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THE PROBLEM OF ARTISTS AS PROFESSIONALS IN GERMANY

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The history of learned occupations or professions in the modern era has become an active and lively subsection of social history. A few "learned professions," however, deviate significantly enough from the classical patterns of medicine or law (which one might call the "queen professions" for their tone-giving importance for others). Despite their antiquity and the clear fact that they also underwent a modernization process at roughly the same time or a little later than others, the occupations of clergyman, military officer and artist, to name the most prominent, faced serious obstacles to realizing their group potential for shaping the destinies of their members. With the churches and the armed forces, one of the most important barriers to the secular process of professionalization lay in the hierarchical structure of these institutions. Such an explanation is useless for artists, who if anything suffered (or perhaps one could also say enjoyed) the impediment of too little structure in their collective activity.[i] Nor could artists be excused (as most officers and pastors could) as being late or indifferent about professionalization because of deeply-ingrained conservative political and social outlooks. On the contrary, especially in Germany, some artists came to occupy the

most forward positions of innovation and critique of existing social as well as aesthetic values by the end of the nineteenth century and ever after.

Perhaps because of the somewhat inchoate and seemingly disorganized nature of the world of the arts, most students of modern social history and professions (including myself) have steered clear of engagement with this fascinating crowd. Yet further acquaintance with the subject reveals that artists did in fact aspire to a professionalized Standespolitik and the protections it offered other learned occupational groups. Even if their efforts were not as successful as those of some others, these efforts left a clear record of articulated demands and statements. It appears to me that this record is promising and worth exploring as a path into broader issues of what one might call the "social history of artists."

The social history of art, or more precisely, the social history of artists, has until fairly recently been a stepchild of both art history and "mainstream" history. The tendency of Western art history to concentrate on the individual artist and his (and I underline the masculine adjective here) personality is as old as the Renaissance. It has also been reinforced since the middle of the nineteenth century by the rise of the system of private dealers and critics that together have come to shape public taste in art. As an early and perceptive study of the sociology of painting in France argues,

> "It was artists, not paintings, who were the focus of the dealer-critic institutional system. The new system triumphed in part because it could and did command a bigger market than the academic-governmental structure. Equally important, however, it dealt with an artist more in terms of his production over a career and thus provided a rational alternative to the chaos of the academic focus on paintings by themselves."[ii]

The capitalist commodification of art that accompanied the growth of an art-consuming urban bourgeoisie and of public collections also promoted concentration on "safely dead" artists, whose "careers" could no longer produce unwelcome surprises that might reduce the market value of their individual works.[iii] For these and other reasons, the most socially-prominent and potentially profitable sides of the modern market for artists' services have deflected attention from the history of artists as a collectivity to an exaggerated concentration on individual artists with the potential or reality of fashionability.

"Mainstream" historians have different reasons for neglect, one of the most important of which is our own inadequate exposure to or training in the arts. Granted, artists as a group are neither as uniform nor as colorless as members of most other professions. Dramatic posturing or the disguise of mystery can be said to belong to the professional tools of the artist just

as anodynes and high-speed drills do for the dentist. But the tendency to wrap professional knowledge in mystery may be described as a constitutive requisite of all "expert" knowledge: if it were easily accessible to the laity, it would no longer be in scarcity and hence not "expert." Historians who have studied other professions, even though not trained in their skills, have encountered no insuperable problems in understanding their collective behavior and statements. Indeed, part of the "lobbying" function of modern professional organizations depends for its success on the ability to persuade laypersons of the justness of their demands. While it may be true that many artists gravitate to their profession because they discover early on that they have a different way of seeing or describing the world than logic or rhetoric would prescribe, a glance at the statements of artists' organizations quickly demonstrates that artistic vision by no means precludes verbal articulateness!

Naturally the social history of artists encompasses far more than the relatively narrow aspect of "professionalization," but this methodologically little-explored path might well reveal more than the traditional preoccupations of western art history.

Let me concede right away that the line between a "professional" and "amateur" artist is not so firm as that between professional and amateur surgeons or highway engineers.

Yet professional artists are also certified practitioners of a complex kind of work, requiring years of higher education and training.As with other learned occupations, pre-modern artists in Europe were commonly organized into guilds ("artist" and "artisan" have the same etymological root). One of the preconditions for the Renaissance's particular myth of the titanic creative loner was precisely the forceful breakup of powerful medieval artists' guilds, and princely patronage was a substitute for the professional self-reliance of the shattered artisanal organizations. Even so, professional associations of artists re-emerged after the Renaissance in the guise of art academies, which were at least as important as marketing and lobbying combines (with monopolistic tendencies) as they were teaching institutions.

In Germany as in France by the late nineteenth century, an alliance of art academies and artists' associations that had managed to control the market to some degree and assure a modicum of security and income to their members over most of the century began to dissolve and lose its effectiveness. At the same time members of other learned occupations, whether old ones like medicine or "new" ones like chemistry, were busily organizing for self-protection and the promotion of a common professional agenda, artists (and not only visual artists) were also facing heightened competition, rapid innovations, and declining economic and social security.

Why Should We Study Artists as "Professionals"?

What follows is a set of suggestions about why the attempts of German artists to professionalize should be investigated, how they can be studied, and what we might be able to learn about the social history of art and the cultural values of modern societies from such a treatment.

I see three answers to the question of why the subject is worthy of further research. The first is closest to my own recent approaches to studying the graduated "products" of the German higher educational system, the "learned professions." I myself neglected artists as a professional group in my 1991 book[iv] because their evolution did not fit a pattern common to most other learned professions. So the first answer is: to find out why artists have had such difficulty "professionalizing" and with that, imposing their own standards on the contemporary world whose aesthetic vision they could be said to shape.

Second, what professional activity does, whether successful or not, is reveal the parameters of discourse (including discourse about self-definition and perceived social role) within a large part, perhaps even the majority, or practitioners. Most professionalizing occupations are concerned with defining and "raising" the Stand, protecting and improving the economic position and working conditions of its members, helping define and enforce the "gatekeeping" functions of educational qualifications, licensing, professional ethics, and

safeguarding the prestige and honor of the collectivity. Discourse about these points reveals the professionals self-perceptions about their task and place in society, as well as dissonance with the views held by the elites that comprised much of their "clientele."

One of the fascinating subtopics of this discourse lies in the chronic difficulty (shared with engineers, among other "new" professions) of defining the social borders of the "artists' world". It would appear that most painters and sculptors (the most exclusive meaning of the term "artist") in the nineteenth century in Germany and certainly in France[v] came from bourgeois social backgrounds and could thus loosely be grouped with the Bildungsbürgertum. But rapid technological and social changes produced a whole new stratum of "artists" who had previously been considered "artisans" and whose social background and status was not so secure, but who, by the end of the last century, began to demand and enjoy the kind of advanced education that had always defined the Bildungsbürgertum. If one includes all the artists who were not primarily sculptors or easel painters, but who claimed a "higher" education in the arts, one can chart a geometric explosion in their numbers over the last century. Some of these may have belonged to an "artist proletariat," but they were hardly children of the industrial working class. Nor were they any longer strictly by origin or their own life-style identifiable as the traditional "educated middle class." (I am tempted to call them ironically the Bild-

Bürgertum, but that term excludes such non-visual artists as composers, writers, and performers.)

A third, related reason for studying the professionalization of artists is that the process reveals the fissure-lines along which the total community of artists of all kinds broke with each other (one of the reasons for difficulties in successful professionalization). On the one hand, organizing as professionals in the way of doctors and lawyers might offer better market control to individual "free" professionals; on the other, labor-union types of organizations might offer better protection to mere "employees" in such enterprises as publishing houses, theaters or concert halls. The distinction between professional "unions" and "associations had and has mostly to do with collective bargaining, but even German doctors had begun to get involved in such collective agreements with insurance funds before World War I, proving that the two directions are not necessarily incompatible. Still, one of the goals of the "professionalization project" is to establish homogenous standards (at least as far as occupational training, licensing, and subsequent practice are concerned) to exclude by those standards all who claim to have equal or superior skills obtained by some other means. Under the conditions of the European art market over the last century and a half, on the other hand, prestigious artistic careers have been more likely to be made by claims to originality or a new vision than to adherence to a universal canon of traditional standards.

How Should We Approach the Social History of Artists?

Let me now turn from reasons to study the social history of artists to possible methods, goals, and sources.

Art historians have at their disposal from the nineteenth century onward increasingly rich material on both individual and collective artistic life. These latter sources have not been fully exploited, perhaps because of the cult of personality that produces hundreds of slick coffee-table books on Picasso but only the occasional scholarly monograph on the fin-de-siecle Spanish artistic milieu from which he emerged. Materials about the activities of "everyday" artists -- the potential subject-matter of a sort of artists' Alltagsgeschichte -- lie slumbering in the past activities of Germany's numerous artists' associations, whether local Künstlervereine, the national Künstlergenossenschaft, the interwar Reichsverband der bildenden Künstler and its postwar successors, as well as in the archives of Germany's art academies and other educational institutions. There are also rich collections of government documents about artists and the arts, which was a matter of interest and considerable expense to everybody from town councilors to emperors. Nor can I do more than allude to the large volume of arts periodicals that thrived in Germany from the late nineteenth century onward.

While much raw material exists, one major problem for the social historian is that little of it has been collected and collated. Our knowledge of such basic questions as "how many artists were there" at a given time is limited. One would need to investigate such quantitative questions as how many artists of different types existed, whether they viewed themselves as "professionals," part-timers or amateurs, how and when "new" subspecialties came into being, how artists were recruited and trained, and how many were active in professional organizations. We need to know more quantifiable information about such professional organizations -- number and inclusiveness of membership, confessional, ethnic and gender traits, and whether their self-understanding was or changed from social, self-help or lobbying in nature. In sorting through the raw data, one would have to make working definitions of categories, for example between industrial and "folk" artists, or between the different types and levels of the "market" for artistic services, that is different and changing "clienteles."

Their clienteles were as varied as the crown, wealthy aristocrats and industrial magnates, the churches, the bureaucracy (with advice from legislatures), contractors for large projects, down to the individual buyer on a sidewalk. Over the century and a half under review here, painters and sculptors in particular witnessed the decline of intermediation between themselves and the public represented by traditional

Ausstellungen (typically mounted by artists' associations, often in league with art academies) and the rise of private galleries and dealers, who tended to cultivate the "career ladder" approach to artists. An interesting question about this concerns the gradual loss of control by old-fashioned Künstlervereine over the painting market: was this a form of "deprofessionalization"?

Indices of the economic status of the art professions would also have to be sought, including income from their works and services, subventions and aid from other sources (for example, patronage).[vi]

The changes in markets and styles went hand in hand with another important variable in the social history of artists, the educational system. Like their analogues the universities, academies underwent considerable stress, if perhaps not as much successful adaptation, starting in the last half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, by the end of the century, traditional apprenticeship training was withering away as demands were raised for a more modern kind of training, as came to be represented by the reformed and new Kunstgewerbeschulen. Both the old academies and the new arts-and-crafts schools represented something of a breach with the guild-like functions of artistic training of the past. Indeed, traditional academies had served not so much the function of teaching handiwork, but

that of granting the social status of "learned gentlemen" steeped in the classics to what otherwise have been regarded as mere artisans as late as the time of the French Revolution.[vii] By a century later, their enrollments had increased dramatically, making them clearly into professional schools, but their ability to lend status to their graduates had declined drastically. Largely deaf to appeals to adapt to technological change (particularly as related to industry), art academies before 1914 were not so much hopelessly hidebound as trapped in the countercurrents and confusion in the world or art.

Their young rivals, the arts-and-crafts schools, were less burdened by tradition and indeed helped forge the foundations for Germany's leap into avant-garde art and revolutionary design by the beginning of this century.[viii]

Yet we know all too little about the educational system. Such basic questions as the ratios of artists produced by that system to the market for their services have either never been studied systematically or, in the few cases where they have been, the scholarly world has not followed up on the work. To give but one example, between about 1895 and 1914 the German medical profession (already well-organized and combative) expressed its concern about mushrooming numbers of new doctors, their difficulties in getting a toehold in the market (itself changing dramatically because of medical insurance), and reform of medical faculty curriculum, licensing examinations and other

matters. The medical profession had a profound impact through its efforts. In the same period, equally dramatic increases in the number of artists, changes in training, and of course near-revolutions in technology and style were occurring, but without more than the beginnings of organized attempts by artists themselves to shape the changes or even document them. It is perhaps significant that only toward the end of this period did artists respond by founding the Wirtschaftsverband der bildenden Künstler in 1913.

Finally we cannot merely rely on statistical data (as helpful as it would be) or structural history and change if we wish to learn more about the social history of artists. Values are also involved -- aesthetic, moral, social, intellectual and even political. All professions have values, to be sure, and all attempt to articulate them "objectively." But it is also true that the artistic occupations by tendency (and necessarily) engage in the realm of subjective values. By this I mean simply that a bridge designed by an engineer tends to be judged professionally by objective measurements, such as efficacy, safety, durability, and cost-effectiveness, rather than primarily by its beauty or daring. (It must be said in passing that such "material" values have also had some currency among artists, in times when stylistic canons were more stable.)

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me return to the question, "What can we learn from approaching the history of art through the social history of artists in general and the professionalization of artists in particular?

1. The experience of so-called "old" and established professions such as medicine and law is now better understood than a decade ago. They can all be understood better in comparison to radically different (and equally old) occupations such as that of artists.

2. A second reason for a fresh look is a chance to rethink the relationship between artists and the publics they address, including ultimately the significance of much of what, quantitatively, gets produced by artists -- home decorations, souvenirs, advertising graphics for beer or motorcars. The vast and rapidly growing majority of artists in Germany as elsewhere after about 1890 comprised men and women who made some part of their living as photographers, designers, graphic artists, teachers, and -- let us not forget -- also composers, performers, and librettists. It included not only graduates of traditional art academies who could not make a living in traditional lines of painting and sculpture, but also products of reformed and ambitious "arts and crafts" schools (Kunstgewerbeschulen) as well as private art schools (an

especially important but overlooked venue for the entry of women into the art world before the end of World War I.) According the German statistics, just between 1895 and 1907 alone the number of women professional (as opposed to amateur) artists leaped 75%, itself 2.5 times the rapid rate of increase for males.[ix] The "overproduction" of artists has its parallels in other professions, too, but most artists were alleged to be unable to earn a decent living even before this, and if true, this situation raises the further question of what one might call market-marginal professionalism.

3. A third reason for this new approach is to explore the changing socio-economic matrix of art as an activity in rapidly evolving societies. Here the narrower question, "To what extent did artists try and succeed in becoming professionals," reflects the broader concern, "To what extent have western values about art and artists been sacrificed or transformed by the Industrial and Information revolutions?" Professional solidarity is not only, as Larson and others tend to view it, a "drive" to achieve a measure of dominance over the market in services of the type they provide, but also clearly a defensive reaction against much more powerful social, economic and political actors.

4. Political behavior by artists may be seen as flowing not merely from ideological naiveté, bohemianism, "outsiderness," or even opportunism, but also from rational, calculated self-interest. For example, in answering the question, "Why did so

many artists support Bolshevism or Nazism or the GDR regime?", we might learn something by looking beyond ideological proclivities of artists and consider instead what they, as threatened professionals, hoped to achieve through collaboration with "revolutionary" political regimes, as well as culturally conservative ones.

Perhaps no century has experienced greater changes in the nature of art than the past one, in which the work of art entered the era of its "mechanical reproducibility." The demand for its mechanical and, more recently, electronic reproducibility has been created by mass markets in leisure and entertainment (which serious art history has barely begun to address), but also by the needs of advertisers, both commercial and political. The lonely-genius or Hungerkünstler approach, which probably told us more about the nineteenth-century Romantic viewer than the artists viewed, cannot, I would argue, any longer block the path to a serious investigation of the social history of artists.

NOTES

[i] It is noteworthy that when German private architects founded the Bund Deutscher Architekten in 1903, their leaders expressed the somewhat unusual sentiment that architects needed less, not more formal training (and by implication, more imagination).

[ii] Harrison C. and Cynthia A. White, Canvases and Careers. Institutional Change in the French Painting World (New York: Wiley, 1965), p. 96.

[iii] For a useful survey of prices fetched by "old masters" vs. living painters in the last two centuries, see Gerald

Reitlinger, The Economics of Taste. The Rise and Fall of the Picture Market, 1760-1960 (New York: Holt, 1961), esp. chaps. 5 and 6.

[iv] Charles E. McClelland, The German Experience of Professionalization. Modern Learned Professions and their Organizations from the Early Nineteenth Century to the Hitler Era (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[v] Andrée Sfeier-Semler, Die Maler am Pariser Salon 1791-1880 (Frankfurt/M.: Campus-Verlag, 1992).

[vi] According to some recent estimates, paintings even by relatively well-known artists sold in Germany for under 500 marks each around 1905 (and these were prices for the ones sold!). Paintings by living artists costing a thousand marks or more were extremely rare. (Cf. Robin Lenman, "Der deutsche Kunstmarkt 1840-1923: Integration, Veränderung, Wachstum," in Ekkehard Mai and Peter Paret (eds.) Sammler, Stifter und Museen (Cologne: Böhlau, 1993), p. 144. According to a somewhat more subjective contemporary observer, ca. 20,000 works of visual art were displayed annually in Germany's many exhibitions (and about the same number refused), submitted by 10,000 painters. Calculating an average price of a thousand marks per picture (a little high by Lenman's standards), Joachim von Bülow calculated a maximum average annual income of 2,000 marks from such sales, weighted against costs and expenses, which produced a negative net income, he estimated, for 90% of Germany's painters. Cf. Joachim von Bülow, Künstler-Elend und Proletariat (Berlin: Maritima, 1911), pp. 1-3. With nearly twice as many visual artists working in the Federal Republic (comparable population) around 1970, only about a third claimed to receive most of their income from gallery sales of their work, although the palette of employment opportunities had become much more diverse. Cf. Karla Fohrbeck and Andreas Johannes Wiesand, Der Künstler-Report (Munich: Hanser, 1975), pp. 511, 592-3

[vii] See White and White, Canvases and Careers, pp. 11-12.

[viii] See Charles E. McClelland, "'Young Germans, not Young Greeks and Romans'": Art Culture and Educational Reform in Wilhelmine Germany," in Francoise Forster-Hahn (ed.), Imagining Modern German Culture, 1889-1910, special issue of Studies in the History of Art (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, forthcoming 1996).

[ix] Paul Drey, Die wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen der Malkunst. Versuch einer Kunstökonomie (Stuttgart/Berlin: Cotta, 1910), p. 307.