

Rhythm as Aesthetic Commonplace (Part 1)

Wednesday 12 December 2018, by [Pascal Michon](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Between 1900 and 1914, rhythm became a commonplace in aesthetics and art history. In addition to Riegl's and Schmarsow's general studies which embraced large sections of Near-Eastern and Western history, it spread in numerous specialized fields devoted to more limited periods. The time had come for an application of the concepts which had just been invented. Since the Vienna school was weakened by the sudden death of Riegl in 1905, most of this new works however were carried out by students of Schmarsow or Wölfflin at Leipzig and Berlin universities.

Romanesque Architectural Rhythm (Pinder - 1904-1905)

Wilhelm Pinder (1878-1947) was among the first young scholars to use Schmarsow's theoretical suggestions to study a specific form of art. In 1904-1905, he published his PhD thesis under Schmarsow's supervision, a study in two volumes entitled *Zur Rhythmik romanischer Innenräume in der Normandie - On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*. Since he was eventually deeply compromised with the Nazi regime, I will return to him in another volume.

In his introduction, Pinder listed the German scholars who, in the 19th century, had used the concept of rhythm to describe architecture. He swiftly cited Schnaase and Semper, reproaching the first for having based his thought on "poetics" [*Dichtkunst*] and, as a result, limited rhythm to "metrics" [*als metrische*] (1904, p. 2). By contrast, according to him, decisive contributions had been brought about during the last decades by psychologists such as Meumann, Herbart, Lotze, Mach, and Wundt (p. 3-4). Even if the scope of the concept was still debated—was rhythm as fit for describing architecture as for poetry and music?—all agreed, Pinder claimed, on a few aspects: the rhythm had something to do with "temporality," "subjectivity," "partitioning of a particular course."

Everywhere the temporality, everywhere the subject, everywhere the partitioning of a particular course [*die Zerlegung eines Verlaufs*] according to its situational conditions! (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 4, my trans.)

The rhythm, Pinder noticed, "is a tremendous psychic power." To substantiate this assertion, he cited Schlegel but also more recent essays by Karl Bücher (1847-1930) and Margaret Keiver Smith (1856-1934) (see next chapter) on the power of rhythm to facilitate work (p. 5). He then, without explicitly referring to him, endorsed one of Schmarsow's most essential concepts: rhythm was, first and foremost, the result of an experience. But he elaborated this idea a little further: rhythm was not only experience, it necessitated to be performed to develop its power, just as a music score. A pragmatic view was introduced which, due to the rise of formalist and structuralist views, was to be forgotten around the middle of the 20th century before being rediscovered in the 1960s by Benveniste and Austin.

The work of art becomes reality only when it is experienced—no matter whether, in the most extreme case, the creator himself is the only one who enjoys it. A designed space, in which no one stands, is artistically realized just as little as a musical work that is not played. The material that forms it—like the music book—only brings information to the recipient. Both have to be used—then the artwork materializes. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 5-6, my trans.)

Through the experience, the artistic rhythm transmitted to the subject its “arrangement” and, so to speak, “bonded” or configured his “ideas.”

When we look at forms, we seek the psychic process that they initiate. The meaningful arrangement [*die sinnvolle Anordnung*] of forms in the work of art is the meaningful arrangement of ideas in man. Here is the temporal process in the subject. He stays bonded in the work of art: [in] the event of his perception. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 6, my trans.)

Pinder concluded on an idea that was to become commonplace in the first 20th century: through rhythm, artists—and it was to be soon adapted to advertisement and propaganda practitioners—can manipulate people’s ideas by giving them “energy,” “pleasure,” and “direction.”

If regular [*gleichmässige*] impressions occur in the latter [the perception], the demand for rhythmization has already been raised. And the artist uses it as an elementary power. He performs a rhythmization of the fundamentals themselves [*in den Grundzügen selbst*]. He brings energy to the one who feels pleasure—he makes him profit. The rhythm is created by the will of the creator, guided by his style. The artist exercises a power by directing the ideas. One of his means of power is the rhythm. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 5-6, my trans.)

The case with music, he noticed, was clear-cut but was it also true for architecture? As Schmarsow, he implicitly rejected Riegl’s emphasis on the visual plane and substituted it with the movement of the beholder in space and the particular visual experience it triggered: due to the limitation of the sensory apparatus, the “plurality of images” had to be “ordered,” i.e. rhythmized.

While painting *opposes* us with its planar appearance, while sculpture *opposes* its bodily works to our own body, the architectural structure *surrounds* us. The interior encompasses us with a large number of visual images that contribute to its artistic unity without forming it in detail. In humans, a plurality of such image impressions must be ordered [*geordnet*]. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 7, my trans.)

Yet, the arrangement of the sensory impressions did not result, as in painting and sculpture, from a painted surface or a carved object facing the beholder but from a particular configuration of space

surrounding him and imposing upon him its own artistic arrangement.

These impressions do not order themselves according to a *counterpart* [ein Gegenüber], but *surround* the human being by close and remote stimuli. They keep him *moving within* the bounds of the designed [space]. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 7-8, my trans.)

However, more precisely than Schmarsow who took only into account a strolling observer integrating his impressions by means of his memory and imagination, architectural rhythm was to be observed, as in music, from a position moving along a straight line which represented time in space.

If the same kind of connection [as in music] is also to be exercised between impressions which essentially serve the spatial intuition, then they too must not refer to any arbitrary line of subjective movement but to a straight line. If, on any stretch of space, a rhythm, clearly and intimately related to pure temporality, is to form, then those movements, which follow the depth axes of the spatial visual field, must meet on only *one* axis, and form a *straight* line at their starting points. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 9, my trans.)

The movement of the perceiving body along this straight line allowed to experience not only “space as time,” that is, to introduce temporality in it, but also time as space. The time, which is void by nature, was filled in with “a rhythm of spatial representations.”

The space is experienced as time, in a determinate one-dimensional system [*Zusammenhang*]. The body movement carries the experience, and the impressions provided by the sense of sight can rhythmize the course of events by filling in with a rhythm of spatial representations the initially empty time of movement. For what is strung together into regular mental formations is no longer the *sensations* of the eye [...] but the *representations* of the forms which have been reached on the basis of the sensations received on the line of movement. A rhythmic series of representations has arisen, on the basis of that *one* dimension that embraces the totality of the stand- and viewpoints. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 10, my trans.)

Rhythm was then defined as mere “alternating series” of spatial sections “by means of spatial signs” on the model provided for music through “stress- and time-change” by Karl Reinhold Köstlin (1819-1894) in his *Asthetik* (1863-1866).

The [architectural rhythmic setting] corresponding to that produced [in music] by a discontinuous series of sound is not the uniformly [*gleichmässig*] divided surface of space [*Raumfläche*], but the continuous surface or mass [*zusammenhängende Fläche oder Masse*]—a uniform wall of lime, for instance. When someone, who surveys it with his senses, arranges it into sections by means of spatial signs, he performs similarly as in the partition [*Sonderung*] of a series of sounds by stress- or time-change. This should be called rhythm. The “partition of the undifferentiated into equal sections,” of which Köstlin speaks, has always been, as far as *space* is concerned, an alternating

series [*eine alternierende Reihung*]. In its simple cases, therefore, the latter will be regarded as a rhythm by the following historical investigation. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 13, my trans.)

In the West, due to the persistence of the basilica plant throughout the Middle Ages, the rhythm was to be observed by moving on the middle axis of the nave from the porch to the choir, where the mass was performed in the direction of Jerusalem (p. 14 sq.).

Now the basilica plant has proved to be the most enduring of all early Christian constructions. Until the end of the Gothic, it dominated the Middle Ages. Throughout centuries of history, a whole field of research has been provided to the observer of rhythm in a great variety of creative achievements regarding the nave partition. In many, indeed most cases, the movement in the nave does not lead directly to the choir but is diverted into a transept. But it is always about giving the human being an aesthetic goal on a line of movement. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 17, my trans.)

The comparison between the rhythm of the various naves could therefore support the specification of the concept of Romanesque “style” in architecture.

All of the nave divisions have in common something essential that unites them into a unified group for research. The development of rhythmic laws can become a means for determining the style. Therefore, the Romanesque architecture of Normandy, an art of a people fostered by nature, embodied in a number of well-preserved works, provides a particularly favorable example of this particular sense of style. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 17-18, my trans.)

As far as Romanesque architecture was concerned, a crucial question was consequently to understand the development of what he called, at the beginning of the first volume, “*die Gruppierungsgrundsätze* - the grouping principles” (1904, p. 1) which were responsible for the formation of the rhythm.

In the analytical portion of the study, Pinder chronologically examined different spaces of Romanesque churches. I won't go here into detail and will limit myself to a very few examples.

The oldest building considered in chapter 2 (p. 20-36) was the late Carolingian *Basse Œuvre* located just behind the present-day Gothic choir of the cathedral of Beauvais - France and dated to the 10th century. Pinder tried to understand “what information” was to be found in the structure of the building itself and that was to be perceived by the viewer during his progression toward the choir.

What information for the sensory movements of the subject are now contained in this objective existence [*in diesem objektiven Bestand*]? For a more convenient answer to the question—after

the discussion of the introduction—the experience in the nave may be presented as a forward promenade [*Vorwärtswandeln*]. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 21, my trans.)

The description that follows clearly shows Pinder's reduction of rhythm to a mere "regular succession" or "alternating sequence" of sensations triggered by the observation of contrasted spaces.

The pillars follow each other at equal intervals. The beholder walks along and, next to him, open and close spaces alternate regularly [*regelmässig wechseln*]. The sensation [*Vorstellung*] of being close to a body alternate regularly [*regelmässig wechselt*] in him with that of having it lifted when looking into the side space. And through their repetition and similarity, these formations always produce the same sensations. This regular succession of sensations constitutes an alternating sequence, a simple form of rhythm [*Dieser regelmässige Vorstellungswechsel ist eine alternierende Reihung, eine einfache Form von Rhythmus*]. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1904, p. 22, my trans.)

I reproduce here Tobias Teutenberg's recent and excellent description of Pinder's following analysis.

[In addition], he finds that this impression is supported by other factors, such as the momentum of the nave arches or the regular pattern of the windows in the clerestory. Absent in the *Basse Œuvre*, however, are strong vertical accents which, in many Romanesque and most Gothic churches, were provided by slim responds and huge pillars. Hence, the rhythmic energy of Beauvais' late Carolingian basilica stays comparatively low but, as a starting point for Pinder's extensive studies on the history of rhythm in medieval Norman architecture, the church plays nonetheless an essential role. (Teutenberg, 2018, p. 169)

In chapter 3, Pinder devoted two sections out of three to the development of the particular "*Gruppierungsform* - grouping form" called "*die Travée* - the bay" (1904, p. 37-60). He first dealt with "the origin of the bay" in the abbey church Notre-Dame of Bernay, the construction of which began before 1017, was resumed in 1025, and completed between 1060-1072 (p. 37 *sq.*). The second section described the appearance of "the bay" in relation with "the division of the wall" and its spreading "in the second half of the 11th century" (p. 44 *sq.*).

At the beginning of the second volume, Pinder explained that the 11th century witnessed a radical shift from the early basilical rhythm based on the mere repetition of similar elements—mainly columns—to a novel form of rhythm based on the repetition of structural groups—the bays—composed of dissimilar elements.

The introductory preliminary investigation has established that in the 11th century two main forms of rhythmic arrangement [*der rhythmische Anlage*] dominated Normandy's architecture: one—in the early Christian fashion—binding, based on their similarity, the individual forms in series

different from each other; the other—turned toward the future—loosening the bonds between similar elements and forming from manifold elements groups similar to each other. It has been said that the latter direction belonged to the future. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1905, p. 1, my trans.)

Compared with the most simple rhythm which characterized the old Roman and Christian basilicas, that of Romanesque churches was much more elaborate due principally to the partition of the nave itself into successive compartments visually separated by pillars, adjacent piers, or engaged columns rising up to the transverse arches supporting the vault, the design of which was an architectural unit repeated in each bay. The oldest building built according to this new rhythmic arrangement was the abbey church of Jumièges in Normandy. It was started in 1040 and inaugurated by William the Conqueror only one year after the battle of Hastings in 1067.

By the middle of the century the formation of the bay [*Travée*] had been completed, and already secured in the second half by the introduction of “adjacent piers” [*Dienste*] [rising to support transverse arches]. To this period—between 1040 and 1067—belongs the oldest three-storey structure of Normandy, the abbey church of Jumièges. It rests so decidedly, like none of the smaller buildings of that time, on the bay [structure], in the sense of a gathering into groups of the echoing energy [*im Sinne der zu Gruppen gesammelten Wiederhaltensenergie*]. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1905, p. 1, my trans.)

In the second volume published in 1905, Pinder painstakingly described the increasing complexity of the Norman Romanesque architectural rhythm—without changing its fundamental nature as alternation of spatial signs—with the introduction of “galleries” as in St. Etienne in Caen, in the Abbaye aux Hommes, started in 1063 (chap. 1), then of “a triforium” as in the Mont St. Michel started in 1060 and expanded in 1085 or 1094 (chap. 2), of “a vault” first covering the choir as in St. Nicolas in Caen started in 1083 then the whole nave at the beginning of the 12th century (chap. 3). He finally devoted the last chapter to discuss the differences with but also what had been transmitted to the rhythm of later Gothic constructions as in the Lisieux Cathedral built between 1170 and the middle of the 13th century (chap. 4).

The conclusion summarized his most important findings concerning the spread in the Norman Romanesque architecture of the main “grouping form”: the bay, the transformation of the “form of movement” induced by the reconfiguration of the inner space, and finally the particular “energy” induced by the successive domination of the depth, the width, and finally the height.

In the development of the architectural rhythm, this treatise has followed the history of a grouping form [*Gruppierungsform*]: the bay, whose origins and first realizations were described in the “preliminary investigation” [the volume published in 1904]. The dossier that resulted is so rich that it requires to be looked at from different angles to be fully appreciated. Should we concentrate only on the history of the bay: it aroused as a line, developed into a means for dividing surfaces, became the dominant cubic value [*als kubischer Wert*], and was finally dissolved into a delicate inner link. Should we observe only the history of the form of movement: it began as a juxtaposition of parallel lanes, transformed into a succession of composite groups, ended up as a construction striving for proportioned units of space. Should we measure only the

energy of the different dimensions: in the beginning the *depth* of the main space was the immediate leading dimension—the limited *width* of the wall body made it [the energy] for some times of indirect significance—on the high point of its energy this too [the width] was overcome, partly with the help of the depth, in favor of the *height*. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1905, p. 59, my trans.)

As his master Schmarsow, Pinder then came back to the effect on the subject of these transformations of the space configuration in the Romanesque churches of Normandy. Through the successive perceptions accumulated along the axis of the nave, the objective rhythms contained in the architecture had significant subjective effects on the people walking in it.

What did this transformation mean for the subject? It has been treated as a *rhythmic* history. It is based on a one-dimensional stretch: the totality of the starting points for the orientation lines in the subject, their localization in space on the nave axis, the succession of orientation experiences in time. This coincidence of spatial points with temporal ones in the subject, this threefold unity [of depth, width, and height] founded the *possibility* of an architectural rhythm, [i.e.] allowed the articulation and animation of the temporal process through the ordering by the spatial impressions. (*On the Rhythm of Romanesque Interiors in Normandy*, 1905, p. 59-60, my trans.)

Pinder was aware of the limitations of his work. He interestingly noticed that a survey of the exterior configuration, especially that of the various façades of the church, should be done one day based on the same method to complete his description (p. 62). He also suggested that the relation between the increasing complexity of the architectural rhythm in Norman Romanesque churches and the “strong religious excitement that dominated this creative period” was to be studied with care. Although he did not elaborate on this, he claimed that there certainly was a close link between the new architectural rhythmic and the renovated Christianity that was developing over the same period (p. 63).

[Next chapter](#)