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Only of local significance?

The German artist Otto Hettner (1875-1931) between Dresden and Europe

Kati Renner, Technische Universität Dresden

Abstract

“Only of local significance” has been the devastating judgment of the National Gallery in Berlin, with which some artworks offered of the estate had been rejected. Surprisingly, this decision ignored important life stages and the influence of this artist. The Dresden-based artist Hettner has spent nearly ten years in the vibrant metropolis Paris and between 1905 and 1911 in the emerging city of Florence. He was married to a French woman, built up an international network with artists and poets such as Edvard Munch, Auguste Rodin, Henri de Groux, Ardengo Soffici and Theodor Däubler and had a noteworthy influence on the artistic exchange between Dresden, Paris and Florence. He was living a life of a typical European artist around 1900, searching for his individual, but also for a new national style.

However, as displayed artworks in certain museums show, he is nowadays solely considered as an artist of regional significance. This classification is based on the fragmentary character of his oeuvre, which formerly comprised around 4.300 artworks and today consists of just a few paintings and graphics. Having been exhibited in 1932 for the last time, removed from museums as “degenerated artist” and his estate mostly being destroyed during the II. World War, the artist’s identification has changed dramatically.

This paper aims to discuss critically this construction / deconstruction of an artist’s local, national and international identity using Otto Hettner as a significant example. Furthermore, this example highlights a general process of national art around 1900 in Europe shaping a nation’s identity: through appropriation and transformation of French and Italian influences especially German artists such as Hettner sought not only to develop an individual artistic style, but also, in contradiction to their transnational biography and in competition with other nations, creating a specific national one.

Key words: Otto Hettner, national identity, deconstruction of identity, artistic exchange, European art around 1900

I Introduction

Dresden – Karlsruhe – Paris – Florence – Berlin – Dresden: those are the European cities to describe the main biographical stages of Otto Hettner. Edvard Munch – Ardengo Soffici – Theodor Däubler: a selection of people to describe his international network. Hettner is one of the many examples for a lost generation and for a lost identity, who significantly has been responsible for the international circulation and exchange and canonization of artistic ideas in the early 20th century. Therefore, the dissertation project aims to reconstruct this life and write this artist into art history again. This paper is a partial extract of this comprehensive thesis and will highlight Hettner's role as individual, German and European artist by giving three examples of his interactions, including selected artworks and questioning his handling of different influences between art as a search for an individual expression, art and the creation of national identities in Europe and the upcoming internationalisation of art.

II Otto Hettner – a biographical reconstruction

As Hettner is nowadays an almost unknown artist, a short biographical overview will introduce the most important stages of his life. Born in 1875 in Dresden into an intellectual middle-class family, Hettner studied fine arts in 1893 in Karlsruhe and then continued in 1895 in Paris at the famous *Académie Julian*. In Paris, he got to know artists like Edvard Munch and lived in the artists residence *Cité Fleurie*. After spending some years in Paris, he moved to European cities like Florence and Berlin. Besides his paintings he began to work on large mural paintings for the exhibition of the German Work Federation in 1914 in Cologne and the museum in Stettin. At the same time he started to illustrate several books and contributed lithographs to the German journal *Kriegszeit* during the war. In 1917, he was assigned as a professor at the art academy in Dresden. As he suffered from tuberculosis and was forced to spend the winter months in southern Europe, he was not able to have a significant impact on his students or to produce a large scale of artworks in the 1920s. Hettner died in 1931 in Dresden at the age of 56.

During his lifetime, he produced nearly 4300 works of art, listed in an unpublished register.¹ This register is an important source to date and name several artworks. His highly heterogeneous work ranges from impressionism, monumental paintings to expressionism. Most of his artworks have been destroyed in the II. World War. The remaining artworks are kept in a small number of museums in especially Germany or are privately owned. Today artworks can be found in museums in Dresden, Leipzig, Magdeburg, Zwickau, Freital, Flensburg, Marburg and Vienna. A greater number of lithographs is part of several museums, for example the Museum of Modern Art New York. The sculptures, which Hettner has produced, got lost in the II World War as well.

The main sources for reconstructing this biography are not only dictionaries of art², but also many letters he wrote to his friends. One of the largest convolute contains around 250 letters addressed to his best friend.³ Beside those main sources the archive of the art academy in Dresden provides several information about his period as professor.⁴ The only extensive exhibition with a published catalogue has been in 1932 in Dresden shortly after his death.⁵ Due to the high number of missing works he was just a few times part of exhibitions.⁶ In 1989 Viola Lippold did the first attempt to write a larger text about Hettner in here thesis, but could not consider works outside the former German Democratic Republic.⁷ Only two publications dealt with parts and aspects of Hettner's work.⁸ The rising interest for his art could be seen as for example the *Städtische Galerie Dresden* published a small book about their works of Otto Hettner and his son Roland, who also has been an artist.⁹

To understand, how an artist like Hettner could be nearly forgotten and how this biography has been deconstructed, a closer look on processes especially after his death will reveal different, but essential reasons. During his lifetime, never a larger monograph was published about this artist and although Hettner had participated in several exhibitions, the only extensive personal exhibition with a published catalogue has been in 1932 in Dresden shortly after his death. His widow Jeanne Hettner took care for his artistic estate, but, as she stayed in Dresden, lost almost everything of his artworks and correspondences during the II. World War and the two dramatic nights of bombing in February 1945. In 1937 the artist was declared a “degenerated artist” and artworks have been removed from several museums such as Dresden, Berlin and Stettin. His international habitus, the significant French influence and his pacifistic attitude might be the main reasons why he had been politically instrumentalised as a degenerated painter. After 1945 no rehabilitation brought this artist back to people's memory. As there was nearly no artwork in any museum and the biography was not relevant to the GDR government, Hettner fell into oblivion. As an effect of this default, museums were not able to integrate his art properly into their collections and, also based on just a very little number of remained artworks of lower

quality, this is how it happened, that the National Gallery Berlin saw in his apparent eclectic works only a “local significance”¹⁰ and did not select a painting of him, although their collection has lost the painting *Hiob* in 1937.¹¹

III Paris – the right place to become Otto Hettner?

Moving to Paris had a fundamental impact on his artistic development. As a high number of artistic biographies indicate, it was a common practice to spend a certain time in this city. Paris had been an appealing metropolis around 1900 to so many young artists, as it offered well-established institutions and an innovative, open-minded, cosmopolitan and international atmosphere. This feeling of artistic freedom combined with an artistic infrastructure were the main reasons for many artists from different countries to come to this vibrant metropolis for further studies, and also attracted the young Otto Hettner.

Shaped by the traditional educational system in Karlsruhe and by the influences of German impressionism and *plein air* painting, Hettner moved forward to Paris and immediately enrolled himself at the *Académie Julian* from 1895 to 1897. This academy was a well-known private one due to its quality of education and the possibility to develop freely.¹² Many professors of German art academies recommended their students to study for some time in Paris and subscribe at the *Académie Julian*.¹³ Well-known Germans like Lovis Corinth¹⁴, Käthe Kollwitz¹⁵ or Georg Kolbe had been students of this academy. Hettner learned to draw things quickly and sketchily and was instructed by teachers, who had been professors at the *École* at the same time. This institution did not offer an alternative educational program, but it was much easier to enter this academy. At least an admission fee had to be paid to get the allowance for participating. As the shown list of students, stored at the *Archives Nationales*, proofs, he has been a student of Jules Joseph Lefebvre.¹⁶ This artist has been famous for portraits and nudes, but had obviously no influence on Hettner.

Financially supported by his family, he had the possibility to stay for several years in Paris. Compared to other German students this was something unique, as most of them stayed for a much shorter period. Also, he always remained an independent artist and did not follow a master like many Germans at the *Académie Matisse*. Besides his studies he was highly interested in contemporary art, he visited many museums, galleries and exhibitions and he build up a network of international artists. Between 1900 and 1904 he has lived in the so-called *Cité Fleurie*, a place on the *Boulevard Arago* in the district Montparnasse, where several artists like Rodin und Munch had their flats and studios. He developed a close relation to Edvard Munch, spoke fluent French and was part of the international circle of the journal *La Plume* and friend of the German author Theodor Däubler. Furthermore, he met his future wife Jeanne. While living in Paris he also collected posters made by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and helped selling French art to Germany and especially to Dresden. As his best friend remained in Dresden, he always had strong connections to his hometown and was well-informed about ongoing processes of the local art scene. Not surprisingly, his first exhibition took place in Paris within the *salon des artistes indépendants* in 1902, where ten paintings had been presented to the public.¹⁷

During his stay in Paris Hettner developed two different modes of painting. One mode to illustrate his objects he found in a spontaneous way of painting things quickly *en plein air*, using the visible brush strokes and pure colours like the impressionists and concentrating on painting atmospheric, light-flooded moments. Paintings such as the *portrait of his mother* (1896) and *garden* (1897) are concise examples. Besides this he created paintings with an obvious influence of symbolism and new idealism, visible through ornamental styles, solidified forms, outstanding outlines and a pathetic character inspired by Edvard Munch. Also, influenced by van Gogh, he uses more and more expressive colours for his paintings. Hettner stated that he aims to combine French impressionism and German symbolism / idealism to a new German art. The innovative synthesis will be a combination of impressionistic brush strokes, expressive colours and idealistic forms, as seen in the painting *bowman* (1901).

The appropriation of Impressionism and of contemporary art in Paris was a necessary impetus to find his own imagery. Hettner tried to set up a personal visual language and started with imitating artists like Munch, van Gogh and the impressive style. Hettner was also drawn to the after effects of impressionism, which means rejecting high-minded subjects and finally finished surfaces in favor of scenes drawn from nature, painted with loose and very visible brushwork. The application of colours and atmospheric, light-flooded sceneries proof, that *plein-air* has been a widespread practice all around Europe. As Hettner saw no innovation potential, he soon overcame this and transformed and combined those ideas to a new and unique imagery. He used form, colour and brush strokes depending on content and personal intension. While Paris has been the necessary source of inspiration and platform for comparison with other artists, styles and nations, Florence, Hettners next destination, became a place of consolidation for finally becoming Otto Hettner.

IV Florence – The German colony and the arriving Parisian Avantgarde

During his stay in Paris Hettner travelled several times to Italy. Having been in Florence in 1897 for the first time, he finally settled in this Renaissance city in 1905 and already knew this place very well. Florence has been one of the preferred destinations of Germans travelling to Italy since the early 19th century.¹⁸ Dissatisfied with political and artistic settings in their home country, many artists chose Italy for travelling around and receiving inspiration through Renaissance art or the ancient world for a renewal of the German art. Examples may be artists off the Nazarene movement in Rome and Arnold Böcklin, Anselm Feuerbach and Hans von Marées, who settled in Florence. The German colony grew as the *Kunsthistorische Institut* (1897) and the artists residence *Villa Romana* (1905) were founded.¹⁹

Florence around 1900 is an emerging city between myth and modernisation.²⁰ Numerous international tourists, artists, and art historians travel to Florence, looking for a rest in the nervous age from their own reality into a transfigured past, into a supposed arcadia. The art of the Renaissance and its beauty, balance and harmony, as an antithesis in its own time, experiences an almost religious veneration. This is demonstrated by the high number of publications, the artistic reception and the numerous festivities with costumes according to Botticelli paintings. At the same time, the city itself is in a state of upheaval, which manifests itself above all in the changed infrastructure and the demolition of old buildings. Florence is not a center of modern art and not a metropolis, but it is revitalized by numerous foreign artists. In addition to the German population, numerous Swiss, English, American and Russian artists, scholars and writers inhabit the city and ensure a corresponding revival of cultural diversity, which is also reflected in a lively café-house culture. The local craftsmanship tradition, as well as the art of *Macchiaioli*, a *plein-air* painting mode with patchy color surfaces play an important role in the city. With the internationally conceived *festa dell'arte e dei fiori* of 1896/97, contemporary art and its diversity of styles are exhibited to a large extent around 1900.²¹ With the return of the Florentine artist Ardengo Soffici 1907 from Paris the city receives further impulses, which flows in the exhibition of French Impressionists in 1910 and includes works by Cézanne, van Gogh, Picasso, Matisse or Gauguin.²² At the same time, Florence became an important center of Italian futurism from 1911 onwards.

There are various reasons for Hettner's relocation in 1905. The urge to leave the expensive metropolis of Paris had existed for some time, the predilection for the Italian landscape growing steadily, as did his private situation. His French companion Jeanne was still married and pregnant, so that a common appearance in Berlin was impossible. Hettner lived in the *Villa Romana* for three months without an official fellowship in 1906, and later moved to a villa in Fiesole, which became his personal retreat, his Arcadia. Hettner is particularly active in the German circles and with the artists of the *Villa Romana*, but has also been shown to have contact with Ardengo Soffici, who had become acquainted with the art critic and writer Theodor Däubler and the magazine *La Plume* in Paris. Hettner exhibited in Florence at the beginning of 1909 together with the French painter Robert Vallin and the Russian artist Alexandre von Heiroth at the Politeama in Florence, showing some of his latest artworks.²³

Between 1905 and 1911, about 85 paintings were created, many of which are missing today. This is also true of the numerous portraits of his family, pastels and charcoal drawings. The works that emerge in the following years are heterogeneous in their appearance and cover the arch of outdoor acts, the portrayal of his house, his wife or children, landscaping depictions of the Apennines, and imaginative scenes. In 1907, Hettner worked on a painting called "Der Aufbruch", which is no longer present today and showed five naked men walking on a ridge of the rising sun. To his friend he reported, that he finally found his own and the new style at all. Over the last few years, the artist has repeatedly dealt with the problem of how to reconcile lighting, local and light colors with a modeling of the body and a clear picture structure. He wanted, therefore, to reproduce the essence of things by the exactness in form and outline, and this connected with the color-like impression which is produced by air and light phenomena. The drawing-contrasts and the picturesque-colored should merge in its art into a new unity. His ideas, which were initially directed at his own artistic development, he expanded, symptomatically for his time, questioning the meaning for a new national art and which inspiration could be gained from the French models.

Hettner is an example for the transfer of the avant-garde from Paris to Florence. He integrates himself into the existing German colony, but extends his contacts with artists such as Ardengo Soffici. With the privately

organized exhibition in the Politeama, he also appears publicly with his art and, before the pioneering Impressionism exhibition in 1910, shows important French impulses, which are thus also introduced in Florence. Hettner thus belongs to the Florentine avant-garde. From Florence, he successfully presents various exhibitions in, for example, Dresden and Vienna. His style of painting as an expressive idealism and a new national artistic direction, unifies various international and national trends and isms of his time to a new personal style.

V Fighting for French art – Hettner's contribution to French art in the German National Gallery

Numerous publications of this period reflect this struggle for the progress of contemporary German art, especially under the influence of France. Hettner's endeavors may be an example for those many international artists, their interactions, the internationalisation of Impressionism and the debate about style and nationality around 1900, which in his reflections also raised the question of a new national art as an identity-creating medium. In the catalog of the exhibition *Impressionismus - Expressionismus* in Berlin 2015 numerous writings and books are mentioned, which not only devote themselves to the comparison of those two styles, but also strive to provide a general, orderly and systematic overview of the styles and developmental strings of the 19th and early 20th century.²⁴ Julius Meier-Gräfe writes one of the most comprehensive publications in 1904 with the three-volume *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Malerei*.²⁵ For German art, he concludes two opposing poles between Arnold Böcklin and Max Liebermann, which both influence Hettner and are also reflected in his art. The other writings bear programmatic titles and finally the comparison of national developments between Germany and France. An example for these interdependencies is Hettner's position in the debate about the acquisition of contemporary art in German museums.²⁶ Some artists criticised the foreign infiltration of German collections and the art market by especially French art. From 1910/11 onwards, in the struggle for art, which discussed in detail the acquisition of French works for the Berlin National Gallery and its influence on German art and artists, Hettner made his contribution to this, and formulated the acquisition of French works as an absolute necessity for the understanding of art development in general and as a benchmark for his own work. He rated the quality and role model of French art higher than the national affiliation. For him, the possession of the French artworks is also nationally valuable and identity-creating, analogous to the works of the Greeks or Italians in the existing German collections.

VI Summary

As the remarks on the biography and the selected case studies show, the relevance of Hettner in art history is not limited to a local one. His evaluation is based on little knowledge about his oeuvre and reveals a methodological problem within art history: the history of geniuses fades out a lot of artists and makes it difficult to handle such personalities like Hettner, who sometimes have an eclectic tendency or less innovation potential, in a monograph or exhibition. Therefore, it is necessary to widen the view. Hettner is part of the avant-garde and, through his geographical mobility and international network, contributes to the circulation, recognition and canonization of artistic ideas. His search for an individual style under the influence of numerous isms around 1900 broadens to a search for a new national style, which does not take place in a delimitation from France, but through inspiration and appropriation. While for a lot of artists, as well as intellectuals and leading statesmen art is still an important factor of national identity, the process of internationalization takes place in art itself. Phenomena occur across borders and can hardly be described locally or nationally. Hettner thus belongs to a generation of the transition, followed by an artist generation, for which shared ideas and theories become more important than a national affiliation. For exhibitions in the museum, however, this also means that the classification must be critically questioned according to geographic aspects - Dresden, Germany, Europe – is no longer useful. In the case of Hettner, the purely local assignment to Dresden means that it does not consider a large part of his work and his life stations.

Biographical note on the author

Kati Renner has passed her Bachelor and Master studies in art history and history between 2005 and 2011 at the Technische Universität Dresden / Germany with a specialization on 19th and 20th European and German art.

While her Bachelor thesis was dealing with interdependencies between poetry and art in the works of the Czech artist Jiří Kolář in the 1960s, the Master thesis was analysing the New Objectivity in Dresden besides Otto Dix and its reception in selected contemporary exhibitions. Research results of her master thesis have been contributed to the exhibition held 2011 in Dresden. In 2011, she also was granted with a 2-month "scientist-in-residence" fellowship in Salzburg for further studies on a comparative analyses of art academies in Dresden and Salzburg. Among her work in different museums she started in 2012 her doctorate about the Dresden-based artist Otto Hettner. Several related research stays in Germany, France and Italy and conference participations in Croatia and US have been supported by the University's travel awards and grants.

¹ Roland Hettner: Otto Hettner Nachlass, typewritten manuscript, 1931, private property.

² Ernst Sigismund: Hettner, Otto (Hermann Otto), In: Thieme/Becker 1923, vol.16, p.602; Annette Brunner: Otto Hettner, In: De Gruyter - Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon, vol.72, Berlin [amongst others] 2012, p.524-526; Fritz Löffler: Hettner, Otto, In: Neue Deutsche Biographie 9 (1972), p.33 f.; N.N.: Hettner, Otto, In: Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler des 20. Jahrhunderts, München 1992, unveränderter Nachdruck der Originalausgabe Leipzig 1955, p.436.

³ Hermann Schmitt: 255 Autographs from Otto Hettner to Hermann Schmitt (1891-1928), 10 attachments, Sign.: Mscr. Dresd. Aut. 414,1-255, Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden.

⁴ Dossier Otto Hettner, Archive of the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden.

⁵ Exhibition catalogue Otto Hettner, Gedächtnisausstellung, Sächsischer Kunstverein Dresden, Dresden 1932.

⁶ For example exhibition catalogue: Malerei - Grafik, Otto Altenkirch, Ferdinand Dorsch, Otto Hettner, edited by Stadtmuseum Dresden, Dresden 1995.

⁷ Viola Lippold: Der Maler Otto Hettner – zur Dresdner Kunst um 1900, diploma thesis Dresden 1989, Pädagogischen Hochschule „Karl Friedrich Wilhelm Wander“, 72 pages, typewritten, Archive of the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst Dresden.

⁸ Annette Brunner: Kriegszeit, Künstlerflugblätter. Ein Beitrag im Rahmen der Untersuchungen zur Position der bildenden Künstler während des Ersten Weltkriegs, I-II, Magisterarbeit Universität Heidelberg 1993; Karin Wilhelm: Walter Gropius. Industriearchitekt, Braunschweig 1993.

⁹ Linda Karohl/ Gisbert Porstmann (Ed.): Otto Hettner Roland Hettner. In der Sammlung der Städtischen Galerie Dresden, Dresden 2014.

¹⁰ Note, 4.2.1982, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Zentralarchiv, Sign. SMB-ZA, II A / NG 259.

¹¹ Hiob, 1919, oil on canvas, 1920 – 16.08.1937 Berlin, Nationalgalerie.

¹² An extended publication will be: exhibition catalogue The Julian Academy. Paris 1868-1939. Spring Exhibition 1989, Shepherd Gallery, New York 1989.

¹³ Karolin Pfeiffer: Deutsche Schülerinnen und Schüler an der Académie Julian 1870/71, typewritten master thesis 2012, Technische Universität Berlin.

¹⁴ Lovis Corinth: Un étudiant allemand à Paris à l'Académie Julian (1884-1887), In: Gazette des Beaux-Arts, vol. 97, Mai / Juni 1981, p.219-225.

¹⁵ exhibition catalogue "Paris bezauberte mich ...". Käthe Kollwitz und die französische Moderne, edited by Hannelore Fischer according to the exhibition "Paris bezauberte mich ... Käthe Kollwitz und die Französische Moderne", Käthe Kollwitz Museum Köln, 29. Oktober 2010 bis 16. Januar 2011, München 2010.

¹⁶ List of Enrolment, Académie Julian, Archives Nationales, Paris, Microfilm, Académie Julian, Sign. 63 AS 3/1, p.149.

¹⁷ Catalogue des oeuvres exposées 1902; 18e exposition, du 29 mars au 5 mai / Société des artistes indépendants. [Paris] 1902.

¹⁸ Christina Nuzzi (Ed.): Arnold Böcklin e la cultura artistica in Toscana: Hans von Marées, Adolf von Hildebrand, Max Klinger, Karl Stauffer-Bern, Albert Welti; Fiesole, Palazzina Mangani; 24 luglio - 30 settembre 1980, Roma 1980.

¹⁹ Hans W. Hubert: Das Kunsthistorische Institut in Florenz. Von der Gründung bis zum hundertjährigen Jubiläum (1897-1997). Florenz 1997; Thomas Föhl, Gerda Wendermann (Ed.): Ein Arkadien der Moderne? 100 Jahre Künstlerhaus Villa Romana in Florenz, Berlin 2005.

²⁰ Bernd Roeck Florenz 1900 – Die Suche nach Arkadien, München 2001.

²¹ Festa dell' arte e die fiori 1896-1897. Catalogo della esposizione di belle arti; con 41 illustrazioni, Firenze 1896.

²² Prima Mostra Italiano dell' Impressionismo. Lyceum club internazionale di Firenze, 04-05.1910, Firenze 1910.

²³ Mostra di O. Hettner, A. von Heiroth, R. Vallin, In: Arte moderna a Firenze. Cataloghi di Esposizioni 1900-1933, a cura di Artemisia Calcagni Abrami et Lucia Chimirri, Firenze Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Firenze 1988, p.63.

²⁴ Angelika Wesenberg, Ingeborg Becker (Ed.): Impressionismus – Expressionismus. Kunstwende, anlässlich der Ausstellung "Impressionismus - Expressionismus. Kunstwende", 22.5. - 20.9.2015, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, München 2015.

²⁵ Julius Meier-Gräfe: Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst. Vergleichende Betrachtung der Bildenden Künste als Beitrag zu einer neuen Ästhetik, 3 volumes, Stuttgart 1904.

²⁶ Carl Vinnen: Ein Protest deutscher Künstler, Jena 1911; Im Kampf um die Kunst. Die Antwort auf den "Protest deutscher Künstler" mit Beiträgen deutscher Künstler, Galerieleiter, Sammler und Schriftsteller, München 1911.