

Birnbaum's 'Baroque Principle' and the Czech reception of Heinrich Wölfflin

Jindřich Vybíral

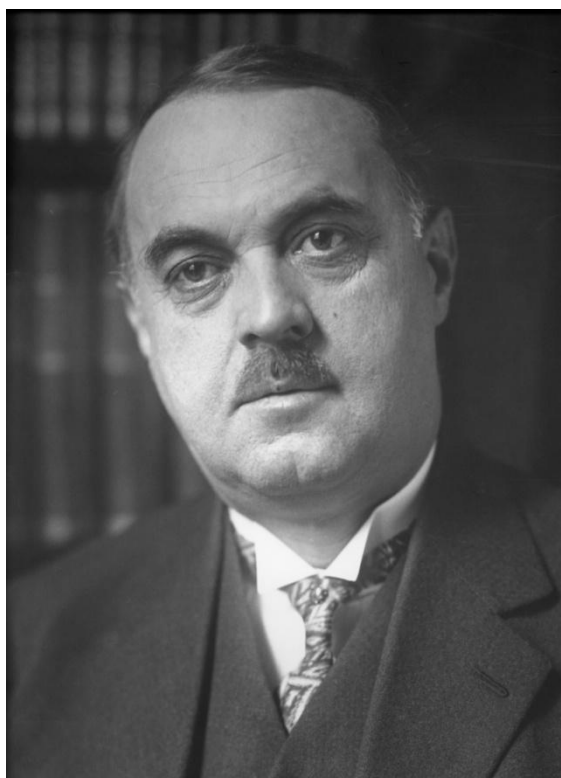


Figure 1 Vojtěch Birnbaum, portrait photograph from 1930th. Photo: Ústav dějin umění AV ČR, Praha.

This paper aims to present a new interpretation of Vojtěch Birnbaum's essay 'The Baroque Principle in the History of Architecture'. Until now Czech historiography perceived it as an original contribution that further developed the ideas of the Vienna School as well as an important work of Czech origin in the canon of 'global' art history. The placement of this work in the context of accepting Wölfflin's methodological initiatives not only questions the originality of Birnbaum's ideas, but also brings up the question of profound self-reflection for Czech art historians: Was not our isolation from the developments in the West that we attributed to Communist oppression, caused more by a chronic problem of Czech art history itself?

Vojtěch Birnbaum (1877- 1934) is one of the more remarkable art historians in Central Europe of Slavic background. (Fig. 1) Educated at the University of Vienna under Alois Riegl and Franz Wickhoff, he received his PhD with a thesis on ancient Christian sacred architecture in 1904. In 1919, after spending several years in Italy as a scholar, he began teaching art history at the Charles University in Prague, where he became a full professor in 1927. He was the author of substantial contributions on the Hellenistic sources of Vitruvius' *Ten Books on Architecture*, the so-called House of

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Livia on Palatine Hill and the architecture of Ravenna (regarding which he criticized the views of Josef Strzygowski, thus taking part in the well-known debate on the topic of the Orient versus Rome). His main research focus later shifted to the medieval architecture of the Czech lands.¹

Birnbaum's accession at Charles University in 1919 is often considered to be the starting point of a methodical 'scientification' of Czech art history as a discipline; meaning, primarily, the adoption of a genetic-formalistic approach and the universalistic perspective of the Vienna School. To understand his historical role it is key to point out that in the 19th century the majority of pioneers of Czech art history lacked university studies in the discipline: Jan Erazim Vocel (1803-1871) who was named the first university professor of archaeology and art history in 1850 did not even complete his law degree. Miroslav Tyrš (1832-1884), who was awarded a professorship a year before he passed away, held a doctorate in aesthetics. Even Birnbaum's immediate predecessor Karel Chytil (1857-1934) was educated as a secondary school teacher of history and geography.² Birnbaum must have made a stunning impression in Prague due to his methodological erudition and his focus on theory. He opened up the field to entirely different possibilities than the dominant role of art history which, at the time, included inventorizing and descriptions of historical buildings. His preoccupation with late Roman and Byzantine art separated him from his predecessors who concentrated on issues facing Czech art and who led fruitless disputes with art historians from the German University in Prague, who were more competent and generally came out on top.³

His essay on 'The Baroque Principle in the History of Architecture' appeared in 1924 in the Prague-based *Styl* review. (Fig. 2 and 3) In it, Birnbaum attempted to present a new formalist definition of the Baroque. At its foundation is the idea that form overcomes material and that the subjective power of the human spirit overcomes the objective reality of tectonic laws. Above all he argued that the Baroque, rather than constituting simply the dominant style of the 17th and 18th centuries, can be considered a transtemporal principle, which ascends to the fore periodically in the late stages of various styles. 'Similar, even identical efforts and trends as in the Baroque,' insists Birnbaum, 'are manifest also in the final stages of the development of other styles, at least insofar as these were allowed to run their entire course; thus, in fact, every style aims at the Baroque, which is a constant refrain in the history of art.'⁴ He substantiated this conclusion by references to the Late Classical period and illustrated it in detail with examples from Czech Gothic architecture.

¹ Jiřina Hořejší, 'Vojtěch Birnbaum', in Rudolf Chadraba and others, eds, *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění*, II, Prague: Odeon, 1987, 101-117; Ivo Hlobil, 'Vojtěch Birnbaum – život a dílo v dobových souvislostech', in Vojtěch Birnbaum, *Vývojové zákonitosti v umění*, Prague: Odeon, 1987, 379-411.

² Rostislav Švácha, 'Historikové kultury', in Chadraba and others, *Kapitoly*, I, 141-159, here 147 and 154.

³ Klement Benda, 'Rozmach oboru v devadesátých letech', in Chadraba and others, *Kapitoly*, I, 197-211, here 203.

⁴ Vojtěch Birnbaum, 'Barokní princip v dějinách architektury', *Styl*, 5, 1924, 71-85, here 71.

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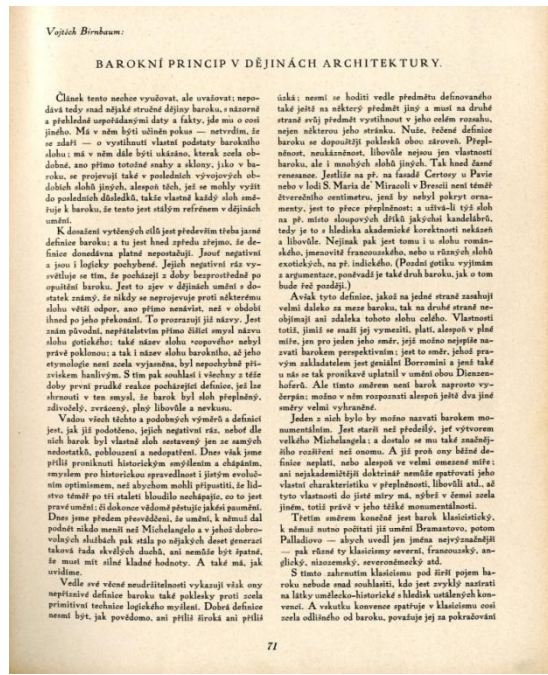
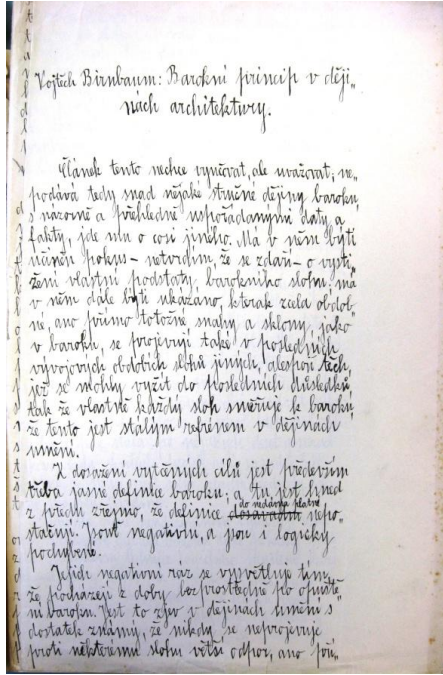


Figure 2 Vojtěch Birnbaum, manuscript of the 'Baroque Principle', 1922. Archiv Akademie věd České republiky.
 Figure 3 Review *Styl*, 5, 1924, with the Birnbaum's essay.

From the viewpoint of the subsequent history of art, Birnbaum's study shows a crucial weakness: the central thesis, presented by Birnbaum as his own intellectual achievement, had been formulated a decade earlier by Heinrich Wölfflin who expressed his *Grundbegriffe der Kunstgeschichte (Principles of Art History)* by saying: 'There is a Classicism and a Baroque also within a framework as alien to it as the Gothic – i.e. not only in modern times and not only in ancient architecture.'⁵ Just as Birnbaum believed that a Baroque stage was eventually attained by every style allowed to 'run its entire course',⁶ his elder colleague proclaimed: 'Every Western style, if given time to live itself out, has a Classical epoch and also a Baroque of its own.'⁷ Also, both Wölfflin and the Czech art historian shared the reference to late Gothic as a key part of the argument. According to Wölfflin, this style 'generated perfectly analogical phenomena regarding the creation and combination of forms', meaning primarily the pushing aside of tectonic principles: 'Here, once again, atectonics is linked with a late style'.⁸ And there is no substantial difference in the two essays' morphological definition of the Baroque. Birnbaum claims that with the advent of

⁵ 'Es gibt eine Klassik und einen Barock nicht nur in der neueren Zeit und nicht nur in der antiken Baukunst, sondern auch auf einem so fremdartigen Boden wie der Gotik'. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, München: Bruckmann, 1921, 249.

⁶ Birnbaum, 'Barokní princip', 84.

⁷ '(...) daß jeder abendländische Stil, wie er seine klassische Epoche hat, so auch seinen Barock habe, vorausgesetzt, daß man ihm Zeit läßt, sich auszuleben'. Wölfflin, *Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe*, 250.

⁸ 'Die Spätgotik hat ganz analoge Phänomene der Formbildung und Formkombination erzeugt... Die Atektionik ist auch hier gebunden an den Spätstil'. Wölfflin, *Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe*, 161.

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the Baroque, architectonic segments 'completely disintegrate and achieve autonomy, and each blends within a novel and firm whole with segments that are materially alien to it', so that 'parts of a given tectonic whole push closer to other segments elsewhere rather than to one another'.⁹ Similarly, Wölfflin detected in the Baroque architecture 'the putting together of parts without autonomy of their own', 'a certain loss of the autonomy of parts'.¹⁰ (Fig. 4 and 5) Last but not least, there are overlaps in the arguments of the two art historians regarding the Baroque as an expression of the national genius and character. Birnbaum saw the reason for the stunted development of Renaissance architecture in the Czech lands in its detachment from the sentiments of a Northern nation, 'still permeated by the Baroque ideas and Baroque feelings of its own late Gothic' – whereas in the Italian Baroque, claims Birnbaum, the North 'suddenly recognized something it had experienced itself in the late Gothic and then missed in the subsequent period of faintness and unfruitfulness, even though it slumbered somewhere in its unconscious'.¹¹ This is similar to the identification of ethnic characteristics and style and the explanation of stylistic transformations by the historical role of nations in Wölfflin: 'The art history of every nation contains eras which appear, unlike others, as the authentic manifestation of the national virtues.' For the Italians, this opportunity arrived in the Renaissance era, whereas 'for the Germanic North it was provided by the Baroque period'.¹²

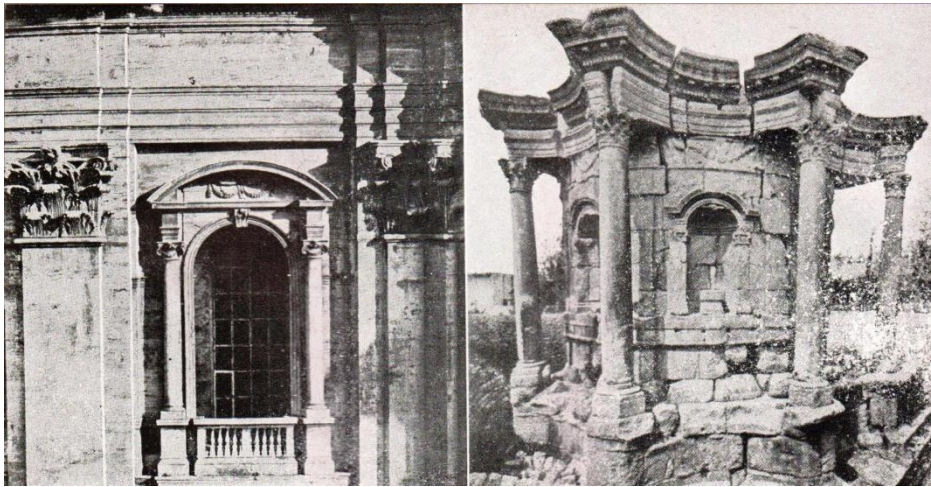


Figure 4 Window of St Peter's in Rome and the Temple in Baalbek, illustration from Vojtěch Birnbaum's book *Listy z dějin umění*, Prague: Václav Petr, 1947.

⁹ Birnbaum, 'Barokní princip', 73.

¹⁰ 'Zusammenballung von Teilen ohne eigentliche Selbständigkeit... eine gewisse Entselbständigung der Teile'. Wölfflin, *Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe*, 10 and 199.

¹¹ Birnbaum, 'Barokní princip', 85.

¹² Wölfflin, *Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe*, 256.

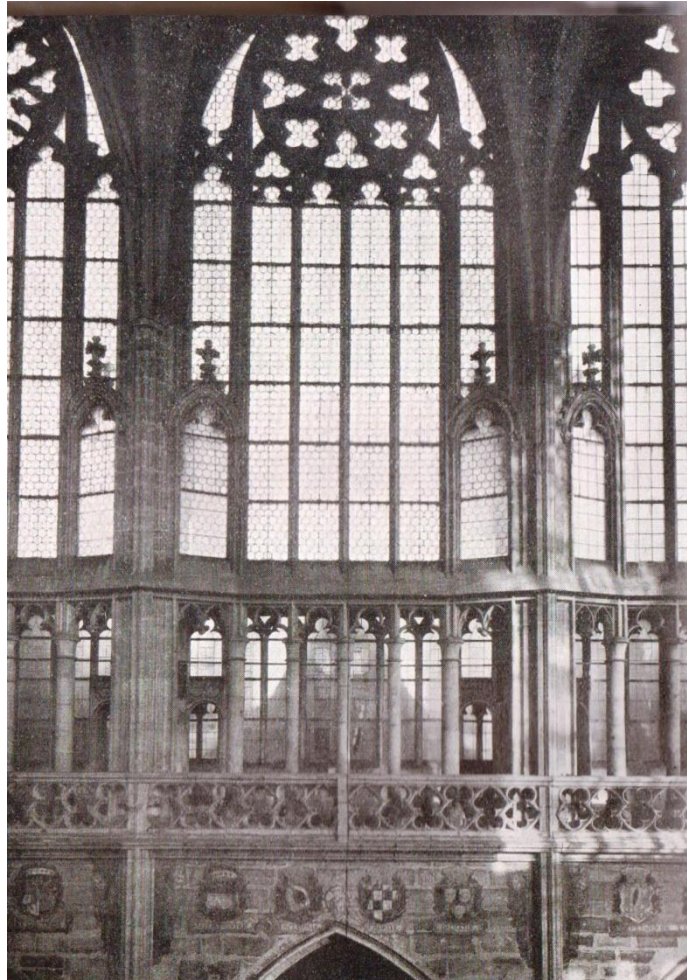


Figure 5 Triforium from St Vitus Cathedral in Prague, illustration from Vojtěch Birnbaum's book *Listy z dějin umění*, Prague: Václav Petr, 1947.

Given the evident similarity between Birnbaum's and Wölfflin's statements, the question unavoidably arises whether the Czech art historian wrote independently of the antecedent work. The doubts can be hardly quelled by the fact that Czech art history has so far remained firmly convinced of the originality of 'The Baroque Principle'. In Birnbaum's lifetime, his *Style* essay provoked no polemical reaction; on the contrary, it was highly praised by the prominent literary critic F. X. Šalda.¹³ After the author's untimely death, his colleagues and students praised the article as a deeply original and extraordinarily significant scientific achievement. Already the obituarist for the *Volné směry* review, writing in 1935, proclaimed that Birnbaum's theories 'are of first-rate significance and will remain a milestone in the progress of our art history'.¹⁴ When collected in a book in 1941, the essay was advertised as a 'groundbreaking, unique study'.¹⁵ This assessment was reproduced without qualifications by the reviewer for *Lidové noviny*, perhaps the aesthetician Bohumil Markalous: according to the review, this is 'a truly foundational piece', indeed 'a significant Czech contribution to the international [debate regarding the]

¹³ František X. Šalda, 'Dvojí dějepisectví', *Šaldův zápisník* 1, 1928-1929, 54-63, 90-103, see 101.

¹⁴ Vn [Vladimír Novotný?], 'Vojtěch Birnbaum', *Volné směry* 35, 1935, 1.

¹⁵ *Řád*, 3. 6. 1941, 280a.

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doctrine of style'.¹⁶ With similar zeal, the art historian Zdeněk Hájek of the University of Brno lined Birnbaum up with such discoverers of the Baroque as Riegl, Wölfflin, Albert E. Brinckmann, Max Dvořák, Paul Frankl and Cornelius Gurlitt.¹⁷ In 1944, Oldřich Stefan, a prominent expert on Czech Baroque architecture, acclaimed the study as 'a key work in the literature on the topic worldwide'.¹⁸ Vincenc Kramář (1877-1960), who studied at Vienna at the same time as Birnbaum, while objecting against his cyclical model, left the originality of the stated laws of development without comment.¹⁹ Dvořák's student Antonín Matějček (1889-1950) was the only one to assess Birnbaum's contribution realistically when he wrote that 'this previously recognized principle is followed here in detail as to its creative energies and functions'.²⁰ (Fig. 6)



Figure 6 Vojtěch Birnbaum with Antonín Matějček, 1920. Photo: Ústav dějin umění AV ČR, Praha.

¹⁶ Ma [Bohumil Markalous?], 'Barokní princip v dějinách architektury', *Lidové noviny* 29. 10. 1941, 7.

¹⁷ Hjk [Zdeněk Hájek], 'O pojem baroka v architektuře', *Lidové noviny* 6. 7. 1944, 3.

¹⁸ Oldřich Stefan, 'Prof. dr. Vojtěch Birnbaum, 1877-1934', *Národní politika* 31. 5. 1944, 3.

¹⁹ Vincenc Kramář, 'Španělsko a kubismus', in V. Mandler and others, eds., *Španělsku*, Prague: Výbor pro pomoc demokratickému Španělsku, 1937, 113-135.

²⁰ Antonín Matějček, 'Vojtěch Birnbaum', *Český časopis historický* 40, 1934, 367-372, here 371.

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The impression one gains from these responses and comments, given their naïve praise of Birnbaum's study, is that the writers have never even seen Wölfflin's *Grundbegriffe*. While such a negative claim is difficult to prove conclusively, it does find a measure of support in the fact that the response to Wölfflin's book in Czech periodicals has been basically nil. Putting aside the brief and rather misleading announcement in *Volné směry*, Prague failed to produce a single review of the 1915 work.²¹ In the interwar period there are only sporadic traces of honest intellectual reception of Wölfflin's ideas, and these are mostly to be found outside of art history, in texts stemming from related disciplines. In his 1916 monograph on Baroque music in the Czech chateaux, Vladimír Helfert lauded Wölfflin for having produced 'the most complete and scientifically exact analysis of the Baroque style in architecture'.²² A similar appraisal was enounced by the historian Zdeněk Kalista in 1934.²³ On the other hand, the writings of the Czech art historians from the same period supply only brief mentions of Wölfflin.²⁴ The lack of interest in the *Grundbegriffe* is especially striking compared to the attention aroused in the Czech and Czech-German milieu by Wölfflin's earlier work. A competent summary of his habilitation thesis, *Renaissance und Barock*, was published within a year from its appearance by the most popular Czech daily, *Národní listy*.²⁵ Shortly thereafter, a specialized periodical noted Wölfflin's succession to Jacob Burckhardt's chair at the University of Basel and attached some brief praise for his research on the Baroque.²⁶ The second edition of *Die Klassische Kunst* was reviewed in 1901 by *Bohemia*, the main Prague-based German daily, and found to be 'undoubtedly one of the most valuable recent titles on history of art'.²⁷ Five years later, the same daily brought out a review of Wölfflin's monograph on Dürer.²⁸ At the time, Wölfflin's work was being widely publicized among Czechs by Max Dvořák, who included a detailed analysis of the *Renaissance und Barock* in his 1902 study on 'The Ultimate Renaissance', written in Czech. Wölfflin's book, says Dvořák, 'discovered law where so far only disiecta membra were seen, and he detected in the Baroque art, 'run wild', certain large goals, a large and impressive system'.²⁹ Dvořák also recommended the book to his Czech friends, even going so far as to mail his copy to two of them, Antonín Matějček and Josef Šusta. 'What I like about Wölfflin's writings is that they contain plenty of ideas and next to no blabber, even though the topic which he handles attracts it so often', he wrote in the accompanying letter to

²¹ *Volné směry* 19, 1918, 118.

²² Vladimír Helfert, *Hudební barok na českých zámcích*, Prague: Rozpravy České akademie věd a umění, 1916, xv-xvii.

²³ Zdeněk Kalista, 'Co jest barok', *Filosofická revue* 6, 1934, 71-76.

²⁴ Jaromír Pečírka mentions Wölfflin in Max Dvořák's obituary as the father of the genetic history of artistic issues, cf. Jaromír Pečírka, 'Max Dvořák', *Český časopis historický* 27, 1921, 1-7, here 3; Wölfflin's sixtieth birthday is registered by *Volné směry* 23, 1924-1925, 128.

²⁵ 'Heinrich Wölfflin, Renaissance und Barock', *Národní listy* 30. 5. 1889, 5.

²⁶ *Mitteilungen des Mährischen Gewerbemuseums in Brünn* 10, 1893, 170 and 8, 1894, 139-140.

²⁷ '(...) unstreitig eines der wertvollsten kunstgeschichtlichen Bücher der letzten Jahre', 'Kunstwissenschaftliches', *Bohemia* 15. 12. 1901, 34.

²⁸ 'Wölfflins Dürer', *Bohemia* 4. 6. 1906, Beilage, 3.

²⁹ Max Dvořák, 'Poslední renaissance', *Český časopis historický* 8, 1902, 30-51, here 36.

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Šusta.³⁰ His recommendations did have an impact, as demonstrated by the Czech edition of *Die klassische Kunst* in 1912.³¹

The indifference to Wölfflin's mature and late works in the interwar Czechoslovakia could be explained by the intense nationalism of the newly founded republic, with historical disciplines delimiting themselves against the previously dominant impulses arriving from the German-speaking countries. Somewhat ironically, for several decades the national art history found a basis for its development in the Vienna School, put under the aegis of the Slavic name of Max Dvořák. Besides Henri Focillon's *La vie des formes* and Élie Faure's *Histoire de l'art*, a collection of Dvořák's essays with the title *Art as the Expression of Spirit* was the only book-length translation in art history from this time period. No doubt the assessments of Birnbaum's 'Baroque Principle' which overlook his dependence on Wölfflin are an indication of this long-term isolation from the international scene. However, another factor is the exclusive part taken by the Vienna School in the formation of art history in Czechoslovakia; this is the reason why even later and current commentators have avoided considering any affiliation of these theories beyond the Viennese connection. Thus, Jiřina Hořejší in her 1987 *Chapters from Czech Art History* did not hesitate to present 'The Baroque Principle' as Birnbaum's 'most significant theoretical work', considering it as anchored in 'the Vienna geistwissenschaftlich concept of art history'.³² Ivo Hlobil, the editor of a collection of Birnbaum's texts with a substantial afterword, also from 1987, did not go any further than to allow a dependence on 'the determinist aspects of Alois Riegl's interpretation of the evolution of style'.³³ At the time, Karel Srp was the only one who put forward a cautious opinion when he said that Birnbaum, 'alongside of stimuli from the Vienna School, perhaps applied Wölfflin's methodological approach'.³⁴ In 2012, a similar allusion was put forward by Petra Hečková, a younger art historian, mentioned Wölfflin next to Riegl and Wickhoff as formative for Birnbaum's views. 'As a matter of fact', she observed, 'Birnbaum's formulations even resemble Wölfflin's description of one of the characteristics of the Baroque: unity.'³⁵ However, as was to be expected, even Hečková resisted any doubts as to the originality of 'The Baroque Principle'.

Once we have thus outlined the resonance area of the Czech reception of Wölfflin's oeuvre and of Birnbaum's formulation of his theories, we can return to 'The Baroque Principle' and attempt to answer the crucial question of this essay. Is Birnbaum's piece an original intellectual achievement, independent in its genesis from Wölfflin's work – or is it plagiarized? Or is there, perhaps, a third alternative? I

³⁰ Max Dvořák, *Listy o životě a umění. Dopisy Jaroslavu Gollovi, Josefu Pekařovi a Josefu Šustovi* (ed. Jaromír Pečírka), Prague: Vyšehrad, 1943, 70.

³¹ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Klassické umění* (transl. by Václav V. Štech), Prague: Jan Leichter, 1912.

³² Hořejší, 'Vojtěch Birnbaum', 111-112.

³³ Hlobil, 'Vojtěch Birnbaum', 399.

³⁴ Karel Srp, 'Situační českého dějepisu umění ve dvacátých letech', in Chadřaba and others, *Kapitoly*, II, 71-94, here 78.

³⁵ Petra Hečková, 'Od Pantheonu k Vladislavskému sálu. Historiografická poznámka k vývoji konceptu pozdních slohových fází u Vojtěcha Birnbauma', in Helena Dáňová and others, *Artem ad vitam. Kniha k poctě Ivo Hlobila*, Prague: Artefactum, 2012, 525-531, here 529.

believe that given the coincidence in both contents and formulations of the two texts as well as the author's familiarity with European research, Birnbaum must have known the *Grundbegriffe*. He was on friendly terms with Dvořák, like Wölfflin he would spend substantive periods of time in Italy, and after his Vienna graduation he even planned to pursue further studies at the University of Munich.³⁶ These were the reasons why in my earlier analysis of the Czech reception of the Baroque in the 19th century I reached a severe verdict and labeled Birnbaum's essay 'plagiarism'. I will soften that judgement now and choose a more fitting term: Birnbaum's essay is 'derivative'. Besides, I see it now as necessary to point out a set of previously overlooked external circumstances which speak on behalf of the Czech art historian. His correspondence with Kramář and Dvořák demonstrates conclusively that Birnbaum had researched the Baroque architecture of Rome a decade before the publication of the *Grundbegriffe*.³⁷ Similarly we can say that Birnbaum's concept of cyclical repetition of 'Baroque' phases of style was not inspired by Wölfflin, but by other authors. In a ironical twist one of these authors we can consider to be his predecessor and antipode Chytil, who pointed out the 'Baroque' aspects in Petr Parléř's Gothic architecture as early as 1886.³⁸ This presumption is supported by the fact that Birnbaum presented his 'Baroque Principle' that was written in 1922 and published in 1924 already in October 1919 in a lecture for the Prague Circle of Friends for Cultivating History of Art, which was headed by Chytil at the time.³⁹ While one can hardly doubt that the articulation of his views is derived from Wölfflin's, it can be admitted, and I see it now as likely, that Wölfflin's book provided Birnbaum with confirmation of his own insights, or at least with answers to his own questions. Next arguments that go in this direction were presented already by Hlobil when he pointed out certain anticipations of 'The Baroque Principle' in F. X. Šalda's columns written after Šalda's discussions with Birnbaum in 1911.⁴⁰

Another finding in defense of the Prague professor is that his study was published in a review for architects, with no references to the literature as the usual editorial policy, rather than in a scholarly periodical. Of course he could have mentioned his sources in the body of the text, just as Wölfflin did when he pointed out Jacob Burckhardt and Georg Dehio as his predecessors and the true 'discoverers' of the periodicity of stylistic modifications.⁴¹ However, it is clear from the extant manuscript of the essay that Birnbaum did intend to cite other authors: on page 6 we find a reference to Wölfflin and on page 15 to Gurlitt (Fig. 6). Why the avoidance of further references in the rest of the text? For his colleagues and

³⁶ With the intent to study classical archaeology with Adolf Furtwängler; mentioned by Max Dvořák, letter to Birnbaum from 28. 1. 1906, Archiv Akademie věd České republiky, Vojtěch Birnbaum papers.

³⁷ Vincenc Kramář's letter to Birnbaum from 19. 2. 1905 and Max Dvořák's letter to Birnbaum from 28. 1. 1906. Archiv Akademie věd České republiky, papers of Vojtěch Birnbaum,

³⁸ Švácha, 'Historikové kultury', in Chadraha and others, *Kapitoly*, I, 141-159, here 156.

³⁹ Archiv AV ČR, Vojtěch Birnbaum papers, Karel Chytil's letter to Birnbaum from 18. 10. 1919.

⁴⁰ Hlobil, 'Vojtěch Birnbaum', 387.

⁴¹ Wölfflin, *Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe*, 281.

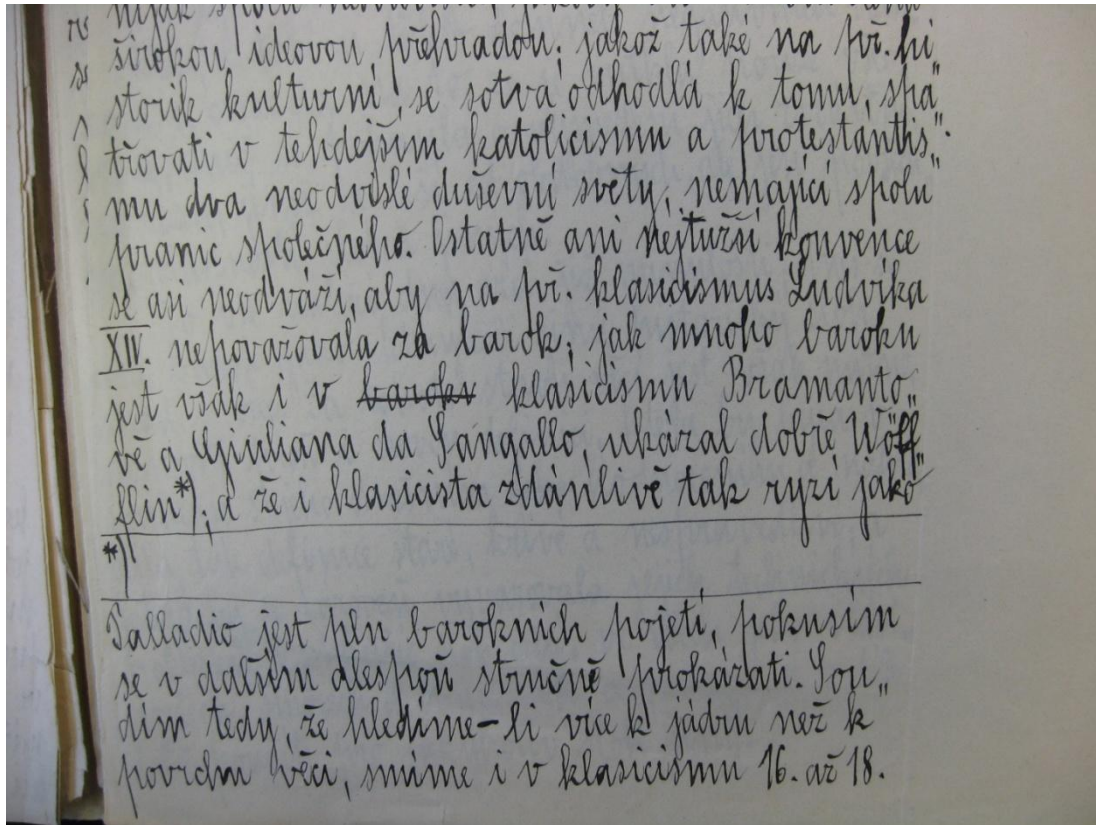


Figure 7 Vojtěch Birnbaum, manuscript of the 'Baroque Principle' with a reference to Wölfflin. Archiv Akademie věd České republiky.

students, Birnbaum was a model of a conscientious researcher, and he must have had a serious reason for proceeding in this way.⁴² I want to suggest that he did so because he was anxious to avoid being attacked by Czech nationalists. It is well known that Birnbaum had numerous academic rivals and opponents, prominently including aforementioned Karel Chytil, the Chair of the Department of Art History at Charles University, Prague, and thus Birnbaum's direct superior. This positivist scholar, who felt defensive with regard to the advance of younger and better equipped graduates of the Vienna School, presented shortly after the birth of independent Czechoslovakia an aggressively formulated program of 'de-Germanization' and 'de-Austrization' of the Czech and Slovak historiography of art. He held it was necessary to 'free our scholarship and its application and practice from the German, and particularly Viennese, template and uniform'.⁴³ Even though the target of the attack was unmistakably clear, Chytil did shrink from challenging his academic colleague by name. However, no such scruples were exhibited by the former student of art history and university drop-out Florian Zapletal (1884-1969) who attacked Birnbaum quite openly. In a review of Birnbaum's monograph on the architecture of Ravenna, Zapletal claimed that the author's 'wretched Germanic method very much endangers a healthy growth of our knowledge' and concludes

⁴² Matějček, 'Vojtěch Birnbaum', 370.

⁴³ Karel Chytil, 'O příštích úkolech dějin a historiků umění v československém státě', *Naše doba. Revue pro vědu umění a život sociální* 26, 1919, 753-766.

with an uncompromising slogan: 'let us break out windows in the Germanic wall which has insulated us from Europe and the world and condemned us to mental atrophy'.⁴⁴ While the cosmopolitan Birnbaum viewed the nationalist arguments among art historians as a symptom of 'lacking intellectual self-confidence', he was forced to defend himself in the *Volné směry*.⁴⁵ Shortly thereafter he published a laudatory essay on the 19th-century Czech art historian Jan E. Vocel, where he appealed to the pride of the nation and emphasized the worth of the domestic tradition as against German art history.⁴⁶ I believe that these are relevant circumstances and have to be seen as the background for the omitted reference to Wölfflin's contributions in 'The Baroque Principle'. Birnbaum, struggling with the narrowmindedness of the Prague intellectual scene and, moreover, waiting for his full professorship, preferred to avoid supplying his opponents with yet another pretext for an attack from 'patriotic' positions.

However, there is one more reason why I now hesitate to label 'The Baroque Principle' 'an act of wrongful appropriation', according to the standard definition of plagiarism.⁴⁷ The fact is, Birnbaum's reading of Wölfflin was rather selective and the direction taken by his essay was fairly distinct. As has been pointed out by Joan Hart and Hubert Locher, Wölfflin's primary goal was *not* to explain the history of stylistic changes but rather to highlight the process of seeing and thematize the perception of forms.⁴⁸ With regard to the universal validity – or lack of it – of the concepts and categories that he postulated, the author of the *Grundbegriffe* was much more cautious than Riegl, who strove to grasp 'the continuous causal nexus in the artistic creativity of all the historical epochs of humanity'.⁴⁹ Birnbaum followed in the footsteps of his own master, rather than in Wölfflin's. The principle of formal transformation that he detected would be worthless to him if it did not allow for a proper generalization in the form of a universal causal law. His apodictic conclusion was that 'the aim pursued by all artistic evolution as its ultimate goal consists in the complete superposition of illusion to reality, the complete supplementation of objective reality by artistic reality'.⁵⁰ In Birnbaum's view, this universal law did not consist in the alternation of a 'haptic' and an 'optic' mode, or a 'linear' and a

⁴⁴ Florian Zapletal, 'Západ nebo východ?', *Umělecký měsíčník* 1, 1919, 112-113; Ivo Hlobil, 'Polemika Floriana Zapletala s Vojtěchem Birnbaumem o směřování českých dějin umění po vzniku Československé republiky', in František Hýbl (ed.), *Florian Zapletal – život a dílo*, Přerov: Muzeum Komenského, 2006, 151-155.

⁴⁵ Vojtěch Birnbaum, 'Nový názor na počátky české středověké architektury', in Josef Schráníl, ed. *Niederlův sborník*, Prague: Společnost československých praehistoriků, 1925, 1-11, here 1. – Vojtěch Birnbaum, 'Západ nebo východ', *Volné směry* 20, 1919-1920, Zprávy, 49-53.

⁴⁶ Vojtěch Birnbaum, 'Vocel jako historik umění', *Časopis Společnosti přátel starožitností* 29, 1921, 1-49.

⁴⁷ Mary Vaccaro, 'Introduction', in Mary Vaccaro, ed. *Plagiarism in Art (and Art History)*, Visual resources 16, 2000, 127-129, here

⁴⁸ Hubert Locher, *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie der Kunst 1750-1950*, Munich: Fink, 2010, 393.

⁴⁹ Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen. Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, Berlin: G. Siemens, 1893, xiii; Locher, *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie*, 388.

⁵⁰ Birnbaum, 'Barokní princip', 77.

'pictorial' mode, but rather in the emancipation of creative subjectivity, 'the achieving of creative thought's complete control over reality', whereby an 'objective architectural fact turns into a subjective illusory impression'⁵¹ – a process which, as Birnbaum sees it, passes through cyclical reruns in the course of history. In the same year when Wölfflin fought the allegation that he had 'written the *Grundbegriffe* in order to mechanize history', his Czech colleague saw the outlining of such a template as a meritorious achievement.⁵²

Birnbaum compressed his teleological concept of the history of art, based on the notion of art as organism, into mere fifteen printed pages, including therein a universal definition of Baroque architecture and its classification. I would hesitate to say that the goal of the essay was popularization: precisely such an intention would require references to sources. More fittingly it can be designated as didactic: Birnbaum's goal was to demonstrate that the 'scientific' character of art history does not consist in the collecting of statements of fact but rather in the possibility to derive theories from such a basis by means of a reliable induction. However, Birnbaum's manner of unfolding the concept of art history as an autonomous evolution of forms was fairly rigid, even pedantic. We would search in vain for any hint of a heteronomous or expressionistic understanding of history. With a degree of hyperbole we can say that his thinking was more Wölfflinian than Wölfflin's and more Rieglian than Riegl's, especially insofar as he ignored the links between a visual tradition and the mental life of a society, and as he strove to impute the same stylistic laws to all periods of Western art. He further developed his schematic model in his 1932 essay 'An Addendum on the Laws of Development', wherein he put forth his conviction that the creative energy of particular nations is insufficient for making the styles created by a nation pass through the entire evolutionary cycle. Therefore, according to what Birnbaum calls 'the law of transgression', the task of completing the process must be adopted by a different ethnic community. Each style, claims Birnbaum, 'runs such a modification even repeatedly, all the way to completely exploiting all the possibilities contained in it'.⁵³ This bizarre theory did run into critical objections and these then touched also upon 'the Baroque principle'. However, it was characteristic for the situation of the Czech art history of this period that this occurred no sooner than three years after the author's death. The above-mentioned Vincenc Kramář then diagnosed the dogmatic and self-serving nature of Birnbaum's model. 'It is perfectly useless and quite certainly non-scholarly to emphasize that, for instance, the Greek genius failed to "achieve" the illusionism of Roman art, Northern France the optical effects of late South German Gothic, Michelangelo (...) the fairy-tale brilliance of Guarini or our own Baroque', argued Kramář and in contrast to Birnbaum's elaborately construed cycles stressed the singular nature of each stylistic period, even of every work of art. 'Greek or Hellenic art is not merely a step in the evolution of art which is then brought to perfection in Rome; rather, it is something independent and essentially different.'⁵⁴ Similarly,

⁵¹ Birnbaum, 'Barokní princip', 74 and 75.

⁵² Locher, *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie*, 394.

⁵³ Vojtěch Birnbaum, 'Doplňk k vývojovým zákonům', *Památky archeologické* 38, 1932, 1-2.

⁵⁴ Kramář, 'Španělsko a kubismus', cf. Vincenc Kramář, *O obrazech a galeriích*, Praha: Odeon, 1983, 152-172, here 154.

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Václav Richter in 1947 rejected Birnbaum's 'aimless applications of stylistic criticism' and objected to his essay due to its 'mechanistic understanding of development' which robs art history of all historical specificity.⁵⁵ However, more numerous were scholars such as Václav Mencl and Oldřich Stefan, who proclaimed substantial agreement with Birnbaum's thinking.⁵⁶ 'Genetic formalism' was subsequently pursued in the Czech lands as the hegemonic model of scientifically-based art history and as a barrier against various allegedly non-scholarly approaches, adopted by the social history of art.⁵⁷ Yet this is not Birnbaum's fault; the ones to blame are the uncritical admirers of his 'Baroque Principle'.⁵⁸

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⁵⁵ Václav Richter, 'Listy z dějin umění' (review), *Památky archeologické* 43, 1948, 112-113.

⁵⁶ Václav Mencl, 'K Birnbaumovu zákonu transgrese', *Volné směry* 37, 1941-42, 195; Oldřich Stefan, 'Barokní princip v české architektuře 17. a 18. století', *Umění* 7, 1959, 305-330.

⁵⁷ Ján Bakoš, *Discourses and Strategies. The Role of the Vienna School in Shaping Central European Approaches to Art History and Related Discourses*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2013, 136.

⁵⁸ The essay is an expanded version of a paper presented on March 26, 2015, in Berlin at the annual meeting of The Renaissance Society of America. It originated within the framework of the project titled 'Art, Architecture, Design and National Identity', with support from the Czech Ministry of Culture, as part of the NAKI (DF12P01OVV041) programme.