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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
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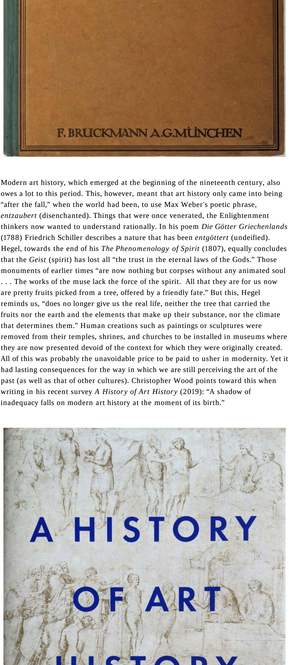
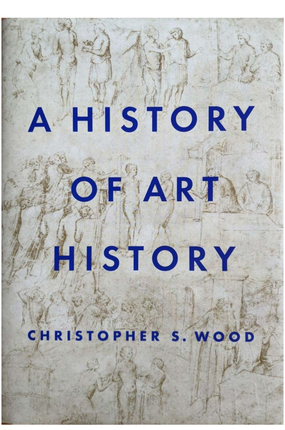
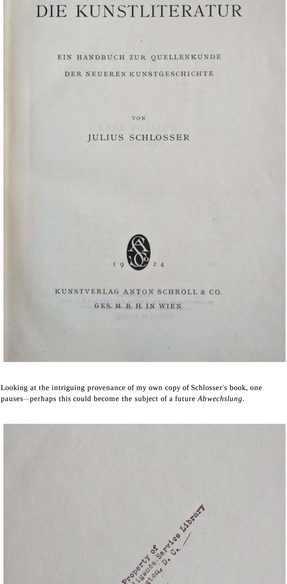
The period around the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century is one of momentous changes in art, philosophy, politics, as well as generally in culture and history. The German historian Reinhart Koselleck coined the term *Sattelzeit* to describe the years from the end of the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions to the mid-nineteenth century. With *Sattel*, he is referring to the peak of a mountain or better perhaps the top (or saddle) of a mountain range. Hans Blumenberg described the period as *Epochenschwelle* or threshold between two epochs. Art historians have been acutely aware of this period, too. In 1908 the German architect Paul Mebes published an influential overview titled *Um 1800*, an illustrated survey of the period's architecture and design that became highly popular after World War I and went through multiple new editions. Werner Hofmann, during his tenure as director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle, organized a seminal series of exhibitions between 1974 and 1981 under the heading *Kunst um 1800*. They were monographic presentations of the art of Blake, Caspar David Friedrich, Fuseli, Runge, and Turner but also of such somewhat lesser-known artists as John Flaxman and Johann Tobias Seegel. The beginning made *Ossian and die Kunst*, a show that was dedicated to the highly influential albeit fictive figure of Ossian who was believed to have authored a cycle of Gaelic poems which had, in fact, been written by the contemporary Scottish poet James Macpherson.



Modern art history, which emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century, also owes a lot to this period. This, however, meant that art history only came into being "after the fall," when the world had been, to use Max Weber's poetic phrase, *entzaubert* (disenchanted). Things that were once venerated, the Enlightenment thinkers now wanted to understand rationally. In his poem *Die Götter Griechenlands* (1788) Friedrich Schiller describes a nature that has been *entgöttert* (undeified). Hegel, towards the end of his *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), equally concludes that the *Geist* (spirit) has lost all "the trust in the eternal laws of the Gods." Those monuments of earlier times "are now nothing but corpses without any animated soul . . . The works of the muse lack the force of the spirit. All that they are for us now are pretty fruits picked from a tree, offered by a friendly fate." But this, Hegel reminds us, "does no longer give us the real life, neither the tree that carried the fruits nor the earth and the elements that make up their substance, nor the climate that determines them." Human creations such as paintings or sculptures were removed from their temples, shrines, and churches to be installed in museums where they are now presented devoid of the content for which they were originally created. All of this was probably the unavoidable price to be paid to usher in modernity. Yet it had lasting consequences for the way in which we are still perceiving the art of the past (as well as that of other cultures). Christopher Wood points toward this when writing in his recent survey *A History of Art History* (2019): "A shadow of inadequacy falls on modern art history at the moment of its birth."



This break in history's trajectory is also where Julius Schlosser ended his own magisterial overview of *Die Kunstliteratur* of 1924, just before art history, as we know it today, began. Yet he allows himself one last glimpse into this new modernity. The example he chooses is the art of Northern European landscape painting where "landscape itself, the life of nature, begins to talk in a thousand tongues until Philipp Otto Runge, with the daring audacity of Romantic youth, ultimately substitutes history with landscape as art's true, modern objective." Schlosser praises not just Runge's art but also his writing. For him, it differs markedly from the "Taumelreden schwärmerischer Literatenjünglinge" of many of the other Romantics (translating these delectable neologisms as "giddy speeches of enthusiastic literary youths" can hardly do them justice) and displays "a new self-contemplation of art seen from the perspective of its creator" while being "grounded on the solid base of the artist's craft." This is a quality Runge's views on art and its nature share with earlier reflections made by one of art's most consummate practitioners: Albrecht Dürer. Without referencing this explicitly, Schlosser thereby manages to bring his own *Handbuch* full circle.



Looking at the intriguing provenance of my own copy of Schlosser's book, one pauses—perhaps this could become the subject of a future *Abwechslung*.