

Images of historical life.
Historical genre in the nineteenth-century painting of Central Europe

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SUMMARY

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a gradual shift had taken place in historiography, from the explanatory model to that of understanding the past, the people, and the events of former times. This shift happened to coincide with the emergence in Central European painting of the historical genre scene; in the German countries first in Berlin, and little later also in Munich: scenes from everyday life in

past times. Historical genre is part of the nineteenth-century *Geschichtskultur*, the entirety of dealing with the past. Very early examples of this genre are street scenes with musicians in small, old, German towns, boat-trips in the Italian Renaissance, and a noblewoman, riding out to go hunting. Such scenes expressed in images an intuitive conceptualization of bygone times, they appealed to an instinctive response to the past and corresponded to the pleasure in more colourful days. The design of this study is to retrace those forms of the experience of history that made nineteenth-century beholders enjoy historical genre. What kind of an image did they have of a certain depicted age, were desires projected on that period of time, did a serious interest in history play a part, could it be said that certain eras were being idealized, and why was that so?

During the nineteenth century, in the fields of painting, literature and historiography, close contacts had been maintained between the German-speaking and the West Slavonic countries. Artists from Poland and the Czech regions studied at the academies of Germany and Austria, and exhibited their work in German towns; and, in their turn, artists from the German-speaking countries travelled to Poland and to Prague, worked for local patrons, and presented their works of art there too. There was a back and forth of artists in Central Europe, but also of writers and scientists. This historical situation provided ample occasion to select the countries mentioned as one coherent field of study, in which, for purely practical reasons, only the Czech regions were not included.

In addition to the earliest specimen of Central European historical genre, those variants or subgenres were studied which were, during the second half of the nineteenth century, represented most frequently, namely the 'classical' genre, rococo scenes, and the national historical scene. These fatherlandish scenes are situated in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, or in the seventeenth or the eighteenth century, all according to national preference. For each of the variations, it was decided to restrict this study to only a few painters, and one or two centres of art. Consequently, this study is composed of a number of case-studies which are supported by research into the artistic notions in the fields of genre and historical representation, and into other aspects of nineteenth-century historical culture, especially historiography and historical fiction.

In the first part of this study the early nineteenth-century historical genre painted in Berlin and Munich is discussed; the second part deals with the above-mentioned later variants by the hands of Munich, Viennese and Polish painters.

Part I. For the greater part, the earliest German specimen of 'historical genre' - a subject matter as yet without pictorial tradition - were produced in Berlin. Earlier than in other German centres of art, the representation of non-classical history had gained ground in academic history painting in Prussia: already in the late eighteenth century the king and the academy of arts actively stimulated this. In local prints and book illustration a representation of history had developed, that presented historical figures as 'ordinary' people, in their tangible surroundings, and in addition strongly appealed to sentiment. Around 1800, genre scenes were already manifold among the illustrations of historical fiction. This kind of presentation of the past prepared public and painters for the introduction of 'historical genre' in painting: the Berlin painters Kolbe and Dähling were the first to take this step, and in 1814 their colleague Hampe followed suit. Contemporary beholders of their historical genre, no less than the painters

themselves, were well aware of the fact that this approach to history was a selective one. The Old German (15th/16th centuries) and Old Italian (14th/16th centuries) history, with its attractive images and figures, presented the desired past. The antiquarian Büsching characterized these centuries as the 'kindliche Zeit', when people were 'geselliger' and 'gesellschaftlicher' than nowadays, because lonely occupations and diversions were permitted to only a few. It was primarily this feeling of sympathy and solidarity with the culture and society of those old times, that was visualized by the Berlin painters. At the same time a more theoretical conception of history found expression in the invention and reception of their scenes. The romantic writers and historians with whom these painters socialized, had been raised with the continuity concept of the eighteenth-century 'enlightened' historians, and they considered the age of the Renaissance to be the furthestmost period in history which, at the same time, still belonged to their own historical era - the 'neue Zeit'. In connection with historical genre, the cultural historical interest for the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Germany and Italy, for the ways of life in those historical days, should be distinguished from an orientation on the 'old' arts. It was the former, wider and more profound historical interest, shared by the Berlin painters with the recipients of their work, that provided the causal background for the historical genre.

The earliest historical genre scenes were inspired, above all, by the painter's own historical imagination, as it was stimulated and fed by the visual wording of historical life in contemporary historiography and historical fiction. In those days, visual and verbal images of the past in painting and drawing, in the finer, as well as trivial literature, in travel accounts and in historiography, together, still made up a coherent whole of representations which came about and were experienced, to a large degree, through intuition and emotion. The invention as well as the affirmative reception of the historical genre scene was embedded in this manner of dealing with history.

The appreciative beholders and purchasers of the Berlin historical genre paintings were to be found among the circles of romantic men and women of letters, amongst the visitors of the 'romantic' salons in Berlin, and among those members of the royal family, who maintained contact with both of these overlapping circles - in other words, they were part of the 'adlich-bürgerliche Bildungsschicht' of Brandenburg-Prussia. In their choices the painters fell in with the preferences of their environment. A choice for the Middle Ages was either directly associated with the specific historical interest felt by many before and immediately after the 'Freiheitskriege', under the influence of those political circumstances, or it was a matter of a 'literary' image of those centuries, a romantic-fanciful idealization. Mainly though, the early nineteenth-century historical genre scenes of Berlin painting are situated in the German and Italian Renaissance. This was the era, the noble-bourgeois intelligentsia felt a historical bond with, in which they saw their own cultural roots, as well as the quality of life they longed for - that was considered lost, yet once had been real.

Contrary to their Berlin colleagues, Munich painters, during the early nineteenth century, situated their historical genre exclusively in the Middle Ages. Furthermore they only depicted the milieu of the knights, and it rarely happened that they gave a prominent role to people of more humble birth. Before 1830/1840, scenes of bourgeois life in towns were almost completely lacking. In individual artists, this partiality for the Middle Ages had developed through the reading of mediaeval chronicles and historical fiction, and interest in mediaeval architecture. In addition, there existed in Bavaria a

romantic movement or trend which, in several persons, had points of contact with the preference for the Middle Ages as it manifested itself with Munich artists. With this movement, the ideas that can account for the abovementioned partiality, become tangible. It was represented by the circle of romantics that had formed at Landshut University in the beginnings of the nineteenth century. All shared the interest in history, and part of them also had in common that they focussed this interest on the Bavarian fatherland and mediaeval architecture. Central elements of the 'mediaeval' genre of the Munich painters were above all the aspects of individuality and a free and roaming life, which characterized the figure of the knight. The knight travelled to foreign parts, and brought home distant cultures: he was freer than oneself. This aspect of being free and unconstrained, that did not find expression in the Berlin historical genre, seems typical of the Munich perception of history of the early nineteenth century. Notably in circles of artists, but also with crown prince Maximilian in Hohenschwangau, there seems to have been a reaction against their own environment, a rebellion against restrictions, rather than the Berlin longing after ideal, and more colourful, versions of what was one's own, of what was already appreciated in itself. The mild, poetic image of mediaeval family life, depicted by the Munich painter Quaglio on the other hand was common Prussian and Bavarian ground.

Differences in context can explain the dissimilarities. First of all, the Bavarian king played a much more dominating part in the arts than his Berlin counterpart, and, mostly, the Munich artists experienced his bias to neoclassicism as restrictive. Also, in Catholic Bavaria, the Renaissance was associated with the Reformation: in this environment historical interest mostly meant interest in the Middle Ages, when, within the German 'Reich', there had still been unity of religion and the knights had gone on crusades in unison. The absence of middle-class town life in the Munich historical genre painting is, on the one hand, probably a consequence of the strong focus on the life of knights; on the other hand, in Munich the bourgeois genre painting in its contemporary form was also still only to be found on a modest scale. In addition, the citizenry's self-assertion vis-à-vis the court nobility was not as strong as in Berlin, let alone that middle-class culture should have dominated.

Different aspects played a part in the positive reception of the early historical genre: a longing for the experience of a historical continuum, longing for the imagined quality of life in historical epochs, true historical interest, the want for a monumental history, delight in the colourfulness of historical cultures and also the empathic experience of largely idyllic scenes. A discussion by Wilhelm von Humboldt of a certain historical genre scene gives us a better insight in the special function of the space, where history and idyllic genre encounter one another. The painter, who derives a theme from the subject matter of everyday human existence, and situates this in the past, chooses and shapes the individualities he portrays himself. A historical setting also demands what one can accept as true and true to life, and so does the depiction of a scene from everyday human existence. Yet, at the same time, it is precisely the location in the past that allows the painter, while fabulating freely within these boundaries, to express a mood that he himself has in mind. The beholder, for his part, experiences this same freedom to take in this mood, to empathize with the figures, led solely by the conception of the visual image - the 'aesthetic mood'. It is exactly with historical genre, that the beholder is not hampered by his own experience of reality, nor by prior

knowledge. This is the implicit advantage of the historical genre scene compared to a contemporary, idyllic scene, to an actually historical representation, and also to the literary illustration. The function of the past is to visualize the idyllic as a possibility in an ostensible, because after all historical, reality.

Part II. In the late thirties of the nineteenth century the subject matter of the historical genre in German painting gradually came to encompass other epochs and other countries as well - parallel to developments in the interest in history, and in interaction with changes in the field of art and culture.

The historical genre scene constitutes a 'thing in the middle' between history painting and genre: in the nineteenth century it was sometimes literally put that way. Throughout the entire century, critics and theoreticians kept squabbling over the position of historical genre, and over the criteria by which one ought to determine whether a painting should be considered a genre or history painting. Often, art theoreticians tied in with the broad view of the designation historical genre that was common in French art criticism, but, thereupon, created all kinds of subdivisions in which historical genre in the strict sense surfaced again. Critics, art theoreticians and art historians declared their enthusiasm for such work, although some did take the view, that this sort of representation was bound to acquire a certain degree of affectation, since the painter could only gather his knowledge of that historical life from books and by following the paintings and prints of the epoch in question. In Vienna, where no preference for this, or even any other kind, of historical subject matter had developed anyway, this objection was raised with exceptional sharpness.

However, historical genre did offer special opportunities that were lacking in other subject matter. As historical knowledge increased and expanded, the danger of a collision between the imagination of the poet and the beholder's historical knowledge grew larger all the time. By having imaginary characters act against the backdrop of a certain epoch's culture, one could combine the historical background and ideas of a certain age with historical faithfulness of the realia, and yet maintain the artist's poetic freedom (Riehl, Immermann). Certainly a painter had to try his best to render the realia correctly, but, in the end, they always remained of secondary importance to the essence of what was represented. Psychological truth and the core of the event in history were of higher significance than correct realia. If so required in order to attain harmony between the various elements of his representation, in material minutiae the painter was allowed to deviate from historical truth. That is what the theoreticians thought about it. Quite a number of painters limited themselves to an accumulation of material specifics nonetheless, and, even if they had wanted to depict an idea, this could still be submerged in that accumulation. Some commentators were that strongly opposed to a close contact with history, which might slow down fantasy's flight, that they wanted to restrict the past's value to an inspirational source for the power of the imagination. Sometimes, it even occurred that the past merely functioned as a repertory of colours and forms: a borderline territory of the historical genre, where it is doubtful, whether one could still speak of any experience of history, or of certain historical conceptions.

The state of affairs in Vienna. Before the year 1848, only a handful of painters in Vienna occupied themselves with the depiction of historical scenes. The public at large was scarcely interested in historical representations, one or two artists made prints,

book illustrations, and watercolours about dynastic history for the court nobility (Geiger, Führich). Historical scenes in painting that had genre character, were always illustrative work and not inventions of the painters themselves. Under Metternich, depictions of the Habsburgian vicissitudes, as a supranational subject matter, outnumbered actually historical representations. After the *Vormärz*, in Austria like anywhere else, scores of anecdotes about scholars and artists were produced, but historical genre remained scarce. One or two painters portrayed scenes from the Middle Ages, in the same key as Lorenz Quaglio's subjects (Johann Till). Several other painters - from the seventies until the nineties, and later still - were to present little scenes from antiquity, Roman as well as Egyptian (Hirémy-Hirschl), and a somewhat larger number would choose the era of rococo (a.o. Hamza, Schweninger) - in which case, however, the representation of history did not altogether keep pace with the attention given to the decorative aspect.

National historical genre in Poland. Already under Poniatowski, a start had been made with the depiction of national history, but the Partitions interrupted this development. In the thirties, the contemporary genre flourished. Some theoreticians were of the opinion that genre would be the road to a national school of painting, because all of life's minutiae would interest everybody as personal and their own, as long as they were national and traditional. And that held as true for life in the past as for the present day existence. All the same, for a long time, the serious historical representation, the battle scene, and variations on soldierly scenes dominated the representation of Polish history. The 'real' historical painters portrayed important moments of national glory and grief; they presented revered figures of bygone centuries, while attending events of historic importance, and in moments of their personal lives; and, in doing so, these painters commented on the course of history in past and present. But in addition to that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, images depicting the small things from life in bygone days, emerged at art exhibitions in ever larger numbers. This current of historical genre, having a very modest start in the forties, increased remarkably after the sixties. At the time the strong increase in genre scenes, and also in anecdotes, in the depiction of the past, by no means confined itself to Poland; nonetheless, this development might here also have been influenced by the doubt concerning the benefit of action, of military uprising against the occupational forces, a doubt which, after the January 1863 Uprising, was widespread. Censorship, also, played a part in the growing interest for the communicative opportunities of the historical genre, that was especially useful for deployment of 'the language of Aesop', or 'prison language', in a visual form, for images and motifs that were intended to be interpreted allegorically.

The dominance of images of Old Polish noblemen's life in the historical genre, resulted from the idealization of this social class: it had been the nobility, that, in the borderlands, and for centuries, had defended fatherland and freedom, the nobility that, all the while, had preserved its customs and traditions and way of life, that, with close and distant relatives as well as the surrounding farmers - as one liked to imagine it - lived together in harmony and idyllically in the wide countryside. The noble homestead, and what occurred in and around this centre: pleasant moments with cards, and stories about old times with a fire on the hearth, the presence of the priest, no less than the hunt, and the boys' drilling in arms: all these motifs stand for the values of the life of the nobility - hospitality, piety, love for one's country, selfsacrifice and valour.

At that time, as Okón (1992) assumes, for the Polish painter as well as the beholder, in even the most idyllic scenes of old morals and the handing down of patriotic memories, the thought of the future liberation of the fatherland played its part. In discussions of paintings, that were meant for publication, this association, or even interpretation, could at the very most be hinted at: which, in my opinion, has indeed been done on many occasions.

With some Polish scenes an allegorical reading was the most obvious interpretation; but in other depictions only a sympathetic image of the past was observed (Szwojnicki, Maszyński) - with appreciation. This concurs with the approach to history that, by the literary historian Andrzej Waśko (1999), is described as characteristic for the literary genre of the 'gawędy': the affirmative approach. Waśko contrasts this position with the utopias of the Enlightenment and the dreams of the romanticists. Indeed, 'gawędy' could contain criticism of the nobility's weaknesses, of the flaws in the old social order, but, above all, they expressed a 'powerful human need of praise to the world', thus Waśko: therefore, at times, the authors applied critical accents in a jocular fashion and, at others, they used a moralizing tone. That very want for *affirmative* images of the past - which also prevailed in the national historical genre in the German countries - greatly influenced the choice of subject matter by the Polish painters of historical genre. They too, mostly expressed criticism of aspects of the noblemen's life in humorous scenes, or in ironic renderings of the characters. Yet, in these instances as well, the impression predominates of sympathy for the idealized way of life and values of the Old Polish nobility, which were perceived as national characteristics. And, for many a painter and his recipients, these were the way of life and values of their own ancestors, because a substantial number of them were themselves gentry, and their sympathy was directed toward the past of their own families.

The appreciation by art critics, who interpreted such historical genre as in any case genuinely patriotic, persisted until late in the nineteenth century. While a romantic, idealizing looking back on bygone times prevailed with painters of the past in Galicia - with those whom Mycielski (1896) named 'small' painters - irony seems to constitute an aspect of dealing with the past that flourished especially in Warsaw.

The rococo genre. Here, in succession, the rococo genre of Munich, Viennese and Polish painters is discussed. The changes in judgment about the eighteenth-century era of rococo that occurred in the course of the nineteenth century, clearly found their reflection in the development of the rococo genre. During the period of the *Vormärz*, painters of this kind of scene either linked up with the disdain, still prevailing at the time, of the morals and ethics of the rococo era, or they mocked the pretentious respectability and stiffness of the 'periwig period' that had followed it in the German countries. Some fifteen years later, rococo genre was defined by a selective, affirmative vision on life in the eighteenth century. A counterpart was the conscious choice for rococo as a costume for the ludicrous, as the most appropriate outfit for ridicule and irony (Riehl). Some Polish painters of rococo genre thematized the contradiction between rococo, i.e. the 'foreignized' court culture of Poniatowski and his supporters, and the old Polish fashion and ethics, the national culture, in the form of the 'kontusz-versus-dress-coat'-motif. This motif had an ideological charge that, in occupied and divided Poland, carried much more weight than any other politically

tinged imitation of rococo elsewhere - such as the ornamental style of Frederick the Great in Prussia, or that of the old order in Vienna and Munich.

Other Polish painters fell in with the seemingly idyllic world of rococo, which, in the second half of the nineteenth century, was revived on such a large scale, and with such apparent success by their colleagues in Munich and Vienna - in unmistakably contemporary versions. Many of them conjured up a rosy aesthetic image of a way of life, into which the well-to-do beholder liked to project himself, and which he, in the protected, but often also threatened world of his home, or while being entertained elsewhere, might try and 'imitate', according to his needs. Younger painters of rococo genre, in Munich especially, pulled the rug from under this seemingly real image of gracious, harmonic living, in an amusing fashion. Unlike the tone of irony or even mockery during the first phase of the German rococo genre in the forties however, the irony of the later nineteenth century scenes was so mild and benevolent, that it did not block access to the joyous and leisurely rococo existence. These scenes too, fulfilled their compensatory function for the contemporary beholder.

The classical genre. In this context, the slow and late rise of the classical genre in Central European painting is discussed, as well as the influence of French and British examples, and the works of a number of German, Austrian and Polish painters who applied themselves to this genre. The better part of the classical genre scenes assumed that the beholder possessed, at least, some knowledge of antique history and culture, whether acquired through the means of a humanist education at school and university, through the reading of history books, or of the so-called *professor's novels*. Especially classical genre that was situated in a house, near a temple, in a workshop, or in the streets of a town, with many pictorial elements appealed in a very direct manner to the recipient's own notions of life in antiquity. Certainly, these kinds of scenes produced most pleasure for beholders of art who had already acquired all sorts of knowledge about antiquity and could now, for themselves, attribute meaning to the situation, the historical personages, and the objects in these paintings. For many, the sensation of a historical continuum was most intense, when experienced through representations of Pompei and Herculaneum - especially when combined with a visit to the excavated cities - and this brought about a continuous popularity of the Pompeian genre scene. With the old Greeks one associated an admiration for the arts, a sense of beauty, and an Arcadian way of life. German and Polish painters mostly expressed the sympathy for that Old Greek way of life in idyllic scenes, unfolding under a southern sky in nature's open air. Since classical antiquity and the southern landscape combined constituted an ideal location for purely aesthetic motives, this latter aspect played a part too; the meaning of the southern light for the reception of these paintings in regions of Europe less blessed in that respect, should not be underestimated either. Genre scenes like Siemiradzki's *Seller of Statuettes*, and *Catching Fish*, Baur's *Junger Poet*, and all those reveries in sun- or moonlight are enchanting, idyllic, funny: they are depictions of light moments, they show a harmonious existence in nature, and in small communities, of which one knew now with certainty, that it had not been carefree, but that seemed more simple and harmonious than the present.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, historical genre also maintained its function as a form, or mould, for what Klaus Hansen (1983) describes as the

degressive historical model, a model of idyllic-nostalgic forms, that held its position beside, and partly in opposition to, the increasing realism in the arts. To most people, the growing pace of historical changes was inescapable in everyday reality, just as inescapable as the increased pace of daily life. For the feelings of loss and unease however, summoned up by those very developments, many, in ever widening circles, sought moments of compensation "im Schoß des Gewesenen", as Hansen phrases it. And this desire, an expression of a retrospective mentality, was met by historical genre in all kinds of different forms. The different aspects of historical interest and historical experience which - the idyllic component not even included - determined the reception of the early historical genre, played an equally important part in the years between 1840 and 1890. Now however, other aspects of historical interest were being added - such as the interest for archaeology and the applied arts - and, during this period, these sometimes received great emphasis.

The range of the historical genre's subject matter in the second half of the nineteenth century does not allow for these kinds of depictions to be grouped under one single denominator. But some dominating forms or, in Okoń's definition, 'styles' of reception can indeed be pointed out; in part, these were already observed with the beholders of the early historical genre. One such form is the ambiguous position which Arnim for instance demonstrated with regard to Kolbes *Meerfahrt* (1812): the side-by-side of sympathy for the scene and the figures, or even empathy, and amusing oneself with the comic features of the personages or of the depicted situation. This attitude was explicitly defined as the correct approach with regard to the arts by the Romanticists. How commentators switched between an intellectual approach, real, sincere empathy, and an amused reaction to the elements of a representation, can also be observed with respect to the historical genre of the second half of the nineteenth century; and, apparently, this reception was now even more widespread than before. The increased historical knowledge brought with it a stronger awareness of the discrepancy between the generally cheerful, or explicitly idyllic scenes, and a larger entity of historical reality, in which the scenes were situated. Often, in their descriptions of historical genre art critics adopted an ironic tone and, simultaneously, demonstrated that they were charmed by the representation as a whole, and even sympathized with the figures portrayed. There is an element of play at work in this kind of reception: the beholder was very much conscious of the historical selectivity of the representation, but nonetheless allowed himself to respond empathetically, and to sympathize with the merry or possibly touching scenes. And this held true for the painter as well, who, what's more, could himself express an ironic or amused approach of scenes he had invented, something which was done fairly often in the later 'kontusz'-genre, as well as in rococo scenes, and, sometimes also, in classical genre.

But this was by no means the only existing kind of reception during the second half of the nineteenth century, the historical genre scenes differed too greatly for that. Some scenes (e.g. by Hagn and Siemiradzki) occasioned undivided admiration for aesthetic qualities, and many a representation presented the beholder with the opportunity to have a pleasant and salutary experience of the depicted 'aesthetical situation'. In addition, representations of an idealized past were painted, which, as a counter image, could arouse melancholy, scenes that could be taken as anticipatory wishful images and as exhortation, like arms drills by young Polish gentry, and also images evoking

feelings of sadness, or even bringing about deep emotion, such as scenes depicting captivity and devastation.

It has been established for the early historical genre, that all such scenes played their part within an emotionally determined, selective historical experience - also, when this went hand in hand with an intellectual, often ironizing, distance - while idyllic scenes corresponded to the longing after harmony, that could only be found in the arts. This determination of the position of historical genre remains fully in force until the end of the nineteenth century. In the later nineteenth-century reception the emphasis could shift to a large extent toward the pleasure in knowledge, while - also for recipients who liked historical genre as such - a stronger awareness of the selectivity of merry, friendly or sensitive scenes might weaken, or even prohibit a truly empathic experience. In that latter case, a positive reception could only be based upon the pleasure in aesthetical qualities.

Regarding retrospective mentality, Hansen distinguishes three different ideal types of manifestations of the degressive historical model: the idealizing reconstruction of a past that may also be actually historical, a natural condition that has been pushed back by civilization, and a certain mental disposition, where one finds one's inspiration in the past. All three can be found in the historical genre. The first and third of these manifestations have already been established for the early historical genre in Berlin, where sympathy was primarily directed toward what was one's own, and familiar, in the past, and for the historical genre in Munich of the same period. These manifestations played an equally important part in all three studied variants of the later historical genre. With the classical genre scene in its idyllic variant, it also came to depictions of such a 'natural condition' which had still been possible in that distant past. As examples of the third expression of the degressive historical model, a mental attitude, Hansen names bourgeois mentality and Roman Catholicism: here, the Polish idealization of life on and around the noble homestead can be included. Throughout the nineteenth century, this retrospective mentality provided the basis for the continuous, although not generally shared, favourable reception of the historical genre scene.