

Rhythm as Spatial Aesthetic Form (Part 2)

Friday 14 December 2018, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Rhythm as Result of the Folding of the Visual Plane \(Riegl - 1901\)](#)
- [Rhythm as Folds in the Visual Plane \(Riegl - 1901\)](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Rhythm as Result of the Folding of the Visual Plane (Riegl - 1901)

In 1901, Riegl published his most famous work: *Spätromische Kunstindustrie - Late Roman Art Industry*. The book focused on the much neglected, “transitional,” period of the Late Antiquity that was commonly considered as having witnessed the “collapse” of classical standards under the “barbaric” pressure of the Germanic peoples. Instead, faithful to the aesthetic relativism presented in *Stilfragen - Problems of Style*, he approached artistic change in Late Antiquity not as a symptom of decay—“there is no such thing in history” (p. 7), “everything flows steadily forwards” (p. 10)—but as a result of the interaction between the legacy of previous periods and an entirely new *Kunstwollen*.

As in his previous book, Riegl rejected the materialist account of art proposed by the Semperians, and substituted it with a reformed idealism. In each particular period, he claimed, the artistic expression is motivated by a singular active drive, *ein Kunstwollen*, through which art becomes, not an imitation of reality, but the expression of a desired world. Consequently, art historians should not concentrate on the material and technical substrate but on the succession of historically contingent drives that permeate all artistic productions of the successive eras with similar formal features closely connected with the contemporary “worldview.”

All human will is directed toward a satisfactory shaping of man’s relationship to the world, within and beyond the individual. The plastic *Kunstwollen* regulates man’s relationship to the sensibly perceptible appearance of things. Art expresses the way man wants to see things shaped or colored, just as the poetic *Kunstwollen* expresses the way man wants to imagine them. Man is not only a passive, sensory recipient, but also a desiring, active being who wishes to interpret the world in such a way (varying from one people, region, or epoch to another) that it most clearly and obligingly meets his desires. The character of this will is contained in what we call the worldview (again in the broadest sense): in religion, philosophy, science, even statecraft and law. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 215, trans. Wood)

Due to his previous research on ornaments, Riegl wanted first to focus on “*Kunstgewerbe - arts and crafts*” (p. 11), that is on small artifacts as fibulas, broaches, belt buckles, all kinds of jewels,

produced in series for a large market covering, late into the 7th century, the whole Mediterranean basin. However, since these artifacts had been considered by most previous historians, quite inaccurately according to him, as directly reflecting the “barbarization [*Barbarisierung*]” of the Roman culture during the “Migration Period” [*Völkerwanderung*] (p. 11), he finally chose to begin his study with three less controversial kinds of arts: architecture with buildings such as the Roman Pantheon, pagan and Christian basilicas, and monuments as the Arch of Constantine; sculpture with reliefs on sarcophagi, busts of emperors, and ivory diptyches; and, finally, if not painting, which were lacking during the late Roman era, at least mosaics such as those decorating some of the churches and palaces in Ravenna and Rome.

Concerning architecture, Riegl first agreed with Schmarsow: architecture aimed at “*Raumbildung* – space building.” But he immediately complemented his view with Semper’s emphasis on “*Raumgrenzen* – space limits” and “*Massencomposition* – mass composition,” i.e. a composition of several individual forms into a higher unit. The former primarily concerned “the inside of the building,” the latter “the outside” (p. 16). We will see that it also concerned different periods.

But, since the earliest rise of mankind to civilization, has the creation of space [*Raumbildung*] not been the aim of every architecture that went beyond the making of a mere monument? Architecture is, after all, a utilitarian art, whose purpose has always been the creation of limited spaces offering to man the possibility of free movement. But as this definition already tells us, the task of architecture is divided into two parts, which necessarily complement and condition each other, but which also somehow oppose each other: the creation of a (closed) space as such and the creation of the limits of this space [*die Schaffung des (geschlossenen) Raumes als solchen und die Schaffung der Raumgrenze*]. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 16, my trans.)

Thus, contrarily to what Schmarsow was to claim a few years later, Riegl did not entirely reject movement and bodily experience but he tried to consider them in connection with the outlines of the building itself. There was actually, he noticed, two extreme possibilities for architects: the first was to form kinds of very large sculptures; the second to create spaces for the free movement of human beings. Consequently, art historians should not limit themselves to one of these two poles and had to assess “how Antiquity, especially in its final phase, addressed this opposition.”

Thus the possibility of implementing unilaterally only one part of the task at the expense of the other has been open from the beginning to human artistic practice. It was possible to let the spatial outlines dominate in such a way that the architectural work did become a sculptural work. On the other hand, one could expand the spatial outlines to such a distance that the thought of the infinity and immeasurability of free space was awakened in the spectator. The question now is how Antiquity, especially in its final phase, addressed this opposition. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 16, my trans.)

According to Riegl, in Antiquity, the “ultimate goal” of artistic creation, the most important principle of its *Kunstwollen*, was to “reproduce the external things [be they objects, animals, or humans] in their distinct material individuality” (p. 17, same idea p. 209). But “the space filled with atmospheric air, by which the [latter] seem to be separated from one another” did not appear to them as “material”; much to the contrary, it was “the negation of materiality, a nothingness.” Therefore—and

this made Schmarsow's perspective entirely inappropriate, at least in Antiquity—"space could not be the subject of artistic creation" and Ancient architecture was consequently bound to emphasize the "limit-building" at the expense of the "creation of space" (p. 17).

Riegl drew the same conclusion from the evolutionist and empiricist psychological doctrine that had become common in his time. The recognition of "the external things in their clear material individuality" was, he said, originally based on "pure sensory perception" (p. 17). It depended first on the sense of touch. But when, "eventually," the sight was used to induce in the observer's mind the notion of the "palpable, impenetrable surface of a closed material individuality," it was necessarily limited to "plane colored surfaces," and therefore excluded "the dimension of depth" (p. 18).

Very early, it may have happened that the optical perception alone was found sufficient to provide certainty about the material unity of an external thing without resorting to the sense of touch for direct testimony. But the most important prerequisite for this was always that the absolute plane [*die absolute Ebene*] would be respected and the extension limited to the dimensions of height and width. [Consequently], ancient art must have fundamentally denied the existence of the third dimension—the depth—which we tend to consider as the spatial dimension as such. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 18, my trans.)

Contrary to Schmarsow's opinion, height and breadth, i.e. plane, had been privileged by ancient art, while depth, i.e. space, was limited to the maximum, although in a way varying in time.

Among the three spatial dimensions, in the broader sense, the two dimensions of the surface or the plane, the height and breadth, (the outline, the silhouette) are indispensable in order to arrive at the idea of a material individuality. They are, therefore, permitted from the beginning by the ancient art. The depth dimension, by contrast, does not appear absolutely necessary, and since, moreover, it may blur the clear impression of material individuality, it is at first suppressed as much as possible. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 19, my trans.)

In order to understand Riegl's position in its entirety, we must keep in mind, however, that although he based his analyses on this joint primacy of the material individual and the plane of representation, he nevertheless proposed to reconstruct the evolution of ancient art until late Roman time under the pressure of a progressive, if limited, "emancipation of space." Thus, contrary to what many commentators claim, space and even bodily experience were not disregarded by Riegl. They were only, if I may say so, "historicized."

Riegl's reasoning went as follows: in the Egyptian art, in the closed temples or the painted very low reliefs used in tombs, the presentation of external things was enclosed within a "tactile" or "haptic plane," that is, resulting from the sensations of touch, which corresponded, as far as the sight was concerned, to "near vision" (p. 20).

In a second phase illustrated by the Greek classical art, for instance the Parthenon or the low reliefs

which adorned it, a certain depth and therefore some shadows were introduced into the presentation of things. In order to be correctly perceived, the latter necessitated the eye to recede, although “not to the point where the continuous tactile link between the parts would be interrupted.” This “tactile-optic” perception implied a kind of vision “located inbetween the distance and the near vision,” which could therefore be characterized as “normal vision” (p. 20).

In the third phase specific to the Late Antiquity, the existence of space was finally recognized in the artwork but—and this restriction is essential—“only insofar as it adheres to the material individuals, that is, as an impenetrable, cubic [*cubisch*], and measurable space, not as an infinite depth expanding between the individual material things.” Since the primary aim of the artists remained to “distinctly reproduce material individuals,” the forms, closely surrounded by their cubic space, remained positioned “regardless of the [larger] space in which they move,” that is, by way of consequence, within the plane. This strongly contrasted with modern art, which, Riegl emphasized, presents the things “within an infinite free space.” As a result, the various material entities forwent the tactile connection with the bottom plane from which they stemmed and were now separated by deep shadows, forming with the former “an optic-colored surface” whose perception required the eye to recede again and adopt a “distant vision” (p. 21). This new way of looking at artworks implied an increased involvement of the “subjective consciousness that complemented the perception” (p. 22).

This is the point where Riegl introduced rhythm into his analysis. Rhythm, he claimed, has been crucial in the dialectical evolution of representation under the pressure of the opposite forces of plane and space, especially during the late Antiquity.

In classical Greek temples or porticos, for instance, there was a beginning of “recognition of space as such,” i.e. depth, but the latter was not sufficient to suggest a clear-cut optical rhythm. The columns were still visually connected with the background plane.

In fact we find the first recognition of the three-dimensionality, the shadow, and the space in the Greek column building [*Säulenhaus*]. Although the main task of architecture remained the limitation and not the formation of space, it did not conceal as systematically as before the existence of space as such. [...] Concerning the column porticos, where the shadow accumulates as in the folds of the classical drapery, the recognition of the depth and space inherent to things is also limited, since the eye immediately finds a support on the closed *cella* wall, as on the flat bottom surface of a relief. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 23, my trans.)

The next step was illustrated by the Pantheon in Rome. Remarkably, Riegl abstained from using the term rhythm to depict the succession of columns supporting its famous portico while he explicitly used it to describe its interior space and its unambiguous alternation of clear wall surfaces and deep shadows produced by lateral niches. Although it was built during the Nerva-Antonine dynasty and probably dedicated about 126 AD, Riegl recognized in it the earliest example of the distant, optical, and subjective perception which was to become typical of “the third phase of ancient art.”

In the lowest zone of the cylindrical wall, there are a number of niches whose entrances are

partly obstructed by a pair of columns, and which therefore appear to be some sort of separate lateral spaces. The deep shadows that accumulate in their cavities produce, together with the clear surfaces of the wall of the rotunda that separate them, an effect of colored contrast, that is to say, optic and in distant vision. Both things will become of paramount importance in the following years, as we will see. We shall rediscover, as the essential features of Late Roman art, both the mass composition of the central space with no less central side-spaces [...] and the effort to animate the surface with a colorist rhythm [*rhythmische coloristische Flächenbelebung*]. Both features are apparently rooted in the concern, characteristic of the third phase of ancient art, to interrupt the tactile planes with deep shadows. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 25-26, my trans.)

As we see, contrary to Schmarsow, Riegl did not conceive of rhythm as the effect of the movement of the observer, or that implied by the layout of the spaces of a building, 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.

This optical aspect has often been underlined by commentators, however they have sometimes presented it as if Riegl had a favorable bias toward sense of sight, immobility, and contemplation, and a negative one against sense of touch, movement, and bodily experience. Against that kind of narrow psychological and binary critique, one must recognize that Riegl did not abstractly nor arbitrarily, for subjective reasons, imposed his optical concept of rhythm upon the historical material he had to deal with: on the contrary, he constructed it genetically. The spread of optical rhythm in late Antiquity was, according to him, the outcome of a long historical confrontation between plane and space.

As Deleuze many years after, Riegl actually resorted to the idea of fold or better yet, of folding process. In his view, everything happened as if the original smooth and flat surface of the art work, whatever the art it belonged to, had contracted itself, resulting first in shallow grooves during the Classical period, then in deep furrows in the Late Roman era. To put it in less metaphorical terms, the spread of rhythmic forms in Late Antiquity resulted from the progressive folding upon itself of the initial plane of artistic representation. The progressive recess of the eye, the transformation from close-range to distant vision, and the primacy of the plane that accompanied this mutation, were thus only phenomena subordinated to the progressive introduction of space and the folding of the art work upon itself that resulted from it.

Rhythm as Folds in the Visual Plane (Riegl - 1901)

According to Riegl, these folds in the visual plane could be observed in sculpture and painting as soon as the early Imperial period. Unless I am mistaken, the earliest example cited by Riegl is a marble pilaster ornated with vine tendrils from the 1st century AD that is kept in the Lateran Museum.

Vine tendrils are growing out of a vase and intertwine with, among other things, a ladder supporting putti (today missing). The leaf tendrils are densely arranged and sharply carved, so that one sees below them, instead of a background, only a dark shady hollow, that is, the space. The constant rhythmic alternation of a light, marble pattern and a dark, shadowy, spatial

background produces the coloristic, optical and colored charm that is so characteristic of this whole art and its specific will. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 71, my trans.)

Riegl noticed that, quite early in the Imperial era, dressed up figures replaced nude bodies because, he claimed, they provided artists with the opportunity to carve “drapery and folds.” In this case, the object of representation was, at least partly, selected—he did not mention cultural, ideological, or religious conditions—to fit the larger folding process that supported the new *Kunstwollen*.

One encounters mostly dressed up instead of nude figures. This predominance is certainly closely linked with the optic conception which finds its satisfaction better in the drapery and its folds [*in der brüchigen Draperie*] than in the nude which had been preferred, in reverse, by the earlier art periods due to its tactile tendency. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 66, my trans.)

Simultaneously, there was a progressive collapse of the eurhythmic norm. This is something that should be underlined with respect to the essential role played by this norm in rhythmological history (see above, chap. 5). However, quite surprisingly, there is not a single mention of Vitruvius in the *Late Roman Art Industry*. Riegl did not care, unfortunately, to address the distance between the ancient Vitruvian definition of rhythm based on “appropriate proportion” and his own based on “regular alternation.”

The spatial isolation of the individual forms within the plane inevitably resulted in the abandonment of the norm of proportionality which was fundamental in Classical art, for the proportions are nothing other than the expression of the connection which unites, within the optic plane, the different parts into a clearly recognizable harmonic whole. But, as soon as the parts show a tendency to isolate one from another in the plane (to unravel the connection), the respect for correct proportions must necessarily lose its importance. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 67, my trans.)

The neglect of the eurhythmic proportions in the Roman reliefs accelerated between the end of the 3rd century and the early beginning of the 4th century.

The main point remains that about 315 AD, the proportional relations of the parts to each other (from which, in the last analysis, the living beauty results for the Ancients) have considerably receded compared to ten years before. This suggests that, during the last years of Diocletian’s reign, the development in the visual arts has taken a more rapid course, and that the new elements which announced the future must have become more firmly established. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 84, my trans.)

At the beginning of the 4th century, the rhythm as series of folds of the representation plane had become a dominant feature of artistic expression. On the Arch of Constantine, built in Rome between 313 and 315, the reliefs showed figures, “projected with meticulous precision on a plane,” “sharply

separated from each other” by deep notches, so that as presenting a “regular alternation” of “bright parts and “dark shadows.”

Although the whole appears to be projected with meticulous precision on a plane, the individual figures, as parts of the whole, show an equally marked tendency to spatially isolate themselves within the common plane. Their outlines are all deeply cut so that they are nowhere conspicuously connected with the ground plane [*Grundebene*]. In the upper tier, two rows of figures are arranged one behind the other and are no less sharply isolated from each other. This is the decisive point in which the Constantine reliefs differ from Ancient Eastern and Classical ones. In the Early Imperial period, every relief had still to obey an inviolable law according to which an obvious tactile connection should be maintained between the figures and the plane ground [*ebenen Grunde*], whether directly or through intermediate figures. Now, the common plane loses its former tactile continuity and breaks down into a series of bright figures separated by dark shadows whose regular alternation [*mit ihrem regelmäßigen Wechsel*] creates a coloristic impression. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 47, my trans.)

The same optic alternation resulted from the opening, from the 4th century, of windows into the building walls, an opening that was a novelty in Antiquity. While a row of columns was only a limited or embryonic rhythmic expression, a regular series of windows such as those cut into the drum of the so-called Minerva Medica temple (actually a ruined nymphaeum built in Rome in the 4th century) formed a fully developed rhythmic sequence.

The cutting of windows into the tambour (and even in the domed vault) was another noteworthy innovation at the Temple of Minerva Medica. If in utility buildings, sidelights have been indispensable since Eastern Ancient times, monumental architecture has fundamentally rejected them, since for an art which aims at forming the material into closed units, the window, seen in near or normal vision, is a disturbing hole in the wall, a displeasing interruption of the tactile materiality by a purely optical-colored nothingness like the shadow. Windows are therefore exceptional in classical monumental buildings [...]. A view from a distance was thus the prerequisite for the integration of the window into the monumental art, for it gives to the rhythmic alternation (symmetry of the sequence) of the shaded cavities and the bright wall sections, which separate them, the aspect of a coherent optical unit in a plane. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 27, my trans.)

Even the mosaics of the 4th century shared the same rhythmic characteristics, like those decorated with tendrils and putti in the church of Santa Constanza in Rome built in the second quarter of the 4th century.

Incidentally, these putti (fig. 45, between the tendrils) allow us to see that the restlessly shimmering lights playing on their flesh neither contribute to the modeling (surface connection between ledges), which was achieved in the preceding antique art by its complement, the shadow, nor associate the figure with its spatial environment, as does modern art through one ray of light, an open-air or reflected light. These lights only produce a constant rhythmic alternation of illuminated and shaded parts, and thus evoke a very special life within the enclosed mass. (*Late*

Roman Art Industry, 1901, p. 127, my trans.)

One could find a comparable development of optic rhythm in the Christian basilicas that spread from the 4th century. Due to the action of the same *Kunstwollen* as in “sculpture and painting,” they broke with the classical expectation of the “organic” continuity in the visual effect produced by the various parts of the building, in other words with the plane of representation.

The deliberate elimination, in the early Christian basilica, of all tactile connections between the parts of a structure resulted in the almost complete loss of the impression of necessity and intimate organic connection of the parts, which Classical as well as Modern art require of composition (as it also disappeared in buildings built on central plan, but to a lesser degree). The phenomenon is exactly the same as that which, in the sculpture and painting of the time, makes us see ugliness and grossness in the figures. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 31-32, my trans.)

Consequently, instead of the classical smooth and even harmonic continuity, the Christian basilica often presented discontinuous, uneven and sharply alternating forms, whether columns and intercolumniations, or windows and wall parts.

The treatment of the parts, which had now shed the last remnants of tactile connection between each other, could be none other than a coloristic one. It manifests itself, below [in the nave], in the rapid alternation [*in dem raschen Wechsel*] of the columns set closely together with their intercolumniations, and on the upper wall, in the row of windows which are opened into it. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 31, my trans.)

Riegl found analogous rhythmic features even in the column capitals that were not carved any longer with chisel but with rotary drills. He emphasized the alternation of lights and shadows that resulted from the generalization of this carving technique in a marble capital from the Basilica of Sant'Appolinare in Classe in Ravenna built in the first quarter of the 6th century.

By contrast [with modern colorism], the ancient colorism ignores space and sticks to rhythm which, in turn, is bound to the plane: if for Classical art the unity of the composition was in the rhythm of the lines, it now rests in the rhythm of light and shadow, which, of course, as the former, still unfolds in the plane and not in the space (which is inaccessible to it). It is clear that this ancient colorism has a restless, flickering effect on us; but it seems to have fulfilled the Late Romans with the same sense of harmony that we Moderns find in space colorism. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 38, my trans.)

Riegl finally analyzed, in the last chapter of his book, some jewels made in the 4th and the 5th century. He unsurprisingly found them based on the same rhythmic *Kunstwollen*.

In order to distinguish the pattern, in particular the rolling tendrils on the semicircular head shield, one must take a closer look, for the superficial view, on which the artistic will of the Late Antiquity is accustomed to rely, merely sees a constant rhythmic alternation of light and dark. [...] [In the gold fibula found in Apahida and probably made in the first half of the 5th century] the top of the foot shows an openwork pattern in which the alternation of light and dark points is so dense that the underlying motif is revealed only by a closer examination: in the center part, one notices an undulation sided with interrupted laces. The objective motive, a (Latin) Christian cross, is laid on this openwork pattern, in which positive and negative, material and empty space have been brought into the most perfect rhythmic equilibrium and, thus, into an absolute coloristic unity, as if it were on a carpet. (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 144, my trans.)

[Next chapter](#)