‘Unframing’ Byzantine ivories: painterliness, reliefs, and the place of Byzantine art in early twentieth-century German scholarship

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Introduction

‘On the third floor there was a grand salon, from where one could have a superb view of Rome […]; there were preserved objects in gold and silver, the medals, the bronzes, the Greek vases and the Renaissance maiolicas, the Byzantine ivories and the Rhine enamels, and the most precious paintings, a Beato Angelico, a Pinturicchio, a van der Weyden, a Quentin Metsys, and on a wall a large sixteenth-century Flemish tapestry depicting an allegory of the Vices and Virtues’.2

The grand salon of Grigorij Sergeevich Stroganoff’s residence in Rome, where the Russian count lived between 1888 and 1910, was a display room for the owner’s most treasured possessions. Among the antique, medieval, and Renaissance works, a selection of late Roman and Byzantine ivories was prominently shown with the collector’s pride. The assortment included ivory reliefs of secular and sacred subjects, dated from the sixth to the fifteenth century. Although Stroganoff’s Russian background was perhaps, in part, a reason for his interest in Byzantine art, the count’s appreciation for Eastern medieval ivories was unexceptional at his time. A nineteenth-century fascination with Byzantine cream-white reliefs can be traced through European collection patterns.3 Exemplary is the itinerary of the plaquette

1 I am grateful to the reader of this paper, Margaret Olin, for the constructive criticisms, and to David Y. Kim and Ivan Drpić for commenting on earlier versions of this essay. I thank, moreover, ANAMED Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations for the hospitality during the writing of this article. Unless otherwise stated, all English translations are my own.
2 Antonio Muñoz, Figure romane, Rome: Staderini, 1944, 148: ‘Al terzo piano c’era un grande salone da cui si godeva di una vista superba di Roma, […]; li erano conservati gli oggetti d’oro e d’argento, le medaglie, i bronzi, i vasi greci e le maioliche del Rinascimento, gli avorii bizantini e gli smalti renani, e i dipinti più preziosi, un Beato Angelico, un Pinturicchio, un van der Weiden, un Quentin Metsys, e su una parete un grande arazzo fiammingo del Cinquecento con una scena allegorica di Vizi e Virtù’.
with the enthroned Virgin and Christ Child, now at the Cleveland Museum of Art. The ivory belonged to the Parisian count August de Bastard d’Estang and was acquired by Stroganoff in the late nineteenth century. At the Russian collector’s death (1910), by mediation of antiquarian Giorgio Sangiorgi, the small icon was sold to another private collector, Jeptha H. Wade II, who in 1925, donated it to the Cleveland Museum for public enjoyment.

The Western admiration for Byzantine ivories, however, has a longer history. Material evidence suggests that since the beginning of the ivory carving tradition in Byzantium, the dentine carved in the medieval Eastern Roman Empire was coveted by its Western neighbours. Ottonian bookcases and medieval church treasures were enhanced with Byzantine ivories gifted, traded, or looted from the East. Their charm continued to seduce throughout the Early Modern period, when ‘Greek’ ivories were privately owned and displayed in Kunstkammers. Modern collection practices by art patrons, art lovers, and scholars further contributed to the exposure of the Byzantine material, which gradually reached the cases and storage rooms of museums across Western Europe and North America. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art-historical studies on Byzantine ivories were essentially born out of the visibility that the material gained in the private and in public sphere. Whether exhibited in Stroganoff’s or other collectors’ houses, or in museums, Byzantine dentine reliefs were increasingly available to the eyes and minds of scholars and intellectuals.

While recent years have witnessed a rising interest in the history and significance of collecting and art market trends for the advancement of Byzantine

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4 Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, 49, cat.n.79.
9 Moretti, Roma bizantina, 149.
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studies, only a few discussions have been concerned with the intellectual frameworks that structured early approaches to the material.10 The assumptions and paradigms that shaped the research at the foundation of the discipline remain largely unexplored, but they tacitly continue to inform scholars’ thinking in the present.11 Building upon historiographic approaches to late nineteenth to early twentieth century German studies on Renaissance, Baroque, and Greco-Roman art, in this article I look at the 1934 study of Byzantine ivories by Adolf Goldschmidt and Kurt Weitzmann to reveal its entanglement with contemporaneous art historical and art theoretical discourses.12 I will first introduce the publication and a critical passage that will be examined through its language and concepts in three subsequent sections. These will touch on the how, what, and why of the ivory study. The tripartite analysis will bring to the foreground the authors’ commitment to Heinrich Wölfflin’s dialectical methodology and their engagement with the concept of relief as defined by Adolf von Hildebrand and Aloïs Riegl. Such contextual and critical approaches to the publication allow for a reconsideration of some of the criticisms directed towards it while further questioning the reliability of its analysis. Furthermore, the article demonstrates that the thinking of figures such as Wölfflin and Riegl, whose works profoundly influenced their respective fields, had wider implications than has been acknowledged to date. This study on Byzantine ivories contributes to the uncovering of the intellectual frameworks that shaped the


11 This issue in Byzantine studies has been recently addressed in Benjamin Anderson and Ivanova, M., eds., Is Byzantine Studies a Colonialist Discipline? Towards a Critical Historiography, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2023.

discipline of art history at large.

**Die malerische Gruppe**

The first, and to date the only, comprehensive study of Byzantine icons in ivory is Adolf Goldschmidt and Kurt Weitzmann’s publication from 1934, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.–XIII. Jahrhunderts: Reliefs*.13 The work is monumental not only in size (43x31 cm) but also in its endeavour. The oeuvre was the sequel of Weitzmann’s doctoral work and the first publication on Byzantine ivory caskets; it gathered in less than a hundred pages and eighty plates all Byzantine ivory ‘reliefs’, or icons, known at the time.14 The volumes on the ivory chests and the icons complemented Goldschmidt’s series on Carolingian, Ottonian, and Romanesque ivories that appeared between 1914 and 1926.15 Kurt Weitzmann, a native of Witzenhausen, had earned his education in art history and archaeology from institutions across Germany and Austria, before arriving in Berlin in 1926 to work on his doctoral thesis under Goldschmidt.16 At that time, Goldschmidt, Professor Ordinarius at the University of Berlin between 1912 and 1932, was a scholar of international reputation and among the very first professors to teach medieval art at the university level.17 His studies on ivory sculpture soon become a model for art historical corpora and were praised for their punctilious stylistic and iconographic
analysis, and their impressive photographic documentation.\textsuperscript{18} While the volume on Byzantine ivory icons was a collaboration between the professor and his former student, Weitzmann was responsible for most of its preparation. Expanding Goldschmidt’s personal archive of photographs and notes, he travelled across Europe to study and document Eastern medieval ivories in museums and private collections.\textsuperscript{19} He discerned originals from counterfeits and Byzantine from non-Byzantine works. The two hundred and thirty-five identified pieces were then divided into five stylistic groups and dated between the tenth and the thirteenth century to provide a history of the evolution of the art of ivory carving in the Byzantine Empire.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen’s} immediate positive reception in the field is evident in the lauding words of the 1935 reviewers for The Art Bulletin: ‘(…) the authors must be heartily thanked for the clearly marked division of the material. Their groups will undoubtedly become the permanent classification of Byzantine ivories’.\textsuperscript{21} The publication’s relevance for later studies on Byzantine art is difficult to overstate. The asserted provenance and tentative chronology for the dentine images offered iconographic and stylistic bases for dating or furthering the analysis of Byzantine works in a variety of media. Ioli Kalavrezou, for instance, conceived her unsurpassed classification of Byzantine icons in steatite, published in 1985, in close conversation with Weitzmann’s ivory analysis.\textsuperscript{22} A few decades earlier, studies on Byzantine marble figurative carving engaged with the dentine works’ stylistic assessment to characterise the monumental reliefs. Significantly, the conclusions presented in these monographs are still considered valid by recent scholarship.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{18} Ivory studies seem to have bloomed in Europe at that time. See Giovanni Gasbarri, ‘Lo studio degli avori bizantini in Italia tra ’800 e ’900’, 30–57. The studies were mostly collection based, while Goldschmidt’s project adopted a historical approach that gathered artifacts from across collections. On the topic, see Brush, The Shaping of Art History, 132-54, esp. 132-134.

\textsuperscript{19} Weitzmann, Sailing with Byzantium, 60.

\textsuperscript{20} The Byzantine empire has a longer history, for it continued to exist until 1453. However, as far as I could observe, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century German literature its end is identified with the sack of Constantinople by the West on occasion of the Fourth Crusade (1204). In current narratives of the Byzantine empire, the tenth to thirteenth centuries represent the middle period.


\textsuperscript{22} Ioli Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, Byzantine Icons in Steatite, 2 vols., Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1985.

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However, over the years, Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s publication has met with criticism for the inconsistent and arbitrary partition of the ivories among the five stylistic groups.\footnote{I refer in particular to the criticisms by Anthony Cutler, _The Hand of the Master: Craftsmanship, Ivory, and Society in Byzantium (9th–11th Centuries)_ , Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994.} One group that has been particularly troublesome and that, for this reason, will be at the centre of the discussion to follow, is the first group presented in the volume, namely, _die malerische Gruppe_, or ‘the painterly group’. This group stands out in the corpus for its denomination and the rationale behind its appellation. Two of the other clusters are titled after emperors whose names are inscribed in one of the group members. The second group was designated ‘die Romanos Gruppe’ from an ivory plaque with the portrait of emperor Romanos and empress Eudokia, who have been plausibly identified with Romanos II (959-63) and his consort.\footnote{Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, 15 and 18, cat.n.34 and 77. The identity of emperor Romanos and Eudokia has been subject of debate in the literature, on which see Maria Parani, ‘The Romanos Ivory and the New Tokali Kilise: Imperial Costume as a Tool for Dating Byzantine Art’, _Cahiers Archéologiques_, 49, 2001, (15–28) 17-20 for a summary of the contention. Goldschmidt and Weitzmann were the first to argue for an identification of Romanos II and his wife Eudokia, while previous scholars identified the imperial couple with Romanos IV and his consort Eudokia, see _Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen_, 15 for the points in favour of either identifications and an argument for Romanos II. Weitzmann’s position was endorsed, among others, by Anthony Cutler, ‘The Date and Significance of the Romanos Ivory’, in _Byzantine East, Latin West: Historical Studies in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann_, ed. Christopher Moss and Katherine Kiefer, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995, 605–14 and by Maria Parani, ‘The Romanos Ivory and the New Tokali Kilise’, 17-25. Of a diverging opinion is Ioli Kalavrezou, ‘Eudokia Makrembolitissa and the Romanos Ivory’, _Dumbarton Oaks Papers_, 31, 1977, 305–28.} Similarly, the fourth ivory group was named ‘die Nikephoros Gruppe’ after the inscription from the Cortona ivory reliquary, which mentions emperor Nikephoros, unanimously believed to be Nikephoros Phokas (r. 963-69).\footnote{Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, 48-49, cat.n.77. Cutler, _The Hand of the Master_, 213.} The title for the two other clusters was chosen according to structural properties common to all members of the defined group. The Triptych Group owes its name to the tripartite format of its pieces and the Frame Group to the carved ornamental band gracing the upper and lower border of the ivory plaques.\footnote{Nicolas Oikonomides, ‘The Concept of Holy War and Two Tenth-Century Byzantine Ivories’, in _Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis_, ed. Timothy Miller and John Nesbitt, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995, 62–86.} The justification for the naming of the _Malerisch Gruppe_ lies in altogether
different principles honouring the stylistic and iconographic qualities of its ivories. The explanation is provided as follows:

The Painterly Group:

The denomination ‘painterly’ is attributed to this group because they depend on painted models in the choice and composition of their representations and the type of relief style. The frontal border (Vordergrenze) of the figures is a completely uniform, flat plane with the slight recession of each single figure. An impression of roundness is obtained through a deep undercutting, which often releases the figures from the background up to a minimal connection. An unmodelled sloping connects figures and ground, so that, with the exception of some heads, the actual modelling rarely exceeds the front face (Vorderfläche). At the same time, there are many overlaps of figures and objects, and through these, as well as through landscape and architectural background, and not least through the shadows cast by the undercut details and the free-worked domes and columns, the reliefs gain a strong spatial character. The figures have their feet in the air (cfr. nr.13) because in the paintings they take as example there is a continuous ground, which is omitted in the sculpture. The crossed nimbus of Christ is plain as in the paintings, while it is decorated with pearls in the sculptural groups. The lack of plastic modelling is compensated by a dense covering of the surface with incised wrinkles and strongly marked facial features, which gives the carving a more graphic than plastic character. Moreover, the practice to overrun the frame with parts of the composition (nr.4, 9, 10, 20) or let the wings of the angels overlap with the dome (nr.6, 26, 28) is derived from drawing practices. The technical peculiarity of the treatment of the garments (…) is also derived from painting (…). This technique is not used in all pieces, but those groups that have them exhibit an influence from the Painterly Group.

The relation with the painted prototype brings along a strong archaising element, which the models in their Renaissance movement adopted from classical antiquity. The architectural background as in nr.13 and 15 matches, for instance, the Menologion of Basil II from 1000, and is similar to images of the evangelists from the tenth century. In turn, they took these features from older paintings. The influence of antiquity is also present in the abundance and detailing of the garment motif, the wide variation of movements and gestures, the turning of the heads and the contrapposto, the execution of the anatomy, and the full faces.28

Late twentieth-century criticisms of Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s rationale for assembling the cluster have relied chiefly on the first line of his definition. The group was named as such because its members depended on painted models, although the authors hesitated to provide specific examples for the *gemalte Vorbilder*. Almost fifty years after Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s publication, Ioli Kalavrezou attempted to qualify the German scholars’ definition of the painterly cluster by providing further factual *comparanda* drawn from book illuminations.29 Despite this attempt, contemporary Byzantine ivory specialists are still critical of the criteria for definition, because affinities between the ivory plaques and Byzantine paintings can be found across the corpus.30 According to Anthony Cutler, it was a common artisanal practice to begin by sketching the figure or scene on the dentine tablet.31


The drawing would thus minimise the difference between the painterly and non-painterly pieces, disregarding their supposed Vorbilder. The shared origin of the pieces and a few other criticisms, addressed later in the paper, have pointed to the weaknesses of Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s analysis. Nevertheless, a contextualisation of their monumental opus in contemporaneous art historical discourses and practices redresses some of their problematic assessments, re-evaluates their endeavour, and situates their work in broader art history narratives.

How: The malerisch and style

‘Painterly’ was a fashionable term when the volume on Byzantine ivories was published. The adjective had been used in German art literature since the art historian Jacob Burckhardt introduced it in his guide to the art of Italy, Der Cicerone (1855), to deprecatingly describe Baroque sculpture and architecture. For Burckhardt, the unpleasant feature of post-Renaissance works was the animation of the surface through the effects of light and shadow in a manner more appropriate to painting than sculpture or architecture. The indelicate play of illuminated and dark areas blurred the neatness of a form’s lines causing an overall unclarity of its composition.

Burckhardt’s influential negative assessment of Baroque art was predicated on two assumptions based on the foundation of art theoretical and art historical discourses of his time. The first assumption was that the (re)creation of vivid light and shadow effects belonged to the art of painting – a precept inherited from Renaissance art treatises. According to the writings of Cennino Cennini, Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, and Giorgio Vasari, the quality of a painting was proportional to the illusion of depth and projection suggested by its figures.
The deception of volume, or rilievo as it came to be known in the Renaissance, was achieved by rendering the incidence of light on a three-dimensional object. The illusory roundness of form was attained by grading a colour area through application of black and white pigments. The logic behind the tripartite scheme is elucidated by Cennino Cennini in his instructions on how to paint mountains in the distance, in which ‘the darker elements in a landscape appear further back, while the brighter appear closer to the eye’. Therefore, for figures in the foreground, the body parts projecting more prominently towards the viewer should be highlighted in white, while those receding in space should fade towards blackness. The pivotal role of light and shadow effects in a painted image is clearly stated by Leonardo da Vinci. In his notes, posthumously published as the Trattato della pittura and translated into modern Italian, French, English, and German during the eighteenth century, he writes that ‘rilievo is the soul of painting’. Although the jargon for the light-shadow effects of the painted image varied over time, throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries the illusion of surface animation remained a defining feature of the art of the easel.


architecture diverged from the essence of their art and were the negative of Burckhardt and his contemporaries’ aesthetic paradigm.

The unfavourable assessment of post-Renaissance architecture and sculpture, however, was soon questioned by Burckhardt’s student Heinrich Wölfflin, who advocated for a more positive evaluation of Baroque art’s malerisch qualities.44 As brilliantly retraced by Alina Payne, the intellectual discourse that allowed Wölfflin to argue against his teacher’s position was caused by the arrival in Berlin of the Gigantomachy relief of the Pergamon altar.45

Fragments of the massive reliefs embellishing the Hellenistic monument’s socle were discovered in the village of Bergama, Türkiye, in 1865 by Carl Humann while serving as a road engineer for the expansion of the Turkish railway network.46 Humann, aware of the archaeological relevance of his discovery, urged for immediate intervention to save the remains. After negotiations with the Ottoman Sultan Abdülabiz (r. 1861-76), German archaeologists were authorised to pursue excavations at the site and export the ruins.47

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45 Payne, ‘Portable Ruins’, 169–89. Further intellectual, artistic, and scientific changes that may have contributed to the shift in opinion are explored by Potts, The Sculptural Imagination, 61-102.
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The revealing of the altar’s Gigantomachy frieze in Berlin to a small audience
of scholars and artists in 1879 caused great commotion among the spectators.48 At
that time, *das Relief* was certainly considered a sculptural work.49 However, the play
of light and shadow created by the gestural emphasis and imbricated forms of the
Pergamon reliefs quickly earned the frieze the adjective *malerisch*.50 Yet, the
depreciative connotations of ‘painterliness’ ill-suited the Gigantomachy reliefs.
According to some scholars, the frieze surpassed the beauty of the acclaimed
Parthenon marbles. They called into question the Winkelmannian claim of the
superiority of classical sculpture’s restrained and calm *ethos* over the *pathos* of
Hellenistic art.51 Moreover, the Pergamon finds challenged the reputation of the
Laocoön group as the pinnacle of Hellenistic sculpture and demanded a
reconsideration of the ‘evolution’ of post-Classical art.52 Although the sensibility of
the time dictated that the Pergamon frieze’s painterly features undermined its
sculptural purity, the relief could hardly be described as an artwork of lesser
quality.

The initial enthusiasm for the Pergamon findings was followed by a heated
debate on the ontological status of the reliefs. Emblematic of the diverging opinions
on the question are the views of archaeologist Alexander Conze and Munich
professor Heinrich von Brunn. Conze, director of the sculpture collection of the
Berlin Antikensammlung, postulated that relief art was considered a branch of
painting in ancient Greece and that the painterliness of the carved frieze should be
evaluated accordingly.53 Von Brunn, on the contrary, assigned the reliefs to the
category of architecture, arguing that their elaborate composition was expression of
the tectonic structure to which they belonged.54 The impossibility to reach consensus
on the status of the Pergamon relief among the three arts showed the
pretentiousness of their ontological boundaries. On this ground, Wölfflin was in a
favourable position to postulate that painterliness failed to define the essence of
painting and Baroque art, as Burckhardt presupposed by following Renaissance
precepts. He instead suggested that *malerisch* was a quality best expressed through

48 Payne, ‘Portable Ruins’, 170 footnote 8 for details. For incredulous reactions to the Pergamon
Johann Friedrich Gleditsch und Sohn, 1712, s.v. ‘Relief’: ‘Relief wird die erhobene gieß. grav. und
geschnitz. Arbeit genennet. Demi ou bas-relief, halb erhoben Arbeit’. Trans.: Relief is called a
mould, graven, or carved work in relief. *Demi ou bas-relief*, half raised work.
51 Payne, ‘Portable Ruins’, 178-79 on the debate about this aspect of the reliefs.
52 Payne, ‘Portable Ruins’, 174-76 with details on the discussion.
53 Alexander Conze, ‘Über das Relief der Griechen’, *Sitzungsberichte der königlichen preussischen
54 Heinrich von Brunn, ‘Über die kunstgeschichtliche Stellung der pergamenischen
the brush but also found in architecture and sculpture, a point he illustrated through the example of the Pergamon reliefs.55

Wölfflin first formulated the idea in his publication Renaissance und Barock from 1888 and revised and expanded his theory in a later work, Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe (1914).56 A malerisch work was defined by the impression of movement. Lines overlap; contours are blurred; forms are continuous, spiralling, and foreshortened; and light-shadow effects create the illusion of projection and recession on the picture plane.57 The painterly style emphasises a body’s mass and the confusion of individual forms, whereas its antipodal style, which Wölfflin names linear or zeichnerisch or plastisch, and considers more germane to sculpture, accentuates contours and the figure’s isolation.58 Its closed, finite, and straight lines generate individually defined forms that neatly stand out against their background.59

Fig. 1 Plate I from Adolph Goldschmidt and Kurt Weitzmann, Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.–XIII. Jahrhunderts: Reliefs (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1934) illustrating the Dormition of the Virgin (left) and the Entry into Jerusalem (right) from the Painterly Group. Photo https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/goldschmidt1934bd2/0103/image.info


57 Wölfflin, Renaissance und Barock, 15-21/30-34.

58 Wölfflin, Renaissance und Barock, 21-22/35-36.

Wölfflin’s positive re-evaluation of *malerisch* and his definition of the painterly style provide a basis for better grasping Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s characterization of the eponymous ivory group. The significant overlaying of objects and figures in the chiselled images and the shadows cast by openwork details are features expected from a *malerisch* work. Moreover, the overlapping and dark areas create the ‘illusion of round forms’ and a ‘sense of space’ animating the ‘flat surface’ of the reliefs. The two painterly ivories opening the *Die Byzantinische Elfenbeinskulpturen*’s catalogue of illustrations are a perfect case in point (fig.1). The crowds attending the Dormition of the Virgin and Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem are arranged on multiple layers, suggesting the effect of depth, while dark shadows bring closer to the foreground the undercut elements. The painterly qualities of the *Malerische Gruppe* thus transcend the mimicry of a painted model. As the authors clarify in the second line of their description, the ivories are *malerisch* in the ‘style of their relief’. Those features copied from actual paintings, such as the haloes’ plainness, the lack of a ground line, and the specific way of rendering the folding of garments, are corroborating yet distinct reasons to name the group *malerische*.

Echoes of Wölfflin’s theory of style are not confined to the definition of the Painterly Group. Their reverberation throughout the ivories’ analysis can help clarify one of the criticised aspects of Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s taxonomic work. The German scholars’ adoption of *plastisch* as an analytical term to classify the reliefs has been discredited because of the apparent vagueness of the word. However, although ‘plastic’ and sculpture have not received the same extensive considerations of painterly and painting in art theories, a perusal of *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen* demonstrates that the term *plastisch* was used consistently with two specific connotations. First, it engaged with Wölfflin’s definition of the linear style in opposition to the painterly. Second, it referred to the formal qualities of a sculptural work characterised by roundness and projection. A comparison of Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s analysis of the Romanos Group’s defining features with the description of the Liverpool triptych from the *Triptychon Gruppe* can illustrate the difference. The Romanos ivories are the quintessence of Wölfflin’s *linear, plastisch Stil*. Their carved forms are demarcated by rigorous, straight lines and stand clear against their background, while a balanced composition replaces the confusion of the masses observed in the Painterly Group. For instance, a peculiarity of the Romanos ivories, of which the Harbaville Triptych

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60 *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 13.
64 *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 14.
from the Louvre Museum offers an accomplished example (fig.2-3), is the string of pearls around the haloes’ edges, which neatly delimits the nimbus’ round form from the ground.65 Moreover, the spacing between the figures gives the impression of restrained and composite gestures further reinforced by the delicate lines that delineate the vertical falling of the garments’ folds. In the scholars’ words, the Romanos ivories’ features are so sublimely plastic that they represent ‘the Middle Byzantine plastic style at its purest’.66

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66 Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, 14: ‘In diesen Reliefs besitzen wir am reinsten den plastischen abgeklärten mittelbyzantinischen Stil’.
The Liverpool triptych (fig.4-5) belongs to the *Triptychon Gruppe*, which chronologically followed the Romanos group and was artistically affiliated to it, albeit qualitatively inferior.\(^6^7\) It shows a Crucifixion scene in the characteristically Middle Byzantine composition, flanked by busts of overseeing angels and saints (fig.4). The single figures’ silhouette is neat against the ground, and the distribution of forms is balanced and clear. However, the foreshortening and undercutting of the figures lead Goldschmidt and Weitzmann to approximate the Liverpool piece to the painterly cluster.\(^6^8\) Nevertheless, they notice that the triptych has a greater *plastisch* strength than the Romanos Group.\(^6^9\) In this context, *plastisch* should be understood as the adjectival form of the German word for sculpture: *Plastik*. The figures’ greater plasticity consists in the higher projection of their relief (fig.5) compared to the more ‘carefully balanced bas-reliefs’ of the Romanos ivories (fig.3).\(^7^0\)

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\(^6^8\) *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 18.

\(^6^9\) *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 18.

\(^7^0\) *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 18: ‘sorgfältig abgewogenen Flachrelief’. It is important to note, however, that in the Romanos ivories the projection of the relief is greater than Weitzmann is willing to acknowledge. The observation is driven by his argument of
Plastisch in its double connotation returns in the description of the Malerisch Group quoted above. The plain nimbi that distinguish the painterly figures from the plastic ones lack the immediacy of form conveyed by the pearled haloes, while the painterly reliefs’ overall flat surface deprives the carving of a sculptural, projecting modelling. The terminology adopted by Goldschmidt and Weitzmann was thus consistent in itself and conformed to the linguistic conventions of their time.

The two scholars were aware of Wölfflin’s ideas when they worked on Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, if only because Goldschmidt had built his earlier analysis of Carolingian and Ottonian ivories upon Wölfflin’s stylistic dichotomy. The two stylistic ivory groups opening Goldschmidt’s study, the Ada Group and the Lothar Group, are defined by contrasting features that follow Wölfflin’s characterization of the linear and painterly styles. The Ada cluster has ‘clear outlines and peaceful modelling’, while the Lothar pieces show a ‘painterly interlocking of forms, brisk expressive movements and strong light and shadow contrasts’.  

The crossing of stylistic categories in the analysis of Western and Byzantine works may be an expected consequence of the collaborative nature of the later volume. However, further similarities between the Carolingian and Byzantine ivory examination and Wölfflin’s theory of style suggest that the corpora’s analysis engaged with broader art historical conversations at the time. The narratives framing the investigation of the Frankish and Eastern pieces follow a strikingly similar path. A first set, strongly sculptural or painterly in style, is superseded by a group that is stylistically opposed. The following clusters are affiliated to the latter group, although their stylistic features are increasingly nuanced by elements from the former set of ivories. Thus, for instance, the boldly malerisch Painterly Group and the purely plastic Romanos Group are followed by the mildly plastic Triptych and Nikephoros clusters, whose ivories show openwork canopies and columns of clear painterly derivation. The last and latest group of the corpus is the Frame Group, an outgrowth of the Nikephoros Group but with stronger painterly features. Some figures are deeply undercut; the treatment of the drapery is more graphic in the richness of lines, and the movement is freer than the restrained gestures of the more plastisch ivories.

resemblance between the Romanos Group and ancient sculpture more than by the reality of the reliefs.


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The overall dynamic of opposition between the styles of the following eras was a common framing device in art historical analysis of the time. Wölfflin was the main proponent of a dialectical and cyclical nature of the process. The two styles defined in his essay on Renaissance and Baroque art were to follow one another in alternate phases, as the comparison between any two artworks from contiguous eras can demonstrate. The scholar had developed the comparative study into a pedagogic and scientific method. In Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, pictures of works of opposing style are consistently paired throughout the pages, visually training and persuading the readers of the binary analysis. Goldschmidt and Weitzmann seem to have adopted and adjusted Wölfflin’s methodological frame to their ivory examination. The oeuvre on the Byzantine dentine reliefs, therefore, calls for a reconsideration in its stylistic and chronological assessments. This is because the evaluations depended on early twentieth century aesthetic and on abstract, analytical frameworks extraneous to the Byzantine works.

What: Das Relief and photography

The late nineteenth and early twentieth-century theories of style and their evolution over time are insufficient to elucidate Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s approach to the relief of the Painterly Group ivories. In the following sections, I will suggest that the writings of Adolf von Hildebrand and Aloïs Riegl, whose work centred on das Relief, further informed their analysis by offering a framework for approaching the Byzantine reliefs.

Artist Adolf von Hildebrand became a highly celebrated theorist when his treatise Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst was published in 1893 and rapidly reprinted in seven editions and translated into foreign languages by the turn of the century. The essay provides a theory for the making of artistic form deeply

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73 For a summary of the range of theories that tried to explain the reasons for a style change, see Walter Passarge, Die Philosophie der Kunstgeschichte in der Gegenwart, Berlin: Junker und Dünneb, 1930.
conditioned by the painterly aesthetic of the time and reliant on contemporaneous conceptions of human vision. As the author explains in the introduction to the treatise, the eyes perceive reality through parallel, two-dimensional planes, while form’s three-dimensionality is mentally reconstructed by the experience of the real world. Cues such as shadows and the overlying of objects signal spatial depth. The grasping of the difference between reality and the optical impression is crucial for the artists who in their works are concerned with the recreation of the strata through which an object is apprehended. The theory of the parallel planes is obviously construed in favour of painting, although Hildebrand, as a practicing sculptor, was motivated to extend its logic to sculpture. The possibility to assimilate the three-dimensional art to the planar vision theory was arguably inspired by contemporaneous discussions on the ontological ambiguity of the Pergamon carvings and articulated through the concept of the relief, die Reliefauffassung. The relief, sharing features with painting, sculpture, and architecture, provided the model for a theory encompassing all artistic expressions.

While Hildebrand’s ideas were nurtured by conversations on the Hellenistic reliefs, in his essay he illustrates the artistic concept through the Parthenon marbles, of which he possessed a small collection of casts in his Florentine villa. The shallow classical reliefs were the perfect artistic translation of the planar stratum through which reality is optically apprehended: artistically, the visual plane should be conceived of as two parallel glass planes defining the relief’s front (vordere Fläche) and rear surface (Grundfläche). The figures appear inside the space of uniform depth defined by the planes. The front plane is the most important for the artist as the relief’s highest points lie on this surface, which demarcates the threshold between the fictional and the real space. From the front plane, the form


Podro, The Critical Historian of Art, 73. Potts, The Sculptural Imagination, 125. On the superiority of painting and the consequences of this supremacy for sculpture, see in particular Potts, The Sculptural Imagination and Hall, The World as Sculpture.

Hildebrand, Das Problem der Form, 39-40/241.

Hildebrand, Das Problem der Form, 45-49/244-245 and 65/252.

Potts, The Sculptural Imagination, 61-62.


Hildebrand, Das Problem der Form, 72/254.
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should then develop in depth, receding away from the viewer. Any suggestion of forward movement or any transgression of the front plane is to be avoided. The optical, two-dimensional apprehension of figures and their reading in depth is further facilitated by smooth foreshortening, as if the form was spreading in the space in between the front plane and the background. While in the case of a flat painting, the concept of the relief is achieved through colours and lines, sculpture, on the other hand, must proceed through the unification of parallel, relief-like planes, providing the figure’s total volume.

The emphasis on the front plane of the relief, its development in depth, and the notion of a uniform space defined by anterior and rear surfaces, were the most appraised and readily assimilated concepts of Hildebrand’s theory by his contemporaries. Wölfflin, for instance, in his review of Das Problem der Form for the German newspaper Allgemeine Zeitung, writes that these were ‘the most beautiful and most clear’ words written on the topic of classical reliefs. The art historian’s enthusiasm is reiterated in his expanded and revised work on the painterly and linear styles from 1914, in which he applies Hildebrand’s concepts to the analysis of Renaissance and Baroque paintings. Aloïs Riegl also contemplated Hildebrand’s theory when he conceptualised his Spätrömische Kunst-Industrie, a point to which the article will return.

Fig.6 Detail of plate I from Adolph Goldschmidt and Kurt Weitzmann, Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.–XIII. Jahrhunderts: Reliefs (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1934) illustrating the Entry into Jerusalem relief from the Painterly Group. Photo https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/goldschmidt1934bd2/0103/image.info

86 Hildebrand, Das Problem der Form, 64-65/251-252.
87 Hildebrand, Das Problem der Form, 52-53/246.
88 Hildebrand, Das Problem der Form, 65/251.
89 Heinrich Wölfflin, Kleine Schriften (1886-1933), ed. Joseph Gantner, Basel: Benno Schwabe & Co., 1946, (75-89) 87-88: ‘[…] ist wohl das Schönste und Klarste, was je über diesen Gegenstand geschrieben wurde’. The review was originally published in Allgemeine Zeitung, 1893 11 July.
Hildebrand’s popular and widely accepted formulation of the relief appears to have guided Weitzmann’s approach to the carved ivories. For instance, one characteristic of the painterly group is that a ‘front boundary’ defines the ‘uniform flat surface of the figures’, the modelling of which ‘does not exceed the front plane’. In the literature engaging with Weitzmann’s definition of the group, the Vordergrenze and the limitation of the modelling to the front have been understood to describe the relief’s overall flat surface, whose forms do not project beyond the picture frame. The impression is suggestively offered by a side view of the ivory.

91 Cutler, The Hand of the Master, 189.
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with Entry into Jerusalem at the Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, formerly known as the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, in Berlin (fig.6-8). The scene, delimited by the perforated canopy distinctive of the Painterly Group, shows Christ, seated on a donkey, being welcomed by a festive crowd at the gates of Jerusalem. While the even and shallow surface of the carved figures at first confirms the above reading of Weitzmann’s passage, the lack of projecting details is a property shared by many more pieces across the ivory corpus. However, Weitzmann’s definition assumes a meaning specific to the Entry into Jerusalem and other painterly ivories if read against Hildebrand’s concept of the relief. According to the theorist, the relief by definition develops behind a glass plane which is touched only by the carving’s most projecting parts. The Byzantine ivory group is thus peculiar because most of the figures’ surface seems to lean on the front boundary. Moreover, following Hildebrand’s idea of the relief unfolding into depth, the constriction of the ivory modelling to the Vorderfläche, the front surface, must refer to the lack of details in the depth of the figures. Depth was the only possible direction for the relief to develop from the front plane. The oblique view of the painterly ivory with the Entry into Jerusalem confirms such a reading of Weitzmann’s comment (fig.8). Whereas the faces receive a treatment in the round, the rich lines suggestive of the folding of the garments stop at the relief’s edge, leaving the surface just around the Vorderfläche unmodelled. The only other ivories to share this specificity are the group stylistically closest to the Painterly, namely the Frame Group.

Beyond the question of the glass planes, Hildebrand’s teachings on the legibility of artistic form seem to have been integrated into Weitzmann’s text in the discussion of the Romanos Group, the purely sculptural group of the corpus. The figures’ postures, which in line with their plastic style avoid foreshortening, are described to develop parallel to the picture plane and ‘to become as evident as possible’. When Weitzmann wrote this sentence, he was probably thinking of the three-quarter figures in ivories from the Romano Group such as the Palazzo Venezia triptych (fig.9). The Virgin Mary and Saint John to the left and right of Christ

93 Cutler, The Hand of the Master, 189.
94 Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, 21.
95 Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, 14: ‘Zugleich werden Verkürzungen möglichst vermieden und die Handlung der Figuren und ihre Beziehung zueinander möglichst augenscheinlich werden’.
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expand the intercessory gesture of their hands to a greater degree than their half-profile posture would require. While the description evocatively translates into words the three-quarter figures’ adjustments to the relatively shallow depth of the

Fig.9 Detail of plate X from Adolph Goldschmidt and Kurt Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.–XIII. Jahrhunderts: Reliefs* (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1934) illustrating the Palazzo Venezia triptych with Deesis and Saints from the Romanos Group.

relief, the casual remark on the immediacy of their gestures is coherent with Hildebrand’s planes of vision. By spreading out on the plane, the three-dimensional form is readily intelligible because it approximates the two-dimensional impressions received by the retina.97

Nevertheless, the interpretation of Weitzmann’s description of the ivory reliefs in light of Hildebrand’s theory does not fully justify the partition of some pieces among the stylistic clusters. For instance, Anthony Cutler’s objections to including the icon with the Dormition of the Virgin, now on the cover of Otto III’s Gospels (Clm 4453) at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich (fig.10-11), into the Painterly Group remains valid even according to the proposed new reading of

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97 Hildebrand, *Das Problem der Form*, 52-53/246.

Fig. 10 Detail of plate I from Adolph Goldschmidt and Kurt Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.–XIII. Jahrhunderts: Reliefs* (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1934) illustrating the Dormition of the Virgin from the Painterly Group.

Fig. 11 Side view of the Dormition of the Virgin relief from the book cover of Otto III’s Gospels (Clm 4453), tenth century. Ivory, 14.5 x 11 cm. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. Photo: https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb00103517?page=1

Weitzmann’s text.98 The icon’s relief surface is articulated into several planes of depth, and the figures’ modelling continues on their sides (fig. 11). The sense of space and attention to volumes in the Munich plaquette is significantly different from the frontal and flattened surface of the Entry into Jerusalem icon in Berlin (fig. 7-8).99

However, it is possible that Weitzmann never saw the luxurious Gospel book cover in person. Although in his biography he declares that in preparation for the publication, he travelled widely across Europe to study first-hand the objects, it should not be assumed that he visited all sixty-seven cities scattered from the United States to Georgia and England to Southern Italy.100 Weitzmann, for instance, admits that he never saw the pieces from museums in North America until after the publication of the volume.101 Their analysis relied on Goldschmidt’s study of the Byzantine ivories on the occasion of one of his transatlantic travels.102 Within

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100 Weitzmann, *Sailing with Byzantium*, 60. First-hand observation was a staple of Goldschmidt’s methodology see Brush, *The Shaping of Art History*, 92.
101 Weitzmann, *Sailing with Byzantium*, 60.
Europe, mobility was relatively easy and fast through the extensive railroad network produced by the same nineteenth-century railway fever that had brought about the discovery of the Pergamon reliefs. Despite the devastating events of the 1914-18 war, the early twentieth-century railway works continued to create ambitious projects, such as the extension of the Orient Express to include northern Italy and the Balkans on the route from Paris to Istanbul. However, the Great Depression caused by the collapse of the American economy in 1929 dramatically changed the reality of life and touring prospects within Europe. Travelling became an increasingly expensive activity that must have put to the test the tight budget on which Weitzmann was living. It thus stands to reason that the young scholar expended his resources to visit those places not yet explored by Goldschmidt; for the remainder, he could rely on the professor’s archive of photographs, on his notes, and on his experience.

If the above speculations reflect the conditions under which Weitzmann worked on the volume, the scholar was possibly relying on a photograph when he assigned the Dormition ivory from the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek to the Painterly Group. Goldschmidt had surely studied the Byzantine plaque while visiting the Munich library to study its rich collection of Western medieval ivories. In the publications on Carolingian and Ottonian material, a photograph of the Byzantine denteine icon features as a *comparandum* to the Western pieces' ornamental motifs (fig.12). The same photograph was used in the illustration catalogue of the Byzantine ivories. Goldschmidt’s works were praised by his contemporaries for the precision of their photographic documentation, which in the early twentieth century had just superseded engraving as new means of illustration for art historical publications. Monochrome daguerreotypes were acclaimed for the superior

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106 Goldschmidt, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der Zeit der karolingischen und sächsischen Kaiser*, vol. 1 fig. 4 and vol. 2 fig. 25. In the bibliography on the ivory icon cited by Weitzmann, Goldschmidt’s second volume is the most recent publication but the first one to offer a photograph and not an engraving of the ivory.

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precision and faithfulness of details they could achieve, while giving a more objective and scientific tone to art historical analysis.\textsuperscript{108} The neutrality of photography, however, was being unconsciously counteracted by the acknowledged need to carefully stage the objects to capture their salient features. Wölfflin, for instance, writing on the subject on three occasions for the Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst, contended that the shot’s lighting and angle should reflect the style of the artwork.\textsuperscript{109}


The extent to which Wölfflin’s precepts were observed in contemporaneous photographic practices is hard to gauge. However, a close look at the black-and-white illustration of the Byzantine icon suggests that the light shining from the top-left corner was staged to ensure the legibility of the composition (fig.10). The cast shadows fall close to the undercut details and within the à-jour worked canopy framing the scene without obscuring the carving of the figures. For instance, the pool of darkness underneath the right angel takes up the space in between the winged body and the mourning crowd below without overshadowing it.


Furthermore, it may be suggested that the lighting staged for the Dormition ivory valorises the *malerische* qualities of the carving by accentuating the cast shadows and the garments’ deep lines. However, it does not allow for an appreciation of the layers of depth with which the side figures are distributed because it brings the bright areas of the photographed relief to an apparent equality of height, nor does it deem possible an observation of the roundness of forms from the head-on view offered by the picture. Moreover, in the illustration catalogue of the Byzantine ivories complementing the analytical text, the juxtaposition of the Dormition of the Virgin and the Entry into Jerusalem reveals the degree of apparent similarity that could be deduced from a comparison of the black and white images (fig.1). This consideration may excuse Weitzmann’s inappropriate inclusion of the Dormition ivory in the Painterly Group and could justify other questionable attributions throughout the study. However, it also acts as a warning that the scholar’s analysis of the ivories was as much a scrupulous scrutiny of their photographs.\(^{110}\)

**Why: Raum, Vorbilder, and the place of Byzantine art**

There is little doubt that during Weitzmann’s formative years at universities in Germany and Vienna, the young scholar was exposed to one of Aloïs Riegl’s major and long-lasting contributions to the field of art history, namely, *Spätromische Kunst-Industrie*, first published in 1901.\(^{111}\) The study became immediately successful amongst German-speaking audiences and contributed to establishing a new academic discipline.\(^{112}\) Liberating Late Antique art from its ancillary role of bearer of

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\(^{110}\) It is worth mentioning that on two occasions Goldschmidt reflects on the lack of verismutide between the photographs and the reality of the reliefs: Goldschmidt, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der Zeit der karolingischen und sächsischen Kaiser*, vol. 1, 3, and 47 cat.n.84.


ancient forms for posterity, it was a reappraisal of Late Antiquity as a period with a style of its own, but without which modern art could not have come into being.\textsuperscript{113}

Riegl’s analysis was founded on contemporaneous theories of vision, and, as often noted in the literature, was in conversation with Hildebrand’s theoretical treatise.\textsuperscript{114} Most emblematic of the intellectual obligation to Das Problem der Form is the pivotal role played by das Relief in the Viennese scholar’s analysis. For Hildebrand, the relief was the artistic principle defining all arts. According to Riegl, the sculptural relief was the ideal medium for art historical investigation and the place where ‘the Kunstwollen of antiquity […] can be seen very immediately and clearly’.\textsuperscript{115}

In Late Roman art, the Kunstwollen, the driving force behind artistic change, was the liberation of the individual form.\textsuperscript{116} In the relief, the striving for formal emancipation was manifested in the gradual detachment of figures from their ground and the ensuing creation of ‘space’. Riegl’s analysis of the frieze narrating Constantine’s battle against Maxentius in the Arch of Constantine illustrates the new spatial transformation brought about by the Kunstwollen.\textsuperscript{117} The deeply undercut contours outlining the individual forms sever the relation between forms and background, characteristic of earlier reliefs. Riegl continues to argue that the gap between the visible front face of the figures (sichtbare Vorderfläche) and the ground, becomes a free sphere of space to be inhabited, or a niche.\textsuperscript{118} The articulation of the carved frieze as a space defined by front and back surfaces is reminiscent of the Hildebrandian plane-enclosed relief. For Riegl, however, the sichtbare Vorderfläche clarifies that the space-defining element is the object and is standing in opposition to the ground. The visible front face of the figures implies an invisible back side that would not exist if the form was contiguous with the rear

\textsuperscript{113} Cfr. Riegl’s introduction to Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie.
\textsuperscript{114} Similarly to the German art theorist Adolf von Hildebrand, the Viennese scholar embraced the post-Herbartian conceptualization of vision through planes. Riegl explicitly mentions the planes of vision in Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie, 18/23. On this and other shared characteristic of the two scholars, see Podro, The Critical Historian, 71-97. Margaret Olin, Forms of Representation, 134-35. Iversen, Alois Riegl: Art History, 74-75.

\textsuperscript{115} Riegl, Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie, 51 footnote 1: ‘Die Kunstwollen des Alterthums […] lässt sich daher an Werken der Reliefkunst am unmittelbarsten und deutlichsten demonstrieren.’/58 footnote 15.

\textsuperscript{116} Riegl, Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie, 47/52.

\textsuperscript{117} Riegl, Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie, 47-48/52-54. Bibliography on the Arch of Constantine is extensive; a recent study of its reliefs accompanied by historiographic considerations can be found in Brian Rose, ‘Reconsidering the frieze on the Arch of Constantine’, Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2021:1, 1-36.

\textsuperscript{118} Riegl, Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie, 47: ‘Zwischen die sichtbare Vorderfläche der Figuren und die Grundebene hat sich eine freie Raumsphäre, gleichsam eine Nische, eingeschoben: nur so tief, um die Figuren darin raumfüllend und freiraumumflossen, und somit noch immer nach größter Möglichkeit der Ebene angenähert erscheinen zu lassen’,/53.
surface. This is the first and only instance in which Riegl uses *Vorderfläche*, which in the original text must be distinguished from *Oberfläche*, the carved surface of a figure. It should also be distinguished from *Ebene*, a general surface.¹¹⁹ The stringency of the argument is conveyed by the strength of the unusual term.

It is too empirical to draw a connection between *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen* and Riegl’s work solely on the basis of their similar use of *Vorderfläche* in the analysis of their respective reliefs.¹²⁰ Weitzmann employs the word twice and only to define the modelled surface of the deeply undercut forms of the Painterly and the Frame Groups. As noted above, the figures’ sides are left unshaped by the chisel. The *Vorderfläche*, as in Riegl’s work, emphasises the visible and modelled surfaces in opposition to the carved but unmodelled sides not visible from a frontal view of the relief.

However, a few of Weitzmann’s observations on the Romanos Group corroborate the suggestion that the younger scholar was in part reacting to Riegl’s text. The connection between object and ground is a defining feature of the Romanos ivories (fig.3) and sets them in opposition to the painterly reliefs’ undercut and detached forms (fig.7).¹²¹ Weitzmann’s conclusion that the prototypes for the plastic group must have been ancient relief sculptures is in line with Riegl’s definition of relief art from before the time of Constantine, when the emancipation of form and ground had yet to be achieved.¹²² Furthermore, the qualification of the space created in the Romanos ivories’ pictures is indebted to the Late Roman reliefs’ analysis by the Viennese scholar. The ivory scenes’ background is free from any framing devices and left ‘indefinite’ by an absence of any suggestion of landscape.¹²³ Moreover, the composition is finely balanced, symmetry is accentuated, and the baldachins are avoided, so as not to trouble the ‘ideal impression of space’ (ideellen Raumeindruck).¹²⁴ Indefiniteness, the ideal impression of space, and *Räumlichkeit* are the words used by Riegl to characterise the new role of ground in Late Roman reliefs after it lost connection with the figures.¹²⁵ According to the scholar’s teleological view, art moved from a planar relation between figures and ground – exemplified by the Egyptian low reliefs – to a spatial dimension characteristic of

¹¹⁹ The nuance between these terms is barely possible to convey in English translation.
¹²⁰ It should be mentioned that the word does not occur in Goldschmidt’s four volumes on Western ivories. Nor does it in Wölfflin’s publications, to my knowledge.
¹²¹ *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 14: ‘Der Romanos-Stil unterschneidet die Figuren nicht, sondern setzt die Modellierung derselben fort bis zur Berührung des Grundes, mit dem sie in fester Fühlung stehen’.
¹²² *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 14: ‘(…) sondern nehmen den antiken Reliefstil auf’.
¹²³ *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 14.
¹²⁴ *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 14: ‘Die Komposition ist feinfühlig abgewogen, die Symmetrie betont und die Anbringung von Baldachinen völlig vermieden, um den ideellen Raumeindruck nicht zu stören’.
modern art.\textsuperscript{126} The ground’s full transformation into space was accomplished through the invention of linear perspective in Western art, for which the emptied ground of Late Roman artworks would be a needed intermediary step. Whereas in the West, the further change was already in place in medieval times, in Byzantine art, the Late Roman \textit{Kunstwollen} remained unaffected until the end of the empire. Riegl illustrates this point through the example of the gold expanses characteristic of Byzantine mosaics.\textsuperscript{127} Weitzmann was thus adhering to Riegl’s ideas on the shared treatment of space between Late Roman and Byzantine artworks in his definition of the Romanos ivories’ empty and ideal background.

Moreover, it is tempting to find in Riegl’s work a justification for Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s presupposition of \textit{antike Vorbilder}, not only for the plastic, but also for the Painterly Group. Although Byzantine art after Iconoclasm (ninth century) was beyond the chronological scope of Riegl’s study, the author offers a few insights on the subject. He claims that the stability of the ideal space in the art of Byzantium allowed its artists to draw from earlier examples without undermining the teleological evolution of art. The art historian concludes by wishing for a future study that could demonstrate the links between Byzantine art, archaic classical Greek art (read: sculpture), and paintings from the Roman empire.\textsuperscript{128} Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s publication seems to respond to Riegl’s request. While the connection between figures and ground in the Romanos ivories bespeaks of their ancient sculptural prototypes, the Painterly Group’s antique models differ. They instead are mediated by mediation tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantine book illustrations known for their classicising motifs, such as the detailing of the garments, the architectural elements, and the anatomy of the bodies.\textsuperscript{129}

A fundamental methodological difference, however, must be drawn between the Viennese and the German scholar. Riegl posited in art itself the causes of change. The possibility to define Late Antiquity as an independent art historical field was argued for by demonstrating that it represented a new phase in the evolutionary scheme of art. Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, on the contrary, searched in historical circumstances the reasons for art’s peculiarities. The ivories’ initial adoption of painterly motifs is justified by the Byzantines’ alleged resistance to ‘purely plastic representations’ (read: statues), of pagan cult images at the time of

\textsuperscript{126} Riegl’s teleological approach is clearly stated in his introduction, \textit{Die spätömische Kunst-Industrie}, 5/9.

\textsuperscript{127} Riegl, \textit{Die spätömische Kunst-Industrie}, 8/12, and 118/125.

\textsuperscript{128} Riegl, \textit{Die spätömische Kunst-Industrie}, 118/125.

\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen}, 12.
Iconoclasm (eighth and ninth century). The copying of sculptural models could occur only at a later moment, when the fear of idolatry had diminished.\(^{130}\)

Moreover, it is wiser to suppose that the authors of the *Spätrömische Kunst-Industrie* and *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen* were all engaging with a prickly issue that had occupied scholars on Medieval and Byzantine art for nearly a century, namely *die byzantinische Frage*. The Byzantine Question was a scholarly debate over the standing of Byzantine art in the narrative of change and evolution of the Western world from ancient to medieval and into modern.\(^{131}\) On German soil, the question was not devoid of nationalistic interests since the marriage between the Byzantine princess Theophano and Emperor Otto II in 972 historically proved a strong and lasting tie between the Byzantines and the ‘medieval German people’. The questionable reputation of Byzantium, however, posed a challenge to national pride and needed to be redressed.\(^{132}\) The disrepute of the Byzantine world was heritage of a millenary tradition of rivalry between the Eastern and Western medieval empires, epitomised by the infamous account penned by Liutprand the Bishop of Cremona, on their immoral customs.\(^{133}\) Next to Liutprand’s text, often-quoted in nineteenth century scholarship, Lorenzo Ghiberti’s negative assessment of Byzantine art and Giorgio Vasari’s notorious elaborations thereupon bolstered the prejudice. The stiff and rough *maniera greca vecchia* was the antithesis of the Vasarian ‘modern way’ of painting defined by a harmonic composition and accurate application of lights and shadow on the surface.\(^{134}\)

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\(^{130}\) *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 14 : ‘Es ist auch anzunehmen, daß der Ikonoklasmus die an heidnische Statuen erinnernden plastischen Gottesbilder energischer bekämpfte als die gemalten Erzählungen, und daß es nach dem Ende der Bilderverfolgung länger dauerte, bis man zur rein plastischen Darstellung solcher Kultbilder als bis zur plastischen Wiedergabe der gemalten Historien schritt’.


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Byzantium between the glorified ancient world and the West was slowly and laboriously emerging in scholarship as an argument to re-evaluate the art of the empire of the east and its place in art historical narratives. However, it risked transforming Byzantine art into a mere repository of antiquity.\(^{135}\)

Riegl explicitly addresses the *byzantinische Frage* in the concluding paragraphs of the chapter on sculpture, but despite his innovative approach he reaches rather conventional conclusions.\(^{136}\) In Byzantine art, the presence of archaizing elements was a result of its unchanged *Kunstwollen* since ancient times. The permanence of the ‘art’s will’ hindered Byzantium from any contributions to artistic developments in the West.\(^{137}\) In Riegl’s teleological narrative, Byzantine art was a side show and a dead end.

Some thirty years later, when Goldschmidt and Weitzmann worked on their joint publication, the *Frage* was experiencing a moment of intellectual stasis.\(^{138}\) Nevertheless, in their discussion the authors engage with the latest developments of the debate, cementing in history the worth and merits of Byzantine art:\(^{139}\)

Very obviously[,] the question is what artistic significance these Byzantine sculptures have to claim. If one only considers the negative properties, such as the lack of liveliness and variety, the little freedom and the limitation of independent invention, the esteem is very low. But one must look at the positive sides: the memorability of what is considered representative and the transformation of antiquity that was handed to the Western Middle Ages. (The motifs) are taken from Greco-Roman and Early Christian sculpture. Statues, sarcophagi, and pure reliefs equally contributed to the Byzantine production, and in the fusion of the impressions lies an independent creation and is not a mere copy. […] Byzantine art owes its fertilization of Western art to the easily teachable and memorable of the selection and simplification of the antique design, which is alive in itself. In the representation of the human body, the uneducated medieval artist was not capable of easily receiving classic art, as it was possible for him in the forms prepared from

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\(^{137}\) Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie*, 121/129.


Elisa Galardi  ‘Unframing’ Byzantine ivories: painterliness, reliefs, and the place of Byzantine art in early twentieth-century German scholarship

Byzantium. Byzantium gave to the western artist an easier feeling for the pure and close to nature inventions of ancient times.140

The paragraph offers a concise summary of the byzantinische Frage and a solution to its dilemma, elaborating on Byzantine art’s intermediary role between Antiquity and the West. The connection between Byzantium and the Abendland had been demonstrated by Goldschmidt in his earlier publications on Western ivories, in which Byzantine elements are identified in pieces from all periods, with particular frequency in Ottonian times.141 The ties between the Byzantine ivories and the past are in turn illustrated throughout the analysis of Die byzantinische Elfenbeinskulpturen, in which emphasis is placed on ancient paintings and sculptures as Vorbilder for the style of the eastern reliefs. Motifs were chosen, simplified, recomposed, and presented to an ‘uneducated’ West that could not have understood the complex forms of classical art. Byzantium had preserved what was important from antiquity and handed it to the West in original elaborations.

Whether the authors of Die byzantinische Elfenbeinskulpturen were committed to contributing to the Byzantine Question or were reproducing an intellectual convention of their time is unclear. Malerisch, however, is a striking choice for the name of the first of the Byzantine ivory groups. The denomination stands out among the other clusters’ names. It engages with a critical term that had determined the fall and rise of Baroque art and that had allowed for a reconsideration of the artistic assessment of Hellenistic sculpture. Besides demonstrating the intellectual modernity of the authors, the choice possibly aspired to relaunch an interest in the value of Byzantium through its ivories.


141 Goldschmidt, Die Elfenbeinskulpturen vols 1-4, passim. In vol 2, on Ottonian works, over a quarter of the text images for comparative material illustrates Byzantine ivories.
Conclusions

Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s study of Byzantine ivories is monumental in its endeavour to collect, present, and find a place for Byzantine art within contemporaneous Western-centric conversations. It is a testament to the need to categorize Byzantium in relation to dominant conversations on the Antique, the Renaissance, and Baroque art and in relation to art historical narratives preoccupied with a dialectical examination of works. Therefore, it is problematic to rely on the authors’ analysis for further assessments of Byzantine artworks without considering the intellectual ground that informed their observations. Nevertheless, Goldschmidt and Weitzmann’s ivory study remains seminal insofar as it demonstrates that the younger and often neglected fields of Byzantine and Medieval studies have much to offer to a history of the discipline. Entangled with contemporaneous art theories and art discourses, Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen reveals that the thinking of figures such as Adolf von Hildebrand, Heinrich Wölfflin, and Aloïs Riegl informed examinations of artworks beyond the canonical West. It thus invites a careful reconsideration of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century foundational studies across the discipline.

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