

18. Everyman's Aesthetic Considerations on a Visible History of Art: Joseph Sebastian von Rittershausen's (1748–1820) *Betrachtungen* (1785) on Christian von Mechel's (1737–1817) Work at the Imperial Picture Gallery in Vienna

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Abstract

When reorganising the Viennese Imperial collections in the early 1780s, Christian von Mechel decided to hang the paintings by school, offering what he described as 'a visible history of art'. His decision was widely greeted with approval, although there were some dissenting voices to be heard. Among them was Joseph Sebastian von Rittershausen, a Bavarian polymath, who published a lengthy and highly critical text explaining why, in his opinion, Mechel's method was faulty. Rittershausen felt that historical hang would efface the paintings' aesthetic qualities. He also argued that it was an elitist approach and would undermine the art gallery's claim to appeal to a broad audience. He suggested that paintings should be hung according to their artistic qualities and not according to erudite principles of connoisseurship based largely on attributions rather than aesthetic judgment.

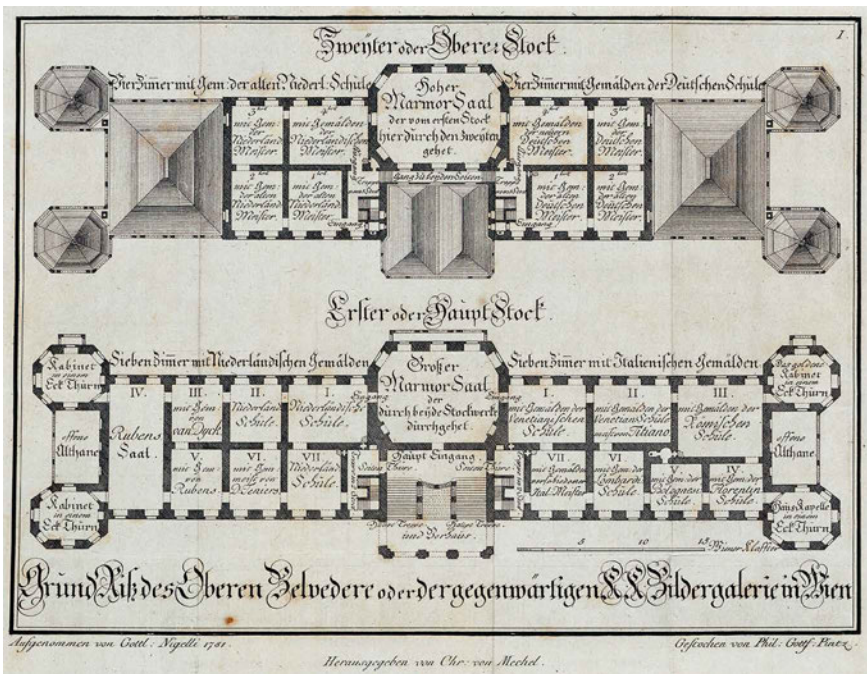
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In 1783, Christian von Mechel published his catalogue of the newly organised Viennese Imperial collections on show in the Oberes ('Upper') Belvedere (Fig. 70). An important feature of the galleries was the innovative organisation of the paintings by school and by epoch. Mechel boasted in the catalogue that he offered visitors a 'visible history of art' (Fig. 71).¹ 1300 paintings feature in the catalogue, whose entries

1 Mechel 1783, p. xi; Mechel 1784, p. xv.



70. Johann August Corvinus after Salomon Kleiner, *View of the Oberes Belvedere in Vienna, 1737*, engraving with hand-colouring, 30.5 x 42 cm, Belvedere, Vienna, inv. BB_P1027. © Belvedere, Vienna.



71. Philipp Gottfried Pintz after Gottlieb Nigelli, *Floorplan of the Oberes Belvedere in Vienna, 1781*, engraving, 19.5 x 25 cm, Belvedere, Vienna, inv. 9539. © Belvedere, Vienna.

are succinct, offering simple details on artist, title, support, dimensions, presence of figures, and size of figures. Preceding many of the entries was an asterisk, indicating the best paintings in the collection; this was a gesture intended for visitors who wished to know the collection's highlights.² It was also the sole authorial comment regarding the relative aesthetic qualities or shortcomings of the works on display. Most reviews of Mechel's work in the Oberes Belvedere and of the accompanying catalogue were positive, hailing this 'visible history of art'.³ Despite this generally favourable press, one lengthy condemnation did appear, in the form of a two-part text published in two volumes two years later by a redoubtable opponent, Joseph Sebastian von Rittershausen. In the first part, studied here, Rittershausen offers observations on connoisseurship, taste, and the organisation of a gallery. In the second, he undertakes a critical rereading of the 1783 catalogue. The text as a whole constitutes a highly important, albeit underrated contribution to the debate on these issues at the close of the eighteenth century.⁴ Above all, it offers an interesting commentary on the merits of Mechel's organisation of the Vienna collection's paintings by schools, and his claim to propose a visible history of art.

Rittershausen was a Bavarian polymath (Fig. 72).⁵ Born in Immenstadt im Allgäu in 1748, he went to school in Augsburg and Konstanz, then studied philosophy at the Universität Innsbruck and jurisprudence at the Universität Freiburg-im-Breisgau. After a short period spent in France, he returned to Freiburg to practise law. He then moved back to Bavaria, joining the Theatine order in 1768. Appointed librarian of the Theatiner-Kloster in Munich, he taught the novices theology and philosophy, before accepting an invitation to teach philosophy at the Lyceum in Munich. He subsequently abandoned his academic career for a short trip to Rome. On his return to Munich, he obtained an ecclesiastical living, and his modest income allowed him to devote himself to his two principal passions—writing and painting. He was forced to flee to Bayreuth in the early nineteenth century, accused of disseminating invectives against Napoleon. In 1817, he went back to Munich, where he was to live, in straitened circumstances, until his death three years later. He was a prolific author, involved in a number of scholarly journals of the time and also producing a number of books on philosophical and artistic themes, as well as some texts of popular devotion.⁶

What decided Rittershausen to write the *Betrachtungen* (Fig. 73)? In the introductory paragraphs to the text, he lays out his motivations clearly and systematically,

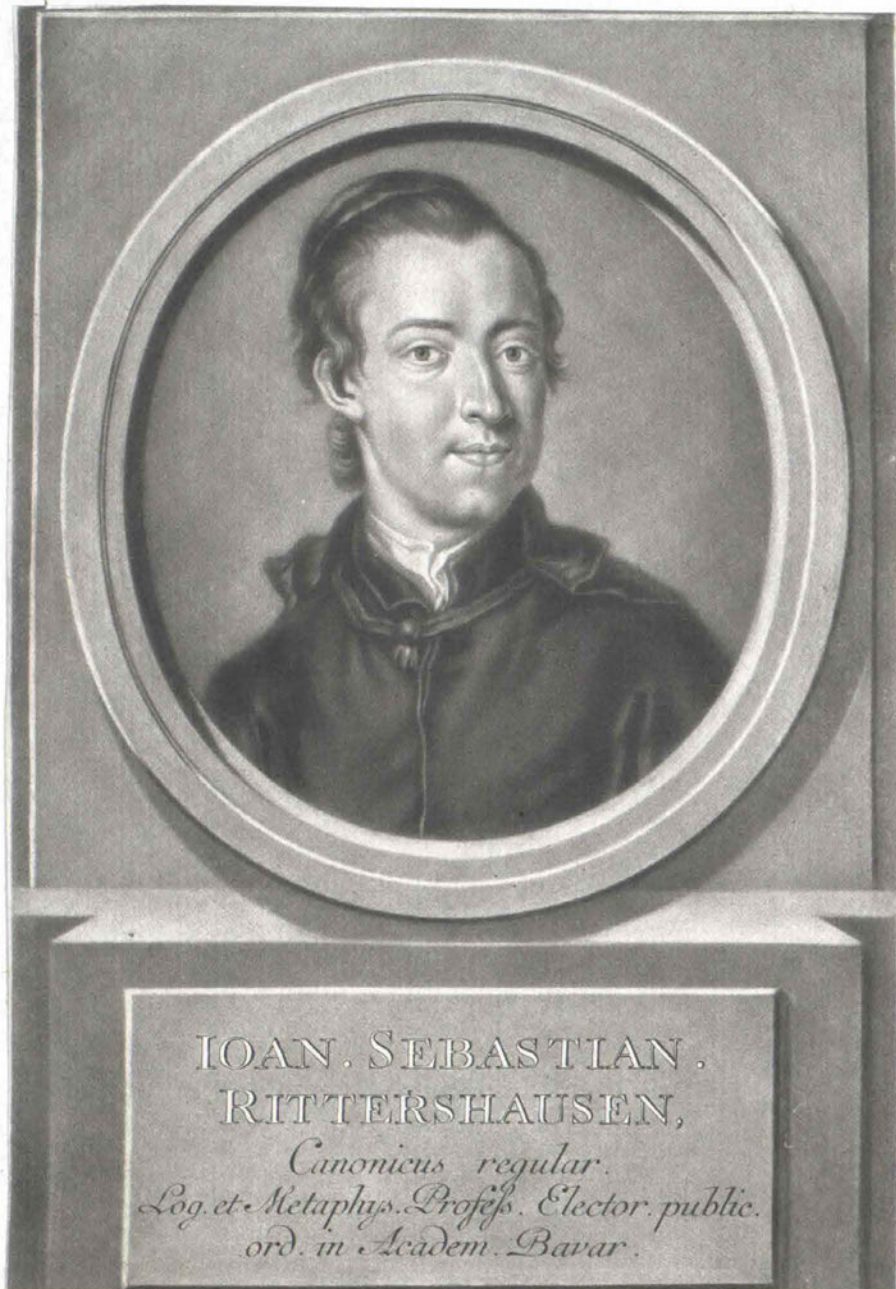
2 Mechel 1784, p. xxv.

3 See Meijers; Pommier; Hassmann; Penzel; Fisher; Schryen, pp. 484–502.

4 See Meijers, pp. 82–85; Böttger, pp. 114–115, 128–129; Pommier, pp. 75–76; Yonan, pp. 183–185; Schryen, p. 290.

5 Klingen, pp. 148–151; Baader, II.2, pp. 38–41.

6 Jöcher, cols. 67–69.



72. Portrait of Joseph Sebastian von Rittershausen, mezzotint, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, call nr. PORT_00129485_01 POR MAG. © Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.



73. Title page, Joseph Sebastian von Rittershausen, *Betrachtungen über die Kaiserlichen Königliche Bildergalerie zu Wien* (Bregenz: Typographischen Gesellschaft, 1785).
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lacing them with a number of incisive and hostile comments directed against Mechel and his work in Vienna. Rittershausen observes that Mechel has assuredly published the *Verzeichniss*, but that this amounts to little more than a printed list of the paintings indicating their dimensions and their authorship. Rittershausen is here a little disingenuous; he omits to mention that Mechel had offered further details concerning the support, the presence of figures, and even an iconographic title for each picture. As for the more detailed catalogue promised by Mechel, he concludes, it will probably not appear for some years to come. In the meantime, Rittershausen seizes the opportunity to present his own version of the catalogue, and to explain his thoughts on the subject. It is in this spirit that he therefore offers 'some explanations of these paintings judged according to aesthetic principles and written from the point of view of Everyman'.⁷ This last word—*biedermännisch* in the text—is troublesome, rich in meaning but difficult to translate: 'petty bourgeois', 'honest citizen', 'upright citizen', or, with a nod to the literary context, 'Everyman'. What is evident is that Rittershausen's intentions for his text are neatly summed up in this one phrase that serves almost as a manifesto for his book. He here strikes at the heart of Mechel's endeavours, criticising him on two major points. First, Mechel has fallen prey to a passion for names and attributions and, in so doing, has forgotten to evaluate the paintings' intrinsic qualities. He sees the paintings as historical documents rather than aesthetic productions, Rittershausen claims. Second, according to Rittershausen, Mechel has implicitly addressed, both in the gallery and in his catalogue, the educated, privileged classes. In Rittershausen's view, neither the gallery space nor the critical tools of artistic judgement should be restricted to a monied, educated elite. He advocates a gallery that serves as a public space, and in which all classes of society can apply their critical judgement to artworks.

Unsurprisingly, given Rittershausen's philosophical education and activities, he proposes a carefully constructed proof of his theory, leading the reader step by step to the conclusion. Not only had he taught philosophy for over ten years, but he had also written a textbook on the subject.⁸ He went about his artistic writing in the same systematic way. His central question stands at the beginning of the first part of his book: 'How should paintings be placed in a building devoted to the Muse of Painting?'⁹ Over the next 80 pages, he sets out to answer this question and to thereby prove that Mechel's attempts to reorganise the Viennese Imperial collections are largely misguided.

He does not refute all of Mechel's innovations; above all, he does not criticise the decision to sort the paintings into their respective schools and then to hang

7 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 4–5.

8 Rittershausen 1777.

9 Rittershausen 1785, p. 6. The question is repeated almost verbatim on p. 54.

them in the gallery accordingly. Quite the contrary. He goes so far as to state that in his opinion, '[t]he idea of distributing the paintings in schools is incomparably the best if it is carried out according to these aforementioned laws'.¹⁰ On the one hand, Rittershausen approves entirely the idea of displaying the paintings of the Viennese collection in their respective schools. On the other hand, he objects to using the gallery walls to offer a 'visible history of art'. This is, in fact, the crux of his criticism of Mechel's work, and his objections—and proposed solution—are laid out even more clearly twenty pages later, when he offers the following plan for a picture gallery:

I would determine the positions of the pictures in the following way: the whole gallery would be divided into as many main divisions as there are schools. In particular, the early Italians, the Netherlandish, and the old High German schools should be kept in separate sections because they are completely opposed styles (just as in the ancient world, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans had different styles). If there is a large number of paintings, the Roman, the Florentine, the Lombard, and Venetian schools can be further distinguished, and each can be given its own place in the gallery. Each of these main subjects [the schools] is then divided into the parts of painting: drawing, colouring, expression, composition: still life, landscape, portrait, history, allegory are redistributed therein, and their own position determined.¹¹

Here, he recommends a tripartite classification system in which the schools predominate and are then divided into the parts of painting. In their turn, the parts of painting are separated into the different genres. Rittershausen's plan was not entirely revolutionary, recalling, in its general lines, the French royal collections on show at the Palais du Luxembourg in Paris between 1750 and 1779. In four rooms, 99 paintings and 20 drawings were exhibited; one room was devoted exclusively to the French school, whereas the three others housed works from the Italian, French, and northern schools (Dutch and Flemish).¹² Within each room, the display was intended to encourage comparative viewing, and was generally structured around the parts of painting. Visitors could compare the different masters' skill in colour, line, composition, and expression. As Andrew McClellan has shown, this display technique was most likely inspired by the *Balance des peintres* that Roger de Piles appended to his *Cours de peinture*.¹³ In this table, 57 artists are awarded marks

10 Rittershausen 1785, p. 57. By 'aforementioned laws', he means the principles established in the preceding pages.

11 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 77–78; Meijers, p. 83.

12 McClellan, pp. 13–48.

13 Piles 1708, pp. 390–392; McClellan, pp. 33–36.

out of 20 for each of the four main parts of painting: colour, line, expression, and composition. De Piles tried to play down the reliability and the authoritativeness of his exercise, claiming that he had done it to entertain himself.¹⁴ Despite the author's protestations, the *Balance* rapidly won over a wide public, largely since it seemed to offer a means of comparing the respective worth of artists by reference to objective and quantifiable criteria. Over the course of the eighteenth century, it was regularly referred to and it even inspired emulation; in 1772, one author drew up a similar *balance* for German poets.¹⁵

The main difference between the Luxembourg hang and the one imagined by Rittershausen is the preliminary, strict division into schools; as a result, the comparison of the mastery of the different parts of painting or of the various genres is encouraged between artists working in the same tradition rather than between artists hailing from different schools. Above all, and on this point Rittershausen is very clear, what is at stake here is a visible history of art based on careful and reasoned analysis of paintings by reference to their constituent parts and their aesthetic qualities. This is in contrast to an ostensibly visible history of art that actually draws its *raison d'être* from a highly discursive form, that is, textual art history and, more particularly, the biographical tradition.¹⁶ Mechel's revolution in gallery presentation was, if Rittershausen is to be believed, quite old-fashioned, referring to an art historical discourse that had held sway since the first edition of Giorgio Vasari's *Vite* (1550).

How is the proposed, aesthetic, visible history of art to be achieved, and which methods does Rittershausen advise using? First and foremost, Rittershausen believes that anyone who wishes to reorder an art gallery must be a connoisseur, a *Kenner*, and must be able to give a clear answer to two questions concerning any painting. First, is it beautiful? Second, which law or laws of painting does it contravene?¹⁷ Interestingly, there is no place here for the niceties of attributions nor for the desire to label every single canvas: Rittershausen's connoisseur is more adept in aesthetic matters than historical ones. Only those who master many subjects—the author reels off an impressive list, including geometry, perspective, anatomy, optics, psychology, poetics, mythology, and history—can hope to answer these questions.¹⁸ Even so, this theoretical knowledge cannot suffice. No one can claim to be a connoisseur if they have not seen a very large number of paintings and, above all else, studied the art of painting.¹⁹ The connoisseur must 'master the

14 Piles 1708, p. 387; Studdert Kennedy; Steegman.

15 Klawitter.

16 Recht.

17 Rittershausen 1785, p. 7.

18 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 8–9.

19 Rittershausen 1785, p. 7.

brush' and understand the niceties of colour, line, and expression. In addition, he must understand that what appears to be simple is in fact very difficult, and that all artists need to strike the perfect balance between the 'mechanical' parts of painting and the 'cerebral', or 'scholarly', parts—imagination (whose tutelary spirit is philosophy) and intellectuality.²⁰ In short, this is a connoisseur who is easily recognisable to anyone who has read the entry *Kenner* in Johann Georg Sulzer's *Allgemeine Theorie* (1777).²¹

On this point—the mastery of painting and of connoisseurship—Rittershausen could claim superiority. Mechel had never studied painting. He was an engraver by trade and renowned for his connoisseurship of old woodcuts.²² Rittershausen, on the other hand, had studied painting with a number of masters. These masters are usually considered to be Johann Herz (1720–1793) and Joseph Winter in Augsburg, Franz Joseph Spiegler (1691–1757) in Konstanz, Franz Joseph Rösch (c. 1724–1777) in Freiburg, and Georges Desmarées (1697–1776) in Munich.²³ Rittershausen also painted a number of altarpieces in Bavarian churches. In his text, he never names his teachers, merely observing once that he owes most of his knowledge to a well-travelled great painter; this brief description leads us to believe that he is referring to Desmarées.²⁴

When organising a gallery, the connoisseur must first select the paintings that should be put on show and then arrange them correctly.²⁵ The first step is especially fraught with difficulties; many errors, in Rittershausen's view, have been committed by those who are not connoisseurs. The best works of art are left languishing in a storeroom, whilst daubs, adorned with broad gilt frames, are put on show. Furthermore, many people have damaged paintings in the name of preparing them for display. Misguided restoration and clumsy application of veneers can harm a painting's surface. Other individuals alter a painting's dimensions. Rittershausen can hardly keep his anger in check here, and the emotive vocabulary employed reveals his distress at the violence inflicted on works of art: paintings are 'emasculated' and 'trepanned', 'cut', and 'fixed'.²⁶

Selecting the best paintings is not, however, tantamount to choosing works by the most celebrated Old Masters. This is at the core of Rittershausen's theory on connoisseurship and is equally his main grievance regarding the work recently carried out in the Oberes Belvedere. Mechel's catalogue leaves very little room for doubt or for questions. Out of a total of 1300 paintings in the gallery, a mere

20 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 9–10, 48, especially note 2.

21 Sulzer, II.1, pp. 5–14. See Griener 2005.

22 Rittershausen 1785, p. 57, note 1. For Mechel, see Wüthrich.

23 Klingen, pp. 148–151; Kolb, p. 512.

24 Rittershausen 1785, p. 6.

25 Rittershausen 1785, p. 11.

26 Rittershausen 1785, p. 11.

handful—only twelve—do not bear the name of a master.²⁷ No effort was spared in the quest for plausible attributions: Mechel explains that he has consulted art histories, biographies, descriptions of collections, archives, and scholars' notes. Above all, he has relied on engravings after the paintings, which were, in his opinion, the 'most authentic documents offering the names of the Masters'.²⁸ Once again, the foundations on which the new, 'visible history of art' is constructed turn out to be firmly rooted in the textual tradition. This is a connoisseurship that relies on reading rather than looking. Instead of trusting his own skills, Mechel founded his judgements on the artists' names indicated in the lower margins of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century prints; he was placing blind faith in the accuracy and intellectual integrity of earlier generations. His claims to have produced reliable attributions for the gallery and the catalogue seem all too flimsy.

Rittershausen deplores the mania for attributions and mocks those who claim to master this art. 'It is impossible that even the best connoisseur can always safely say that this or that picture is surely painted by the hand of this master.'²⁹ There is a host of reasons for this, and when listing them, Rittershausen betrays his close reading of *De Piles'* texts on the question.³⁰ Most artists have more than one manner, he claims. Likewise, an artist sometimes worked more quickly for base, material reasons—because he needed to be able to put food on the table.³¹ Rittershausen gives examples of these artistic strategies. Some artists deliberately imitated the work of their predecessors or contemporaries. Sometimes a pupil copied one of his master's works and then the master just touched it up. In short, even if an adept connoisseur can recognise the brushstroke of many masters, it is unthinkable that he could recognise all artists' hands. With a neat swipe at Mechel and his colleagues, Rittershausen states simply but surely: 'knowing everything is the surest sign of knowing nothing.'³²

Rittershausen's solution is simple: only beautiful works of art deserve a place on the gallery's walls. For this reason, he reminds us again, a connoisseur must first ask if a painting is beautiful. Only once a painting's beauty has been determined, can the connoisseur then turn to the question of which school it belongs to or even who painted it.³³ But, Rittershausen hastens to add, labels of school or artist should not be taken too seriously. Beauty is, he opines, an intrinsic quality and should be unaffected by external elements, even an artist's name. A painting

27 Mechel 1784, pp. 39, 113, 115, 143, 146, 232, 233, 234, 238, 249, 261.

28 Mechel 1784, p. xxvii.

29 Rittershausen 1785, p. 13.

30 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 13–14; *Piles* 1766, pp. 464–468; Penzel, p. 136.

31 Merck, p. 185; Griener 2014, p. 19.

32 Rittershausen 1785, p. 15.

33 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 16–21; Meijers, p. 82.

does not become more beautiful in a true connoisseur's eyes just because it can be associated with a great painter. After all, 'the best artists have often produced very bad art and mediocre artists have from time to time produced great artworks'.³⁴ The solution is apparently simple; it does nonetheless require connoisseurs able to discern beauty. To this end, the author sets out to explain what is meant by beauty and how it can be recognised.

Beauty is a form of perfection and is a visible quality that must be apprehended by the senses and not by means of philosophical treatises.³⁵ Once again, Rittershausen invites true connoisseurs to eschew book learning and textual art history and to trust their eyes and their feelings. There are degrees of beauty, and each and every one of us has our own appraisal of what is or is not beautiful. However, true, universally acknowledged beauty can and does exist; it obeys all our generally accepted rules for what is beautiful and is pleasing to everyone ('true beauty, when it shows itself to a high degree, pleases everyone.')³⁶ One problem remains, and that is the question of the ugly, the unpleasing, and the frightening. On this point, Rittershausen reveals his understanding of the recent debates regarding the sublime and the terrible, more especially the work done by Edmund Burke (1729–1797) and its reception in Germany by thinkers such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.³⁷ He concludes that deformity is acceptable, inasmuch as it plays a part in a painting or representation, but that the truly repulsive can never be included in the category of 'beautiful objects' and must always be rejected.³⁸

How can a *Kenner* recognise beauty in a painting? Many feel that it can be identified in the mechanical parts of painting, pointing to a master's use of colour or line. Rittershausen suggests, rather, that we should look for it in the intellectual parts of a painting—imagination, composition, and expression. At this point, he selects three examples of great artists: Raphael, Correggio, and Titian.³⁹ Instead of praising Raphael for his draughtsmanship, Correggio for the sensual texture of his oil painting, and Titian for the warmth of his colours, he avers, we should focus on the more scholarly, or intellectual, features of their work; Raphael excelled in the selection of forms to imitate, Correggio in the grace of his compositions, and Titian in truthfulness (the faithful imitation of colours).⁴⁰

34 Rittershausen 1785, p. 21; Piles 1766, p. 465.

35 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 26–29. This owes much to Mengs; Meijers, p. 82.

36 Rittershausen 1785, p. 27.

37 Menninghaus; Furniss.

38 Rittershausen 1785, p. 28; Hagedorn 1775, I, bk. 1, ch. 9, pp. 103–123. Rittershausen later returns to this question (p. 60).

39 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 30–32. Rittershausen acknowledges his debt to Mengs.

40 Rittershausen 1785, p. 32; Mengs, p. 77.

Armed with this basic definition of beauty, and a clear understanding of the relative merits of the mechanical and intellectual parts of painting, Rittershausen finally turns his attention to the different schools of artists. Are these characteristics of beauty and skill peculiar to individual artists or can they serve to characterise entire schools? Rittershausen tends towards the latter view and develops his thesis over several pages where he offers an overview of the various schools, discussing their strengths and their weaknesses, providing a cursory history of their development, and offering a brief list of their most distinguished members.⁴¹ Both the mechanical and the intellectual parts of painting are taken into consideration here. The Roman school specialised in drawing but was poor in the use of colour. The members of the Lombard school drew well and painted sublimely but did not master the art of shadows (except for Guido Reni, Francesco Albani (1578–1660), Correggio, and (maybe) Domenichino and Guercino, although their practice was never consistent). The Florentine school was strong in colour early in its history; over the course of time, however, the Tuscan painters became more talented draughtsmen. The Venetian school always excelled in colour.

When discussing the non-Italian schools, Rittershausen evaluates not only their mastery of the mechanical and the intellectual parts of painting but also of the various genres. Few people could deny that the Dutch and Flemish painters were invariably very talented in the use and application of colours and in the art of chiaroscuro, nor that they excelled in history, genre, and landscape painting. The French school, on the other hand, has little to recommend it. The artists are too lazy, refuse to apply themselves, and have therefore seldom succeeded; in short, with a few notable exceptions (he indicates Antoine Coypel and Jacques Courtois (1621–1675)), the French school is little more than a regional Italian school. It is hardly surprising that the German school is treated more kindly by Rittershausen. At its beginnings, it produced artists who were capable of scaling the artistic heights, despite working in less favourable conditions than their Italian counterparts. If only Albrecht Dürer had seen antique sculpture, he would have been able to rival Raphael.⁴² Proud patriotism did not, however, blind Rittershausen to the German school's imperfections. Highly precise and detailed work, combined with fine draughtsmanship, was unfortunately not always allied with the most perfect forms and harmonious colours. Harsher words were yet to come, since the author then states that the fine arts have been suffering in the German states over recent years because the country does not esteem its artists and does not yet have an art

41 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 40–48; Meijers, p. 83.

42 Rittershausen seems to imply that Dürer could not have seen much antique sculpture when he was in Italy, where he spent most of his time in Venice. Rittershausen 1785, p. 46.

academy worthy of the name.⁴³ Neither the British nor the Spanish schools are deemed worthy of mention; it is probably to be imagined that their artists were subsumed into the Flemish and the Italian schools respectively.

At this point in his essay, after having defined beauty, explained the relative merits of the mechanical and intellectual parts of painting, and appraised the various schools, Rittershausen returns once more to his introductory and central question: how should paintings be arranged on the walls of a gallery? The answer is succinct: according to aesthetic principles and the rules of beauty.⁴⁴ He here introduces a further essential criterion, which at first sight seems to be a simple digression, but which does prove central to his *biedermännisch* concerns about art as a public good and galleries as public spaces. Art, he claims, is a path towards moral perfection. It should never be thought of as a mere series of historical facts to be learned, a crowd of names and styles that can fill our heads. It can improve our individual and collective taste and can thus aid the common good. Taste is here construed as a moral quality, in no way connected with luxury or frivolity, or limited to an educated and wealthy elite. The fine arts, just like literature, are not meant to afford us only pleasure, but are a form of instruction; admittedly, this can be a pleasurable experience, even if pleasure must always be a means to an end and never an end in itself. 'Their [*schöne Künste und schöne Wissenschaften*, 'fine arts and belles-lettres'] great purpose is to guide our will through sweet violence, to give our passions a correct turn, to wrap our hearts in a flower chain, and to guide them to virtue; their power is almost insurmountable, and our minds follow them like a willing lamb.⁴⁵

By way of this striking comment on the power of art and on its role in society, Rittershausen hopes to demonstrate that a well-organised gallery could be a force for moral improvement. Yet scarcely any connoisseurs—and he is surely hinting at Mechel here—seem to be aware of art's potential for moral education, he argues. The chief culprit for this ignorance is German artistic education, particularly the art academies. As noted above, Rittershausen stated earlier that the German states do not have an art academy worthy of the title. We now understand why he holds such an opinion: the German art academies have always concentrated on the mechanical parts of art and have undervalued painting, which has been considered merely 'the pretty daughter of the mechanical arts'.⁴⁶ Consequently, professors in the art academies instil into their students the basic lessons of drawing and colour

43 Rittershausen 1785, p. 48. Academies did exist in Germany of course: Pevsner, pp. 115–124, 140–176. Rittershausen complains that they do not teach young painters all the necessary skills or all the parts of art, and tend to concentrate on drawing techniques: Rittershausen 1785, p. 56.

44 Rittershausen 1785, p. 55; Meijers, p. 83.

45 Rittershausen 1785, p. 55; Penzel, p. 138.

46 Rittershausen 1785, p. 56.

without ever attempting to interpret and communicate the spirit that infuses all art; yet without understanding this spirit, one cannot comprehend art's moral purpose and benefits. A remedy is to hand, in the shape of a new philosophical theory that purports to explain the spirit of art. The work in question is Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's (1714–1762) *Aesthetica*, first published in 1750.⁴⁷ Regrettably, whilst many people know the name of the science—aesthetics—they know nothing of its methods. The result is all too clear on the walls of the Belvedere—a gallery that has been organised along historical rather than aesthetic lines: 'The names of great painters determine everything that is considered worthy of attention in a gallery.'⁴⁸

Rittershausen's solution to this problem at first glance appears illogical. He suggests that in order to combat the historical display advocated by Mechel, a connoisseur should arrange paintings by schools.⁴⁹ The reasoning seems fallacious. But closer examination proves that this is not the case. Schools of art, Rittershausen argues, should not be defined by a connoisseur who bases his theories on wide readings in art history and of artists' biographies, but by one who works according to aesthetic theory: the connoisseur analyses the mechanical and intellectual parts of each painting, identifies the genre to which it belongs, and attempts to evaluate its qualities and shortcomings, especially in terms of its 'beauty' and 'perfection'. By so doing, a connoisseur can hope to assign any work of art to a school. Even anonymous pictures can be attributed at least to a school of painting, since as Rittershausen has already observed, 'even the least known artist generally betrays the school to which he belongs'.⁵⁰ Within each school, paintings will then be sorted into four groups: one for paintings in which colour predominates, a second for works that reveal excellent draughtsmanship, a third one for paintings whose composition is interesting, and finally, a fourth group for works that stand out in terms of expression. These four groups are familiar to all readers of *De Piles*, since they define the ranking system in the *Balance*.⁵¹ A final classification principle can then be applied: the paintings should be sorted into genres. Even here, great care must be taken. In the genre of history painting, for example, a wide range of diverse subjects is to be found. History paintings must be sorted into religious or profane subjects, historical or literary, poetic or dramatic, tragic or comic. It would be quite improper to juxtapose a Bacchant by Reni and a Holy Family by Raphael.⁵²

47 Baumgarten; for the critical reception, see Décultot.

48 Rittershausen 1785, p. 56; Meijers, p. 83.

49 Rittershausen 1785, p. 57; Meijers, p. 83. On p. 89, Rittershausen seems to contradict himself when he states that the division into schools serves only to transmit historical knowledge. This refers solely to the use of schools made in the Viennese collections and should not be taken out of context.

50 Rittershausen 1785, p. 40.

51 Rittershausen 1785, p. 63; Piles 1708; Puttfarken, ch. 4, p. 42.

52 Rittershausen 1785, p. 74; Meijers, p. 83.

There are a couple of exceptions to Rittershausen's blueprint for gallery organisation. First, in a small collection, the primary classification, that of schools, can be dropped. The collection would then be structured by the parts of painting and, within these categories, by the genres. Second, one of the four parts of painting—expression—deserves particular attention. Rittershausen suggests, although he is not quite clear as to whether this should apply to all collections, or only to some, that the paintings selected for the category 'expression' should be subtracted from the main sequence and housed apart, in a 'sanctuary'. Ideally, this 'sanctuary' would be at the end of the sequence of gallery spaces or rooms, so that all the other parts of painting seem to be a prelude to it.⁵³ Expression therefore stands at the pinnacle of the artist's powers.

When explaining this choice, Rittershausen refers to a collection with which he was familiar and on which he was soon to publish a text—the recently constructed Hofgartengalerie in Munich. In 1783, the building by Carl Albert von Lespilliez (1723–1796) was completed. Seven rooms were available to house the best pieces in the Electoral collections, and the curator entrusted with the work was Lambert Krahe.⁵⁴ Krahe offered a mixed hang.⁵⁵ The first, second, and fourth rooms showed works from different schools, whereas the third room housed German paintings, the fifth Dutch and Flemish, and the sixth Italian. The last room offered a selection of Dutch and Flemish paintings and played an important role in the gallery. It represented the telos of a visit, the room in which the best specimens were on show.⁵⁶ According to Rittershausen, '[t]he collection of their most precious objects is shut up in the last room, as in a sanctuary; one reaches it through the other rooms, as if climbing step by step in order to attain the absolute summit of art'.⁵⁷ He was to elaborate further on the idea of a 'holy of holies' for the Munich art collection in a text published three years later.⁵⁸

A gallery organised along aesthetic lines should, Rittershausen claims, please all visitors from all classes and all walks of life: 'dilettantes, artists, scholars, commoners, and nobility'.⁵⁹ Why does he believe that he speaks, as he claims, for 'Everyman' and that his project for the organisation of a gallery, unlike Mechel's, is more suitable for people from all classes? First and foremost, to Rittershausen's way of thinking, the gallery that he proposes would be easily accessible to everyone, irrespective of their

53 Rittershausen 1785, p. 82.

54 An anonymous catalogue appeared in 1787: *Die Bildergalerie*. Böttger, p. 113.

55 Analysed by Böttger, pp. 113–117, and Baumstark.

56 The idea of a room for the best paintings in a collection was being tested in Florence after 1780 and would later be adopted elsewhere: Spalletti; Géal; Hurley 2012; Hurley 2019.

57 Rittershausen 1785, p. 82; Meijers, p. 84.

58 Rittershausen 1788, pp. 194–340, especially pp. 280–340. See Baumstark.

59 Rittershausen 1785, p. 77.

level of education. Whereas a collection organised along historical lines presupposes some understanding of history and, above all, knowledge of artists' biographies, a collection arranged according to aesthetic principles is open to everyone. Some might argue that aesthetic appreciation is an elite activity. Rittershausen opposes that idea throughout his text; in a series of comments reminiscent of Jean-Baptiste Dubos' affirmation of the public's role as an arbiter of taste, he sets out to prove that art can be a matter of public opinion and judgement.⁶⁰ For example, when attempting to ascertain the qualities of a painting, should one listen only to a coterie of connoisseurs? In Rittershausen's view, this is a cardinal error, and he offers a refreshing opinion on the way to go about things. 'Listen to the verdict of all classes of people (all those who are not absolutely degenerate); and you will soon find out whether and how they feel; only don't listen to your gentlemen (the art connoisseurs) about it.'⁶¹ The lorgnetted, bewigged noble connoisseur is less likely to deliver an honest and accurate verdict on the qualities of a Renaissance painting than is the bourgeois or the working-class man or woman. The idea appears incongruous, but the reasoning behind Rittershausen's suggestion is quite simple: the true mark of a good artwork is that it arouses in the spectator—whatever his level of education and his knowledge of art history—the feelings that the artist wished to arouse.⁶²

The democratic quality of art reveals itself in another striking fact, namely that 'true beauty, if it reveals itself to a high degree, pleases Everyone'.⁶³ The logical conclusion, which Rittershausen proceeds to apply, is that if young artists imagine works that will please everyone, they will have discovered true beauty.⁶⁴ When confronted with the question of relative taste, he concedes that different subjects and styles appeal to different people with different interests. But this variety is in itself an advantage, since it leaves plenty of scope for a range of styles and subjects; all of them will no doubt please someone. To prove his point, he then reels off a litany of artists' names and their potential publics. Raphael, we learn, could interest philosophers, scholars, and theologians. Correggio could charm literary types, Titian would fascinate natural historians, Peter Paul Rubens poets, Anthony van Dyck physiognomists, Jusepe de Ribera and Nicolas Poussin tragedians, and so on. The list includes the names of 22 artists and almost as many areas of interest; much, if not all, of human activity is covered here.⁶⁵

This faith in Everyman's judgement runs profoundly throughout the *Betrachtungen*, motivating many of the author's beliefs concerning collections and their

60 Dubos; Lombard; Kaiser; Menant.

61 Rittershausen 1785, p. 23.

62 Rittershausen 1785, p. 24; Penzel, p. 136.

63 Rittershausen 1785, p. 27; Penzel, p. 137.

64 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 27–28.

65 Rittershausen 1785, pp. 33–39.

display. Building his argument on a corpus of artistic literature characteristic of eighteenth-century thought—Dubos, De Piles, Anton Raphael Mengs, Sulzer, Christian Ludwig von Hagedorn, and others—he constructs a vision of a gallery that should serve as an open space for aesthetic discussion and artistic judgement. Art possesses, in Rittershausen's view, a very important moral function. As he states, art's aim is 'to guide our will through sweet violence, to give our passions a correct turn, to wrap our hearts in a flower chain, and to guide them to virtue'.⁶⁶ A gallery should put this aim on display and should allow viewers to concentrate on the aesthetic and moral perfection of the works of art rather than on historical labels. Mechel's visible art history, with its insistence on chronology and artistic biography, would distract or dissuade wide swathes of the population. Rittershausen's proposed gallery organisation would exploit a division into schools in order to open the collection up to a wider public. The gallery would no longer be the aesthetic and intellectual playground for a group of connoisseurs and wealthy collectors but would instead propose aesthetic and moral education for the whole population. After all, '[a]s soon as a collection is intended for public use, it must be able to achieve it [moral perfection]'.⁶⁷ The *biedermännisch* observations on artistic geography in the museum offer a refreshing glimpse into the debate concerning art history and its classification at the end of the eighteenth century.

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66 Rittershausen 1785, p. 55; Meijers, p. 83; Penzel, p. 137.

67 Rittershausen 1785, p. 59; Meijers, p. 83.

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