

# Rhythm as Spatial Aesthetic Form (Part 3)

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## Rhythm as Matrix of the Visual Space (Riegl - 1901)

These analyses illustrate a very peculiar use of the concept of rhythm based on its historical interpretation. But that is not all. Just as the spread of optical rhythm in Late Antiquity should be placed in line with the previous struggle that brought it forth, it had also to be considered in view of the subsequent history it opened onto. The reduction of aesthetic expression to the plane and the spread of optical rhythm paradoxically announced the future domination of the third dimension that had been repressed during the whole Antiquity.

In the Arch of Constantine (313-315), for instance, the former “tactile plane” of representation was now chiseled by deep furrows that obliterated its continuity and transformed it into a purely “optic plane.”

As before, the latter [the coloristic impression] is that of a plane that is symmetrically arranged. But now, it is no longer a tactile plane that unfolds either without any interruption or, at most, that is slightly clouded by partial shades, but an optic plane, like that in which all things appear to our eye in distant vision. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 47, my trans.)

But at the same time, the figures gained an embryonic form of specific space, which, at this moment, was reduced to “a niche” and remained as “close as possible to the plane,” but which anticipated the future opening of Western art upon the “free unlimited space.”

Between the visible surface of the figures and the ground plane, a free sphere of space, as it were a niche, has inserted itself. It is just deep enough so that the figures seem to fill some space and be surrounded by free space, but still remain as close as possible to the plane. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 47, my trans.)

Another significant example of this dialectic can be found in the reliefs that ornate most of the sarcophagi made between the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. In one of them probably dating from the first decade of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, representing the farewell, departure, and

wounding of Adonis (today kept in the Museo Gregoriano Profano in the Vatican), the artist “still expected that the ancient plane composition, based on rhythm” would bring “the solution to the artistic task of unification.”

Nevertheless, this relief, which unites three different scenes, shows in a striking manner that artists still expected that the ancient plane composition, based on rhythm (of vertical and horizontals, interrupted by a few minor diagonals) and on the no less rhythmic distribution of light and dark within the plane, would bring the solution to the artistic task of unification, whereas modern art expected it from space. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 77-78, my trans.)

However, a concern for space was actually reflected everywhere. The figures were placed in a “spatial niche.” Some of them had recessed to the point that they had become “concave hollows.” The folds in their cloth were suggested by “deep-drilled, dark-shading and spatially revealing recesses between them.” Finally, the figures, including their heads, were “placed in a shady space.”

The spatial niche [*Raumnische*] into which the figures appear, instead of being completed only above and below, as on the previous sarcophagus, is also closed on the right and left sides. The bodies of the figures, again arranged in two rows one behind the other, have not only abandoned the former convex projection for the flat surface, but have partially sunk below this level, and become concave hollows (see Venus on the left and the bearded man next to her). The notion of materiality is now brought to the attention of the beholder exclusively by the visual effect of the folds (or rather the deep-drilled, dark-shading and spatially revealing recesses between them) which are combined into a rhythmic-schematic sequence [*zur rhythmisch-schematischer Reihenfolge*]. The figures, including the head, are placed in a shady space. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 77-78, my trans.)

In other words, if flat optic rhythm substituted the play of harmonic proportions—i.e. eurhythm which was related to mass composition—in the role of uniting the parts into a whole, it also already contained many new spatial elements that would eventually achieve the same task in modern art. It thus clearly anticipated the free arrangement of the figures in the infinite space.

The same dialectic could be traced in architecture. In the Minerva Medica temple, the cutting of windows into the mass structures implied a view from a distance as if all elements were on the same plane, but it simultaneously introduced, if still virtually, a new spatial dimension. It involved the opening of the architectural work onto “the infinite and immeasurable space,” which announced, Riegl suggested, no less than “a new art.”

From the point of view of a contemplation in distant vision, a new decorative system was created, based on the purely optical basis of the regular alternation of dark apertures with bright wall surfaces in between. [...] The windows which draw the sight out of the closed narrow space and project it into the open announce for the first time a new art which does not present the individual form in its isolated existence, nor in a mass composition with several similar forms, but in connection with the infinite and immeasurable space. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p.

Quite logically Riegl alluded, a few pages below, to the development of the linear perspective in the Quattrocento at the hands of Ghiberti and Donatello (p. 60 and 62) and suggested that the late Roman art had visibly anticipated the most recent artistic developments, especially Impressionism.

We have seen above that the Constantinian artists did not endorse this kind of arrangement [the rhythmic optical arrangement] out of sheer carelessness and coarseness, but driven by the very positive artistic intention to sharply separate figures and figure parts from each other and simultaneously evoke the visual impression of a rhythmic alternation of light and dark [*eines rhythmischen Wechsels von hell und dunkel*]. The fact that, we, Modern viewers are not satisfied with the result of such endeavor, present in the reliefs, must strike us doubly if we remember that our own most recent art, much like Late Roman art, is essentially based on visual perception, and indeed on the most momentary colored impression. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 49-50, my trans.)

The same “colorism” brought together, according to Riegl, the Late Ancient and the most Modern “artistic wills.” The only difference between them was that the latter emphasized the primacy of space upon the individuals while the former, on the contrary, insisted until the end on the primacy of the individuals upon space.

The Constantinian artistic will [*Kunstwollen*] seems almost identical with the most Modern one and yet its works provoke in us the very opposite of an artistic satisfaction! As a matter of fact, it is the relation to the space that upsets our Modern taste. This relation severely separates the forms from each other instead of connecting them together, as Modern art demands. The figures as well as their parts set themselves sharply against the dark space, while we demand that they blend in with their environment [*das Zusammenfließen mit der Umgebung*] and into the atmospheric space. As a matter of fact, the Constantinian art—just as previously the whole art of Antiquity—is still striving for a pure material individual form. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 50, my trans.)

According to Riegl, the particular emphasis on optical rhythm in Late Antiquity was thus literally transitional: it was both the result of a folding process of the visual plane under the pressure of an artistic will for visual space, and the origin of a subsequent unwrapping of this visual space.

The art historian, who has made objectivity his guiding principle, must confess from now on that Constantinian art (and late Roman art in general) was, with its coloristic conception of the individual forms located in an absolute depth, the necessary final phase of the transition of ancient art. This phase opened the way for a new conception of art, which had to make things and figures free from the space that separates them, and it opened it indeed by its consideration for space as such, although it was at first only forced and compelled. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 50, my trans.)

The momentary predominance of visual rhythm in Late Antiquity art had “ended the cycle” and cleared the way for “the representation of the individual shape in infinite space.”

In fact, the lack of beauty and the lifelessness, for which [the Roman art after the time of Marcus Aurelius] is often reproached, immediately becomes elements of progress and rising development as soon as one realizes that those two were the ones which overcome the ancient barrier of the negation of space, and which ended the cycle, clearing the way for the solution of a new task: the representation of the individual shape in infinite space. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 68, my trans.)

## **Rhythm as Core of the Late Antique Artistic Will and Worldview (Riegl - 1901)**

There has been plenty of discussion in the 1920s and again in the 1960s about the notion of *Kunstwollen* as elaborated in *Late Roman Art Industry* (for an enlightening assessment of these debates and a thorough bibliography, see Elsner, 2006). But, the commentators rarely mentioned the rhythm although it was clearly central in Riegl’s narrative. After having demonstrated, with so much care, that the Late Antique rhythm was both the result of a long folding process of the visual plane, and the paradoxical source of a new unwrapping dynamics introducing the principle of infinite space into Western art, Riegl wanted, in the conclusion of his book, to come back to the intermediary period between those two eras in which, he insisted, the rhythm had become the core of the *Kunstwollen* and even of the *Weltanschauung*.

Riegl began by recapitulating his findings. He first recalled his starting point: the continuity between the artistic will [*Kunstwollen*] of “the whole previous Antiquity” and that of “the late Roman era.” Both had sought, first and foremost, “to apprehend the individual form in its immediately obvious material appearance.” By contrast, Riegl noticed, “Modern art [was] less concerned with sharp separation between the individual phenomena than with their collective connection” (p. 209). But—and this must be again underlined—this particular aim of Antique art, whether in its Classical or Late period, had been achieved through rhythm. Rhythm was the “essential means” to integrate into wholes otherwise disparate phenomena.

The rhythm has been the essential means used by late Roman art—again, like the whole Antiquity—to achieve this aim. By means of the rhythm, that is to say, the serial repetition of similar phenomena [*der reihenweisen Wiederholung gleicher Erscheinungen*], one made the spectator, directly and convincingly, understand that the respective parts belonged to an individual homogeneous whole. And where several individuals were brought together, it was again the rhythm that could make it into a higher whole. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 209, my trans.)

As before, Riegl noticed, this predominance of rhythm demanded to give precedence to plane over depth.

But the rhythm, if it is to be immediately perceived by the observer, is necessarily bound to the plane. There is a rhythm of elements side by side and on top of each other, but not one behind the other [*aus Elementen nebeneinander und übereinander, aber nicht hintereinander*]. In the latter case, the individual forms and parts overlap and thus escape the immediate sensory perception of the beholder. As a result, an art that wants to arrange units into a rhythmic composition is compelled to compose in the plane and avoid the deep space. Like all Ancient art, the Late Roman period sought to present homogeneous individual forms through a rhythmic composition in the plane. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 209, my trans.)

This *historical* predominance of the plane did not mean however a *theoretical* disregard for space as such. On the contrary, Riegl considered the desire for space representation as the powerful force which was responsible for no less than the whole transformation of Ancient art and especially its final opening towards a new era.

By contrast, the late Roman artistic will [*Kunstwollen*] differs from that of the earlier artistic periods of Antiquity by the following feature—the farther the periods, the sharper the difference, and the closer they get to each other, the weaker the latter: this artistic will no longer contented itself with apprehending the single form in its two-dimensional extension but wanted to see it presented in its three-dimensional spatial achievement. Thus, a disconnection between the individual form and the universal visual plane [*Sehebene*] (ground) and its isolation from this ground plane [*Grundebene*] and other individual forms was necessarily associated to it. However, this not only freed the individual form but also the individual ground intervals between them, which had formerly been bound in the common ground plane [*Grundebene*] (visual plane [*Sehebene*]). (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 209, my trans.)

The “disconnection between the individual form and the universal visual plane” triggered by the introduction of the space resulted in “an emancipation of the intervals,” that is, a “promotion of the ground” to the dignity of an “artistic formal power.” But rhythm was again the means used for this promotion of the ground.

The complete isolation of the individual form thus entailed at the same time an emancipation of the intervals, the promotion of the hitherto neutral, formless ground to the dignity of an artistic formal power, that is, isolated in such way as to form an individual unity. Again, the means for this, as we already observed, was the rhythm, which implies that also the intervals had now to be rhythmically shaped. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 209-210, my trans.)

As a matter of fact, once they have been “emancipated,” the intervals have given rise to a “free space niche of a certain depth” which increased the optic contrast between the light, projecting forms and the dark shadows in between, which produced together “a colored rhythm of light and shadow, of black and white” (p. 210).

In addition to this short summary, Riegl elaborated further some points he had only mentioned in passing in the book, although without changing, in the final analysis, the binary metric concept he

had used so far.

First, he contrasted the “Classical rhythm,” which aimed at “structuring and articulating” the elements through oppositions such as “*contrapposto* or triangular composition”—i.e., we could add, according to the norm of eurhythmic proportions—, with the “Late Roman rhythm” that was based on “simplification and line-up [*Commassierung*]” (quadrangular composition)” (p. 210)—and, let us say, the rejection of eurhythmy.

Second, he differentiated between the “colored rhythm” that were typical of the middle and late Imperial periods and the “line rhythm” that he had observed in the last Ravenna sarcophagi made in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries and which marked, according to him, a late return to a tactile plane (p. 210).

The most interesting, if not the most convincing part of the conclusion was dedicated to a comparison of his own findings with the “aesthetic doctrine of Augustine” as exposed in various works, amongst others, the treatise in six books entitled *De musica* composed between 386 and 409 (p. 211-215). This section was designed as a passage towards a general assessment of the Ancient *Weltanschauung* – worldview which ended the book.

According to Augustine, Riegl noticed, since the world has been created by God, all creatures in it, “even the ugly ones,” bear “some traces (*vestigia*) of beauty.” The fine arts thus aim, “by the imitation (*imitatio*) of the natural things,” at enhancing the expression of these traces. Therefore, “the question is to understand what Augustine meant with those universally present ‘traces’ of beauty.” Riegl immediately answered his own question by recalling the two essential principles of the Antique *Kunstwollen* he had just presented: “*die Einheit (isoliertes Erfassen der Einzelform) und der Rhythmus* – the unity (the isolated capture of the individual form) and the rhythm” (p. 211-212).

The task of the artist was to render, as best he could, the individual formal achievement of the things he imitated, that is to say—Augustine agreed in this with the whole previous ancient tradition—their “symmetry,” “proportion,” and “order” (p. 213).

But Riegl found in Augustine the same conceptual articulation as in his own study of the Late Roman art: the main features of beauty actually depended on a higher means: the rhythm.

Symmetry and proportion are, however, only special manifestations of a higher universal means of the fine arts: the rhythm (*numerus*). For, according to Augustine, the latter is the means by which the unity, that is to say, the individual form-closure of the natural things, is brought to a clear expression in the work of art. Augustine strongly emphasizes its significance [...]. All other marks of beauty in the works of the fine arts (to the already mentioned symmetry and proportion, one must add the order) are only special expressions of the rhythm. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 213, my trans.)

Augustine, Riegl noticed, demanded that all windows of a building “be of the same size” or, if they are not, that they be designed so that “the window of medium size would be larger than the small

one in the same proportion as it was itself respectively to the large one.” In the first case, he said, Augustine praised “the rhythm of uniform series [*der gleichmäßigen Reihung*]” and, in the second, “the rhythm of opposition [*des Contrastes*]” that was illustrated, for instance, “in the baths of Diocletian (298-306) or the basilica of Maxentius (312)” (p. 213). Similarly, Augustine considered that “the rhythmic distribution of black and light, shadow and luminosity” constituted a major artistic goal in painting (p. 214).

Moreover, Riegl continued, Augustine reflected both in “his ethics and aesthetics” the “emancipation of the interval” which had resulted from the progressive “emancipation of space” throughout Antiquity. In other words, in emphasizing the ethical and theological dimension of the rhythm, Augustine’s philosophy was in tune with the *Kunstwollen* of his epoch.

The emancipation of the intervals is one of the fundamental principles of Augustine’s ethics and aesthetics. One finds it in countless places and it has rendered to him great services, especially in his struggle against the Manichaeans. The latter has given him the opportunity to demonstrate, among other things, the *raison d’être*, indeed the necessity of the ugliness, the formless. Evil is merely a *privatio* of the good, the ugly only the interval of the beautiful; they are just as necessary as, in the language, the intervals between the words, or, in the music, the intervals between the notes. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 214, my trans.)

Although it could seem at first brilliant and convincing, this attempt at correlating Augustine’s contribution with the fine arts of his epoch only shows the limits of Riegl’s catch-all historicist methodology. He obviously projected his own limited concept of rhythm on the works of the one theoretician in the Late Antiquity who had developed the most sophisticated theory of rhythm.

If it is true that Augustine, who had renounced both the hard dualism of the Manichaeists as well as the soft dualism turning into monism of the neo-Platonists, considered that all creatures, “even the ugly ones,” bear “some traces of beauty,” if we can accept that he saw—late in his life as a matter of fact—art as a way to get closer to God, I am not sure that he ever compared ugliness in fine arts with the intervals between the words or the notes in poetry and music—philological evidence is cruelly missing here in Riegl’s account. In any case, “traces” simply cannot, for mere logical reasons, be compared with “intervals.” While the former involve continuity, the latter entail opposition.

By contrast, we can firmly say that whereas Riegl reduced rhythm, first, to an optic phenomena and, second, to a mere alternation of contrasted units, be they aligned in a series or arranged in symmetrical blocs, Augustine starting from a banal rhetoric and metric definition—i.e. after all from language—expanded it into a full religious system connecting, from top to bottom and bottom to top, the whole creation, the soul, and their Creator—and all these under the aegis of an *unmetric* conception of rhythm (for a more complete view, see vol. 1, chap. 9). Augustine’s view on rhythm was quite far from that attributed to him by Riegl.

In the last pages of his book, Riegl generalized once more his findings, this time to the whole history of Antiquity. Needless to say, that this section, swiftly sketched in a very few pages (p. 215-217), was even more fragile than the previous one concerning Augustine. It consisted in a bold extension of the conclusions he had drawn from observation: the rule of rhythm, that he had found in the late period

in almost all artistic artifacts he had analyzed, had pervaded not only the work of the most famous writer and theologian of the time, but also the whole culture of the era, its *Weltanschauung*.

The *Kunstwollen* was indeed only an aesthetic principle that regulated “man’s relationship to the sensibly perceptible appearance of things” and “the way in which man wants to see things shaped or colored,” in other words his artistic perception and expression. But, since man was not only “a passive, sensory recipient, but also a desiring, active being who therefore wishes to interpret the world,” the *Kunstwollen* was an element of a larger “*Weltanschauung*,” that is to say a worldview including “religion, philosophy, science, as well as state, and law” (p. 215).

As it was customary in 19<sup>th</sup> century, Riegl detected in the evolution of the Ancient worldview “three clearly distinguishable periods,” in which he found again the same overall development of the principle of rhythm, first being almost invisible during the most remote periods, then reaching full expression in the Middle and Late Antiquity, before finally disappearing due to the sudden dissolution, at the end of Antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages, of “purely mechanical relationships between the things” and their replacement with “universal chemical relationships, weaving, so to speak, the space in all directions”—a conclusion that confirmed his idea of an emancipation of space which laid the ground for the arts of the Modern era.

The change in the Late-Antique worldview was a transitory phase of the human mind, which was necessary so that it could shift from the idea of purely mechanical (in the narrower sense) relationships between the things, serial and, so to speak, projected into the plane, to that of universal chemical relationships weaving, so to speak, the space in all directions. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 216, my trans.)

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Scholars interested in Riegl’s aesthetics have usually focused on his emphasis on optic perception, distant sight, and space. Riegl’s fascination for rhythm in art has therefore been reduced—when it was taken into account—to a psychology-inspired doctrine. But the evidence gathered in this chapter shows that, if this view is not totally untrue, we must complement it by paying more attention to Riegl’s historicist side. From this viewpoint, artistic rhythms were determined by a long-term evolution which covered the whole Antiquity, became finally mature during the last centuries of the Western Roman Empire, and announced some of the basic features of the new artistic forms that emerged at the end of the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance. It spanned over the whole history of the West.

This new conception of art history and rhythm entailed a series of obvious problems. Riegl’s view could be deemed at best complex, at worst paradoxical. First, it joined two virtually conflicting perspectives: the first was based on the latest positivistic psychology and its related empiricism; the second on a completely different trend of thought that had grown throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mostly on idealist bases: historicism. Furthermore, Riegl’s own brand of the latter was a curious cross between the old Hegelian philosophy of History, from which he borrowed the notion of dialectical development based on struggle between forces, and the newer doctrine of Wilhelm



Dilthey (1833-1911) who, more and more openly in the last decades of the century, opposed the idea of a universal unitary development under the aegis of the Spirit by insisting on the incommensurable specificity of each period and each *Weltanschauung* (Iggers, 1983).

Those problems did not, in fact, attract as much attention as another set of questions pertaining to some of the most essential points in Wölfflin's and Schmarsow's perspective.

1. Concerning the method, contrary to Wölfflin and Schmarsow, Riegl did not conceive of rhythm as the effect of the movement of the observer, or that implied by the layout of the art work, but as mere regular optical alternation. Rhythm was a *Wechsel* - alternation or *Wiederkehr* - recurrence of bright and shady, light and dark parts, on a plane observed from a distance.

2. Furthermore, he did not differentiate between *Regelmässigkeit* - regularity, and *Gesetzmässigkeit* - lawfulness. While his critics were deeply influenced by the musical theorists, which, in the second half of the century, increasingly differentiated between rhythm and meter, Riegl never mentioned any of them. By contrast, he used the concept of rhythm in a strictly metric way inspired by physiology and living science. As in *Problems of Style*, rhythm was, in *Late Roman Art Industry*, clearly thought of within the frame of the Platonic metric paradigm.

3. Concerning the object, the arts themselves, he recognized that architecture aimed at "*Raumbildung* - space building," in other words, that she could be called a "*Raumgestalterin*." But we remember that he immediately balanced this view with Semper's emphasis on "*Raumgrenzen* - space limits" and "*Massencomposition* - mass composition." The result of the conflict between these two opposite goals had to be assessed, he argued, in each historical period. And as far as Antiquity was concerned, even if space was the subterranean driving force under the whole development of Ancient art, "space could not be the subject of artistic creation" and Ancient architecture emphasized the "limit-building" at the expense of the "creation of space."

4. In general, he contended, space was not in this period a relevant category because it was still repressed by the primacy of the visual plane. Even in the Middle Ages, it still had little significance. Space had become plainly active in Western art—and therefore worth studying—only from the *Quattrocento* on.

These theses, naturally, immediately triggered a severe critique from the Swiss-German school.

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