific interpretations of recent historical events in monuments resulting from the initiative of court, elite, or burgher circles. Chapter 6 discusses the usefulness of an explanatory model for 19th century art based on center and periphery. Telesko argues that the rediscovery of local traditions and Volkskultur was related to romanticism but can also be understood as a conscious reaction against centralization (p. 182). Chapters 7-15 treat the development of regional memory in Vienna, Lower and Upper Austria, Salzburg, Tirol, South Tirol, Vorarlberg, Styria, and Carinthia through close studies of the ways in which paintings, museums, literature, monuments, medals depicted the past and explicitly or implicitly related that past to the nineteenth century present. The final chapter considers landscape painting as one of the key artistic forms of identity formation in Habsburg Austria.

In many respects, this is an exciting and innovative study. Werner Telesko relies only in part on well-known paintings displayed in Vienna's museums. He has combed through the back rooms of local and regional museums and the pages of commemorative publications not to find overlooked artistic treasures to now be included in the canon of great European art, but to rediscover the historical sensibilities of the 19th century through exactly those cultural products that had previously been ignored by scholars as mundane and unworthy of academic study. This is not in itself a novel approach. Many scholars have taken a similar approach while grappling with the same kinds of questions Telesko tackles here: collective memory; the construction of local, regional, national, dynastic identities and loyalties; and so on. At the same time, no one has made such a systematic study of art history, memory, and memorialization in the Habsburg lands, and for this Telesko must be commended.

It is not possible to do justice to Telesko's many insights and arguments. By bringing together so much historical art and describing its development over time in the context of the regions in which it was produced, Telesko is able to flesh out the simplified canons of images and themes that distinguished local identification in the separate provinces. Chapters and sections move from the

late eighteenth century to the twentieth, from regionally specific heroic depictions of the defense against the Ottomans, the War of Liberation against Napoleon, the saving of Franz Joseph from an assassination attempt in 1853, to centennial commemorations of persons and battles in the years before World War I. Telesko shows the interplay between dynastic, state, and regional motifs, and argues convincingly that dynastic themes of defense and unity in diversity could be depicted in ways that enhanced loyalties to locality as much or more than loyalty to the imperial center.

Many readers will want to know more about who is producing and who observing/consuming the art discussed. Telesko is most interested in form and iconography; yet, he himself notes that the art needs to be explored as expressions of the historical self-conception of those involved with its creation and unveiling. The chapters and sections where Telesko focuses on this kind of material—like his treatment of the Catholic-conservative use of Andreas Hofer and the Heart of Jesus in opposition to the liberal challenge during the Kulturkampf in Tirol—are among the most interesting and successful in the book.

The reader will likely feel that there are both too many and too few images in this beautifully illustrated book. Some of the short sections describing works reproduced on opposite pages seem unnecessary because they are not clearly linked to larger arguments. Yet, Telesko at times provides detailed discussions of art and architecture while offering few if any corresponding images (to name two examples, see the discussion of Heldenberg in Chapter 5 or the passages on the decorations of Vienna's Town Hall in Chapter 7).

These criticisms, however, should not dissuade those interested in the tensions between local, regional, Austrian, and dynastic loyalties in the Habsburg lands from delving into Telesko's two-volume study. While the volume discussed here is not as sharply focused as the first, both volumes can serve as an excellent reference work for historians and art historians alike. Telesko's study has rescued rich material from dusty backrooms and challenges us to rethink Austrian identities in the long nineteenth century.

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

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Daniel L. Unowsky. Review of Telesko, Werner, *Kulturraum Österreich: Die Identität der Regionen in der*

bildenden Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23264>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.