

*Kunstwissenschaft* and Art History:

## Two Forgotten Subjects

James Elkins

# Organization of this talk:

A.

Introduction

B.

*Kunstwissenschaft*, as it was (and still is) practiced

C.

*Bildwissenschaft*, as it may have been (and still is) practiced

D.

Visual studies, as it is (and might be) practiced

E.

Art history, and how it is melting away:  
two examples

F.

Sad conclusions



A.

## Introduction

This is a speculative talk; my interest is in the waning of methodologies and disciplines.

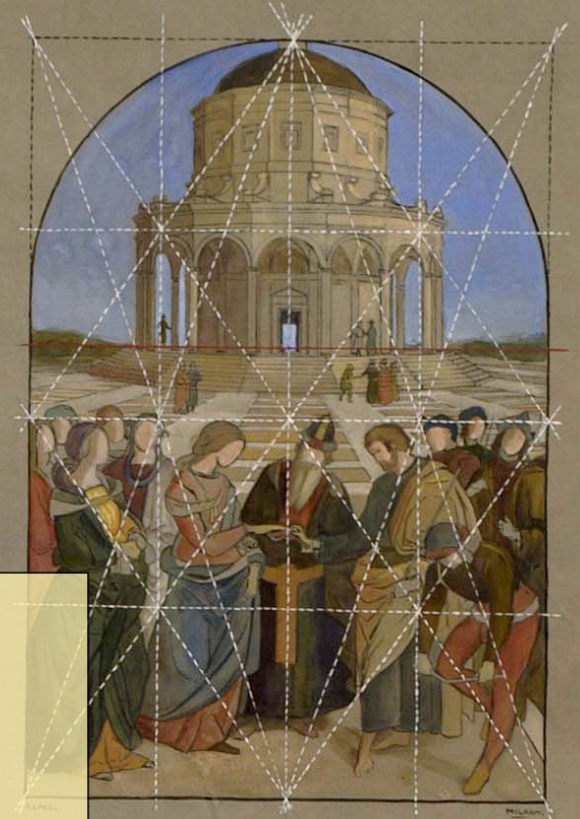
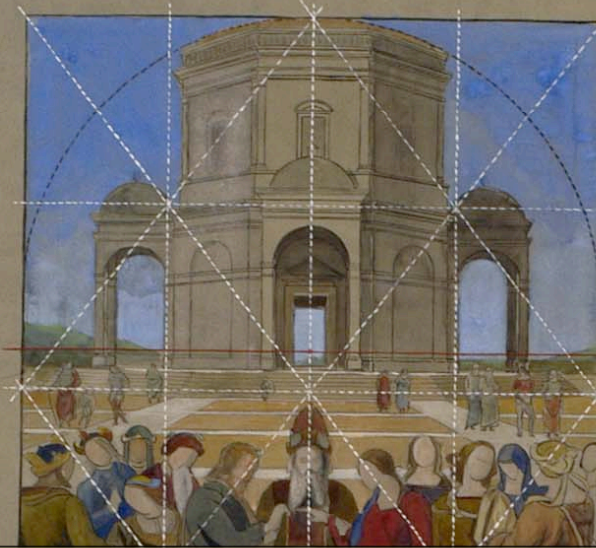
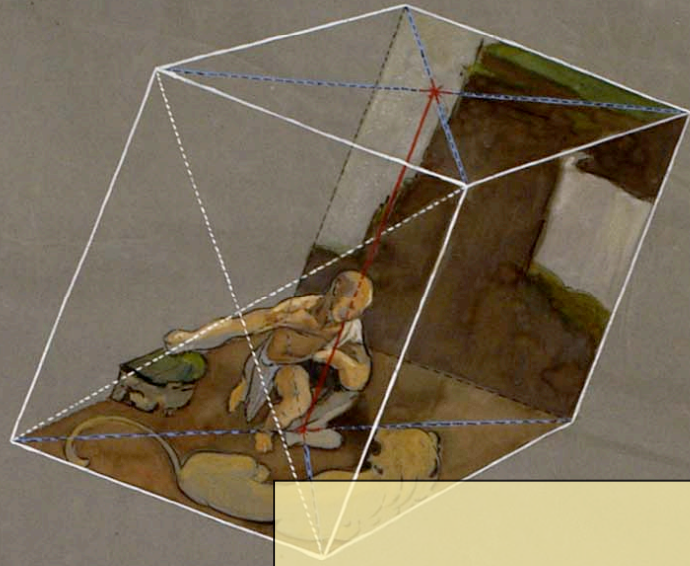
I will propose a *comparative analogy* between four fields:

*Kunstwissenschaft* : art history :: *Bildwissenschaft* : visual studies

B.

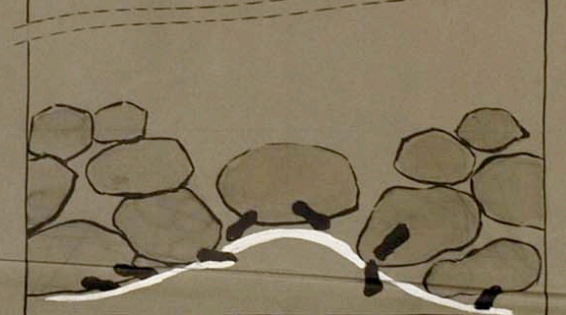
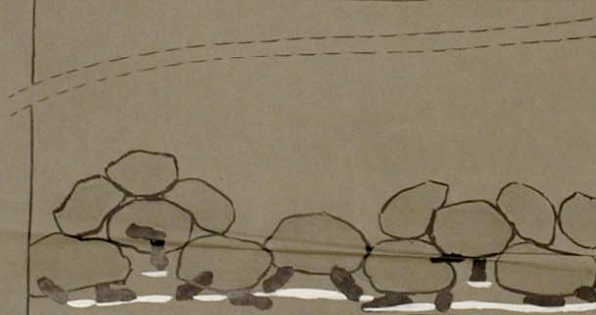
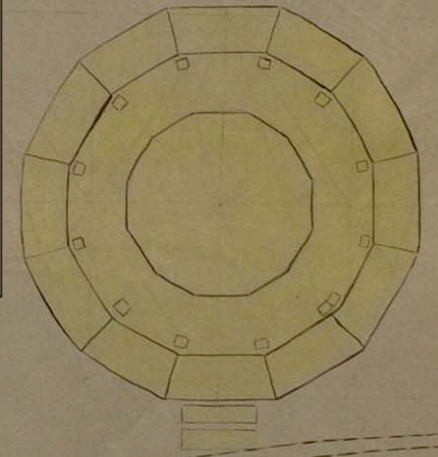
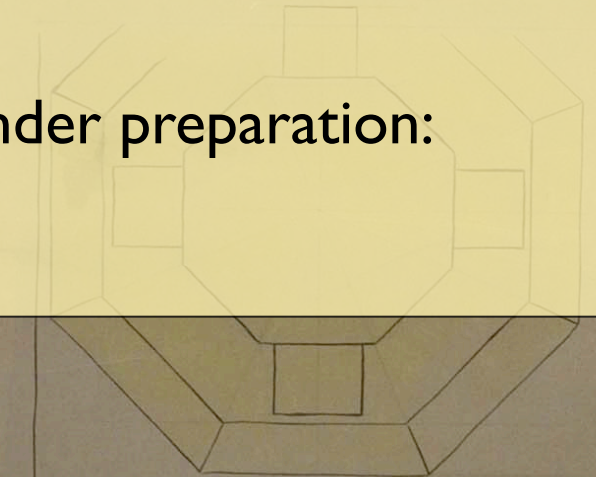
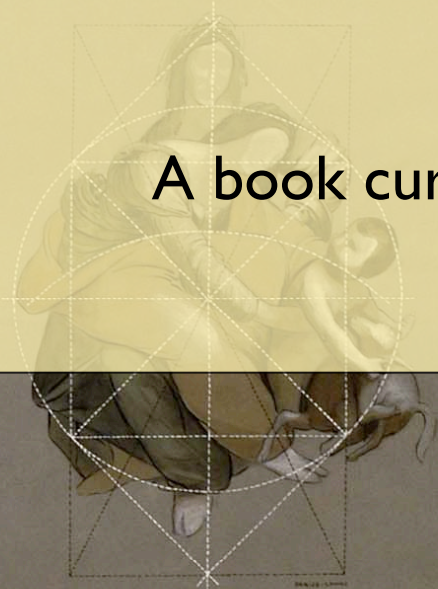
*Kunstwissenschaft*, as it was  
(and still is) practiced





How might it be possible to decide what  
*Kunstwissenschaft* was?

A book currently under preparation:





# Art History and German Philosophy: A Systematic Legacy

Edited Daniel Adler, Mitchell Frank and Richard Woodfield  
to be published in 2009

- Daniel Adler, University of Guelph: 'Wölfflin, the Painterly, and Psychology'  
 Daniela Bohde, Goethe Universität Frankfurt: 'Art history as a physiognomic science'  
 Mark A. Cheetham, U. of Toronto: 'The Grandfather Clause: Panofsky, Kant, and Disciplinary Cosmopolitanism'  
 Ricardo de Mambro Santos, Università di Roma 'La Sapienza': 'Concentric Critique. Schlosser's Kunstliteratur and the Paradigms of Style in Croce and Vossler'  
 Heinrich Dilly, University of Halle: 'Max Dessoir and "Aesthetics and the Theory of Art"'  
 Jae Emerling, University of North Carolina: 'An Art History of Means: Wind, Benjamin, Arendt'  
 Claire Farago, University of Colorado at Boulder: 'Art History as Kunstwissenschaft: Contemporary Ethical Implications of an Epistemological Legacy'  
 Mitchell Frank, Carleton University: 'Recapitulation and Evolutionism in German Artwriting'  
 Christian Fuhrmeister, Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich: 'On the notion and topos of "objective scholarship" being subject to (and being interwoven with) the large context of political history, politics, ideology, and personal biographies in Germany ca. 1920 to 1950'  
 Joan Hart, independent scholar: 'Wölfflin and Weber'  
 Karen Lang, University of Southern California: 'Ernst Cassirer, Aby Warburg, and the Philosophy of Art History'  
 Evonne Levy, University of Toronto: 'Strands of political philosophy in Wölfflin and Gurlitt's Baroque of the 1880s'  
 Hubert Locher, U. of Stuttgart: 'The notion of "Art with a Capital A": Schlosser, Gombrich and Warburg'  
 Margaret Olin, Art Institute of Chicago: topic to be confirmed  
 Andrea Pinotti, U. of Milan: 'Body and Space: Schmarsow between Phenomenology and "Völkerpsychologie"'  
 Donald Preziosi, UCLA: 'Art History and / or Philosophy? A (More Than) German Dilemma'  
 Matthew Rampley, Teeside University: 'Art History and the Crisis in the Human Sciences: from Spengler to Sedlmayr'  
 Charlotte Schoell-Glass, Hamburg U.: 'Discourse of Purity and Cleanliness in Early 20th c. German Art History'  
 Paul Stirton, University of Glasgow: 'Lukacs' Sunday Circle/Antal, Hauser, Wilde and de Tolnay'  
 William Vaughan, Birkbeck College, University of London: 'Place vs. Race; Pevsner's Geistesgeschichte'  
 Lambert Wiesing, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena: 'The State of the Eyes: Konrad Fiedler and Heinrich Wölfflin'  
 Robert Williams, U. of California, Santa Barbara: 'Friedrich Schlegel and the Origins of Radical Cultural History'  
 Christopher Wood, Yale University: 'Strzygowski and Riegl in the United States'  
 Richard Woodfield, Nottingham Trent University: 'Ernst Gombrich's Contributions to Kritische Berichte'  
 Beat Wyss, Karlsruhe University: 'The Schopenhauer-galaxy'



Three general criteria that might help define what *Kunstwissenschaft* has meant at different times and places:

1. The succession of uses of the word *Kunstwissenschaft*
2. The naming of methods such as iconography
3. The appearance of texts that discuss principles of interpretation and hermeneutics



## I. The succession of uses of the word *Kunstwissenschaft*

A. The 1880s and 1890s: *Kunstwissenschaft* was a disciplinary denomination, marked by an emphasis on fine art, expression, and philosophical aesthetics over antiquarian, museum-oriented “positivist” research

(Parenthetically: who first used the term “positivism” to refer to some 19th c. art historical methods?)

B. The 1890s, through Wölfflin, Goldschmidt, and Vöge (continuing in Tikkänen, Vogelsang, up to Frankl, etc.): *Kunstwissenschaft* indicated comparative *Stilkritik* and other philosophically informed, aesthetically driven “scientific” research. In English: *art history* as opposed to *history of art*



## I. The succession of uses of the word *Kunstwissenschaft*, continued

C. In the 1910s and 1920s, *Kunstwissenschaft* was a trans-Atlantic practice: Arthur Kingsley Porter got an honorary doctorate in Marburg for *Kunstwissenschaft*; the journal *Art Studies* (1927) recognized transatlantic links\*

D. In 1933, according to Panofsky's narrative, *Kunstwissenschaft* came to the U.S. because of the migration of scholars; this would associate *Kunstwissenschaft* with iconography and textual studies\*\*

E. In the later 20th c., *Kunstwissenschaft* was associated with all of the above, especially in regard to the German art history and the school of Vienna. In this usage, it is everything before poststructuralism. This is a “generalized *Kunstwissenschaft*”: more on it later

\*This is argued in Kathryn Brush, “German *Kunstwissenschaft* and the Practice of Art History...,” *Marburger Jahrbuch* 26 (1999)

\*\* See Wikipedia (as of November 2007): “*Kunstwissenschaft* ist die Wissenschaft von der historischen Entwicklung der bildenden Künste und ihrer ikonographischen, ikonologischen wie auch materiellen Bestimmung”—the article discusses Rumohr, Waagen, Jantzen, Kugler, Hotho, Schnaase, Pinder, etc., but also includes Winckelmann



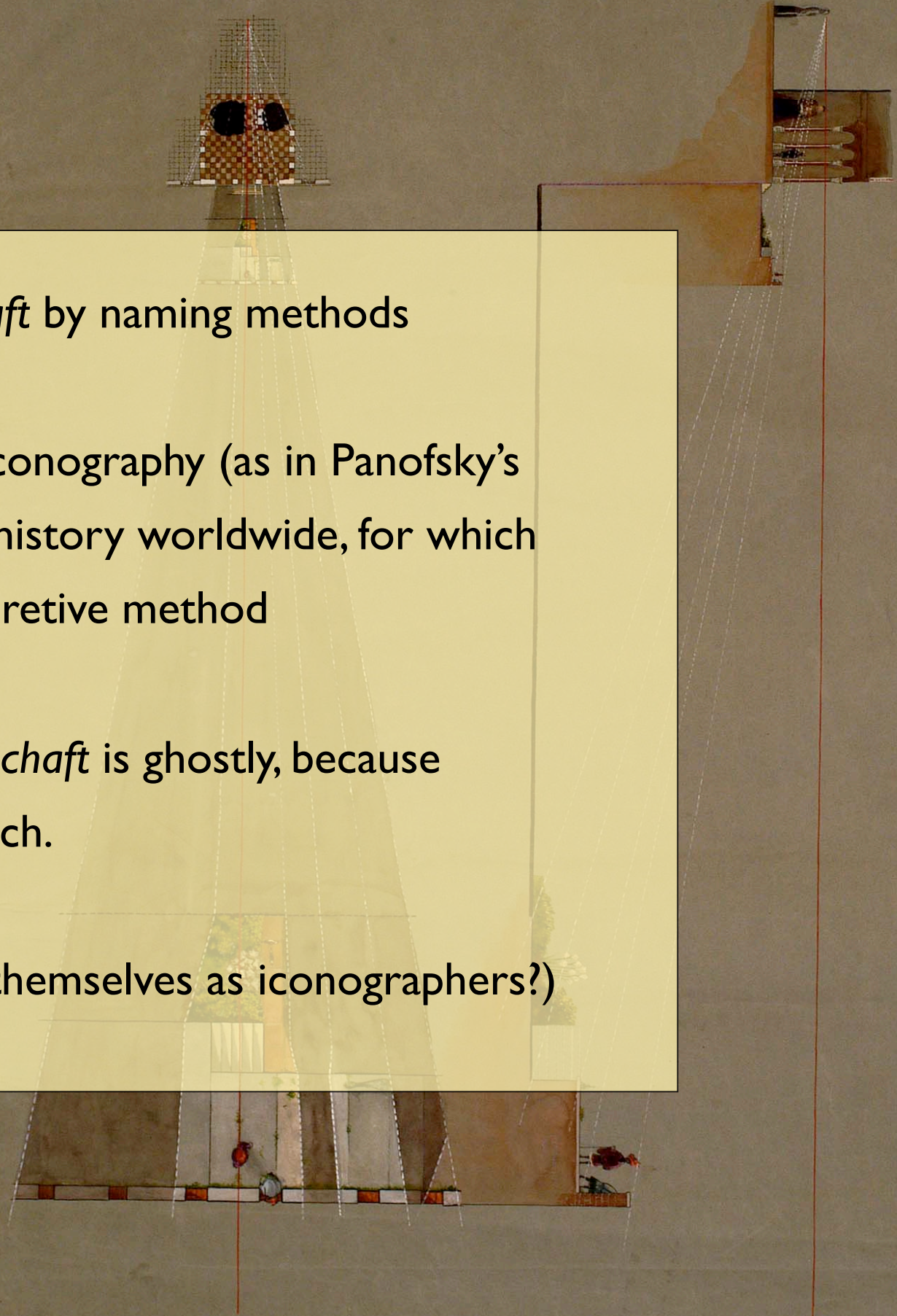
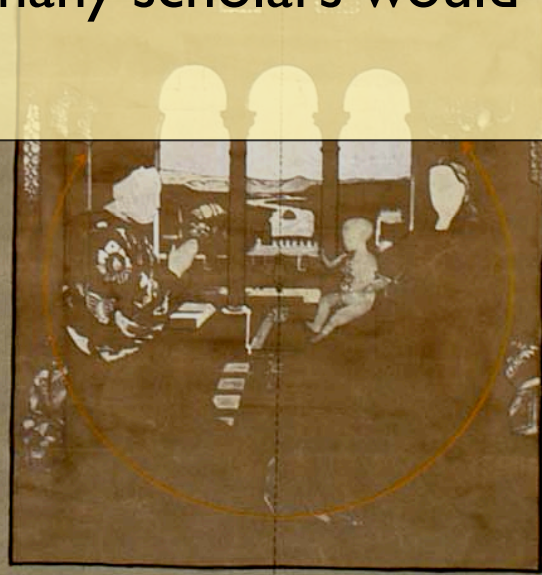
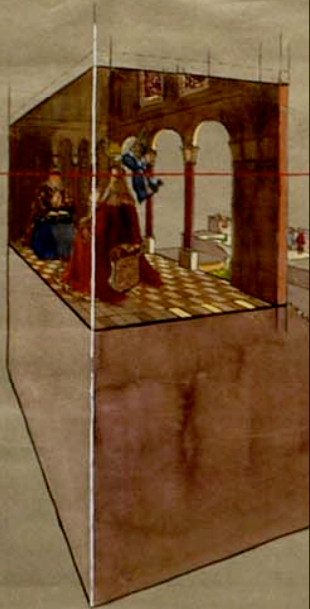


## 2. Locating *Kunstwissenschaft* by naming methods

If *Kunstwissenschaft* is identified with iconography (as in Panofsky's historiography), then it central to art history worldwide, for which iconography is often a “default” interpretive method

But at the same time this *Kunstwissenschaft* is ghostly, because iconography is seldom espoused as such.

(How many scholars would describe themselves as iconographers?)

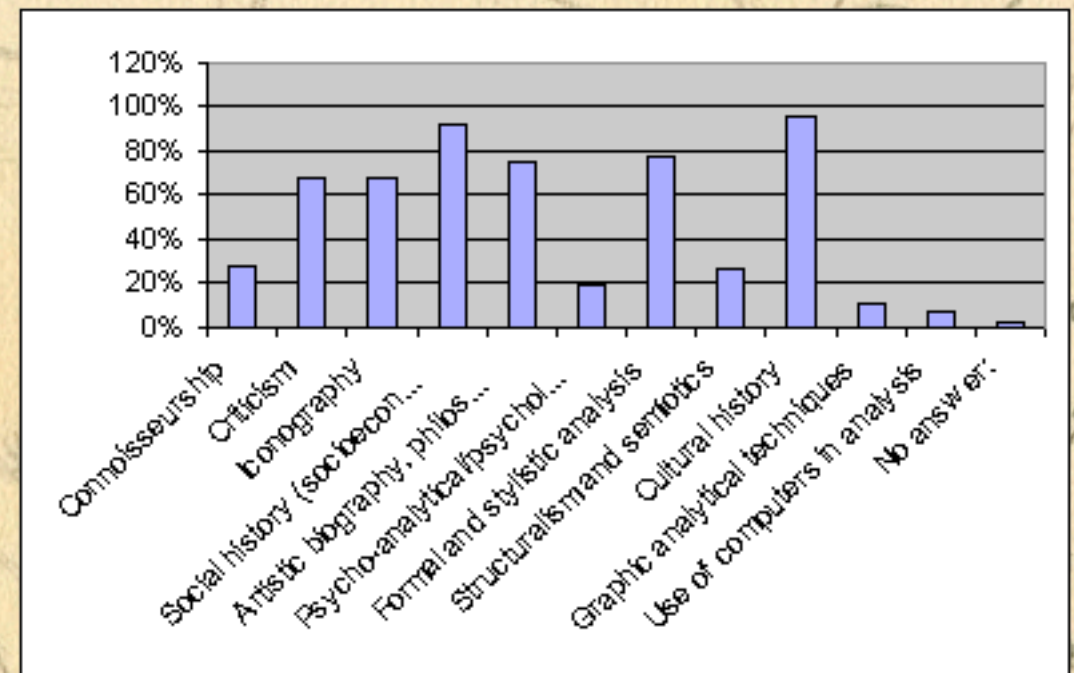




Parenthetically, that question can be partly answered: Christopher Bailey presented a small sample at the 2000 CIHA.

“We did not assume that one method had driven out another, although we were surprised by the extent to which the supposedly ‘old’ methods continue to be used. The working terminology... consisted of the following terms:

- \* Connoisseurship
- \* Criticism
- \* Iconography
- \* Social history (socioeconomic, political)
- \* Artistic biography, philosophy, theory
- \* Psycho-analytical/psychological
- \* Formal and stylistic analysis
- \* Structuralism and semiotics
- \* Cultural history
- \* Graphic analytical techniques
- \* Use of computers in analysis”





## 2. Locating *Kunstwissenschaft* by naming methods, continued

In our Stone Summer Theory Institute, Chicago, July 2007, Michael Holly suggested the metaphor of the broken vase: art history's fragments lie before us—semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminisms...

It could be said those names update Christopher Bailey's, and so they are something "after" *Kunstwissenschaft*, but it also seemed those names were something from the past, and art history is differently perceived now—as undifferentiated critical engagement, perhaps informed by performative writing



### 3. Defining *Kunstwissenschaft* by looking for texts that discuss principles of interpretation and hermeneutics

Relatively few recent scholars have formulated the “science” of art history in any explicit fashion:

- 1, 2. Julius Held (a student of Julius von Schlosser) and Jules Prown both disseminated (very different) rules of interpretation
3. Marilyn Lavin has a list of requirements for art historical argumentation that includes “clean and thorough interpretation”
4. Oskar Bätschmann propounds art historical hermeneutic principles (most recently in “A Guide to Interpretation: Art Historical Hermeneutics,” in *Compelling Visuality*, edited by Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg)

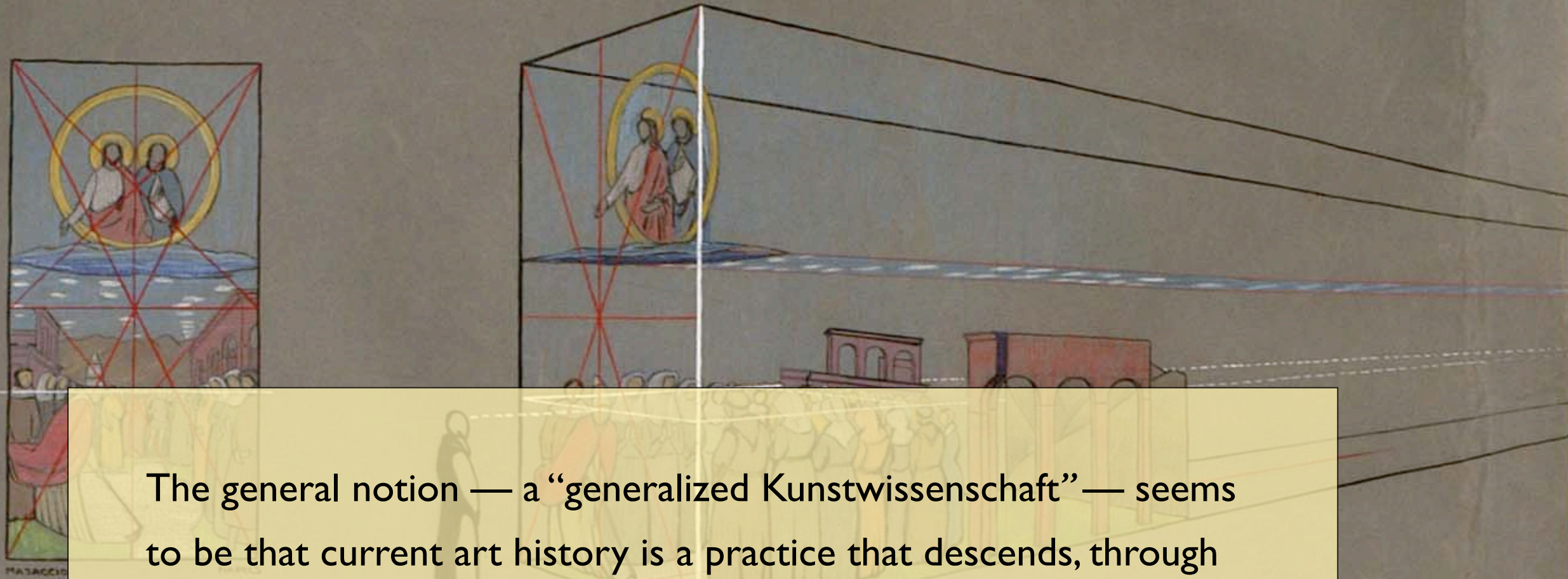


5. Michael Baxandall contemplates the elements of art historical interpretation in *Patterns of Intention* and elsewhere (“the avoidance of anachronism, coherence, and critical necessity”)

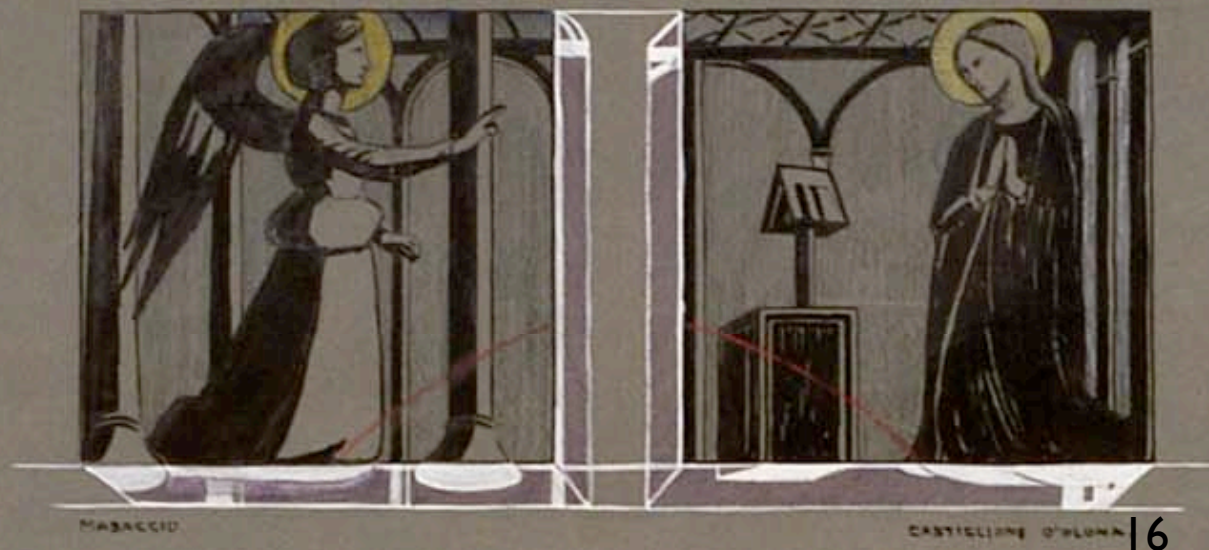
6. David Carrier has proposed other elements (making rules of interpretation explicit, etc.)—but he doubts art historians care about such “principles”

(These are discussed in the chapter “Meandering” in *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing*)





The general notion — a “generalized Kunstwissenschaft” — seems to be that current art history is a practice that descends, through certain (mainly undefined) elements of *Kunstwissenschaft*, through Hegel and Winckelmann to Vasari.



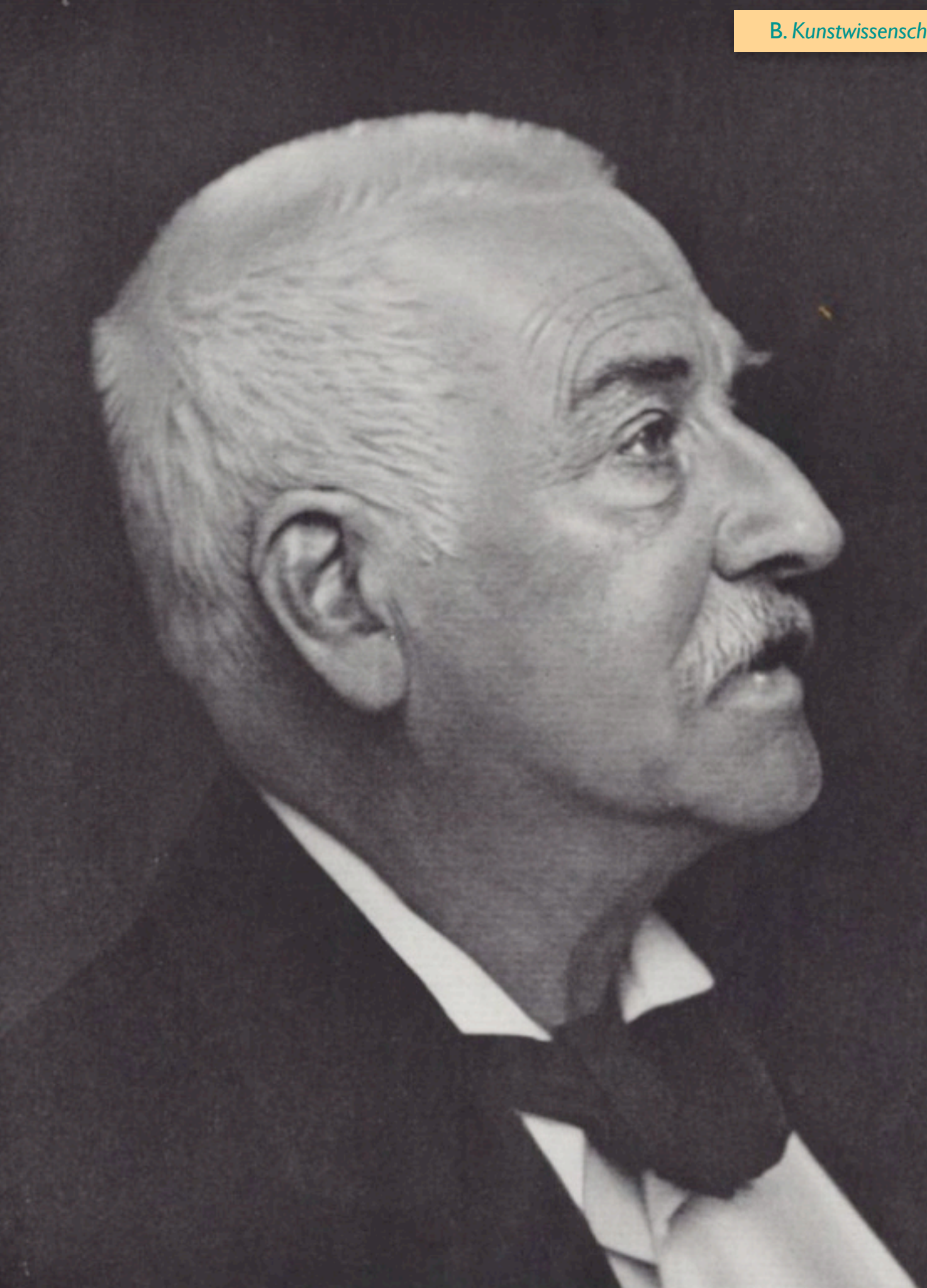


Thomas Puttfarcken has some interesting observations on this in one of his last texts, one written for *Renaissance Theory*, co-edited by Robert Williams, vol. 6 of *The Art Seminar* (New York: Routledge, 2008)

What is the “blueprint for art history,” he wonders. Is it something out of Vasari?

“However, in its recent usage the ‘Vasarian canon’ has acquired yet another sense, and that is as a supposed model, the blueprint, as it were, for the emerging academic discipline of art history. The underlying claim is that from its dominant role in the art academies, the ‘Vasarian canon’ simply extended its domination to the emerging academic discipline of the history of art, that it was there from the start and helped to define the discipline in a way which is still affecting our practices and our thinking today in a restrictive way. This is implied several times in the Cork discussions, and it is a claim with which I disagree completely.”





There is no trace of Vasari in Burckhardt, Puttfarcken says, and even less so in his immediate successors:

“To claim, as is done here [in the conversation in Cork], a direct (presumably canonical) tradition of writing art history linking Wölfflin and Riegl to Vasari seriously misrepresents the work of early *Kunstwissenschaft* in the generation following Burckhardt.”