

Cultural policy – The Origin of the Field of Culture? The Case of the Art Academies of 18th and 19th Centuries and the Field of Art

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Abstract

Question: Is there a historical connection between cultural policy and the origin of the modern art world in Europe?

Hypothesis: Yes, there is such a connection, dating back to the 18th century.

Method: A study of the case of the (mostly state owned) art academies of 18th and 19th centuries and their relationship to the basic functions of the modern art world.

Conclusion: As far as visual art is concerned, the early art academies gave an important impulse to the formation and functioning of the modern (visual) art world. This may indicate that similar processes between art policy and culture took place in other fields of culture as well, suggesting that the modern field of culture owes its historical origin to political initiatives in late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Keywords

Art academies, art politics, history.

Introduction

If cultural policy is the application of political means on a field of culture, then a question arises: Is there a historical connection between the origin of cultural policy and that of the field of culture? Or, more directly, was the emergence of a field of culture a consequence of cultural policy?

The answer I will suggest in this paper is “Yes. Cultural policy gave a decisive impuls to the origin and development of the field of culture”. The answer will be supported by reference to the history of the origin and development of the standard European art academies of the 18th and early 19th century, as described by Nikolaus Pevsner in his classic treatise *Academies of art. Past and present* (Pevsner 1940). I will state that the establishment of art academies in almost every European kingdom and principedom by early 19th century were early instances of cultural policy, and that these art academies introduced in European culture most of the basic elements making up the modern field of art, or art world. I think a similar history can be told about the fields of music, opera and dance, and perhaps, but to a lesser degree, of theater and literature. This paper should

be seen as an essay to cast doubt upon the widespread opinion that the European style of cultural policy is something that developed well after the 2. world war.

The History of Norwegian Cultural Policy 1814-2000

The background for this paper is my participation in a historical project: *The history of cultural policy in Norway 1814-2000*. 1814 is the starting point, because in that year Norway was separated from Denmark, gave itself a democratic constitution (Denmark remained an absolute monarchy until 1848) and entered into a union with the more enlightened kingdom of Sweden, lasting until 1905. Culturally, however, Norway remained integrated with Denmark for many years after its political independence. My part of the research in the project is the history of art policy – art here understood as visual art. Denmark-Norway had an art academy in Copenhagen from 1754, founded on royal order and financed by public funds. In 1818, on its second regular meeting after the constitutional assembly in 1815 (the assemblies took place triannually until 1869), the Norwegian Storting (Parliament) decided to establish as one of the very first public institution in the young state – a drawing school organized on the principles of an art academy. At that time, there were more than hundred public art academies in Europe, organized more or less along the same principles as the Danish one. In order to understand why an art academy was so important for a poor, young nation, I undertook a study of the history of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (note) and of the European art academies generally (note). This made me aware of the fact that almost every one of these early art academies were state owned, financed and controlled, and had many traits common with the modern field of art.

“Art”

Before I venture further into the subject of art academies and the field of art, I will make one comment on the concept of “art”, and another on the concept of “art academy”. In 18th and far into the second part of 19th century the concept of art, in the context of art academies and aesthetics, referred to a highly developed craft and not to art objects. An artist was a professional craftsman, versed in one of the fine arts. A painting or a sculpture was not referred to as “art”, but as a beautiful product of art – as works of art. An art academy was an academy of fine arts – Academie der schönen Künste, Academie des beaux arts. The first name of the art academy of Copenhagen was “Kongelig Akademi for Bilthugger-, Maler- og Bygnings-Kunsten” – Royal Academy of the Arts of Sculpting, Painting and Building.

“Art Academy”

An academy of art was not as it usually is today – a higher teaching institution for art students. Most art academies, until late 19th century at least, were complex institutions undertaking a variety of purposes decided by the government – one of which was the free teaching of elementary drawing to any young man who wanted a career as artisan or craftsman.

The Danish Royal Academy

This academy was founded in 1754 by Fredrik 5. in Copenhagen, with the purpose to furnish the king and his country (which also encompassed Norway, Iceland, Greenland, Færeøyanne and the northern province of present day Germany north of Hamburg) with

Danish sculptors, painters, architects, miniature painters, printmakers and engravers of medals and mints – all of them in royal service. This was considered less costly than importing foreign artists, as the case was at that time. The professors of the academy were already in paid royal service as royal artists, most of the foreigners. The statute of the academy was in every detail regulated by the government.

The Functions of the Early Art Academies

Reading this description, one should bear in mind that the large majority of the European art academies around 1800 were public, that is, founded, owned, financed and governed by the state. Their stated aims were among others to secure the domestic supply of artists, establish formal vocational training for the work growing workforce in the craft industry, spread the good taste, and council the government in aesthetic affairs. The art academies were the results of political demands, not of any selforganizing movement within a field of art.

The Academy as Organization of Artists

The name “academy” did not refer to the institution as school, but as corporation, a closed, elitarian society with privileged members. The academy was its members assembled in plenum, where they deliberated and made the academy’s decisions. The academy, in this sense of collective body, also voted in its own members, after a thorough process, keeping the membership low and restricted to academy trained artists. Applicants for membership, after the academy had accepted them as qualified applicants, were obliged to make a work of art according to certain specifications. Only when the academy had judged this reception piece favourably, they would be given the rights and duties of membership – one of the duties being compulsory participation in the proceedings of the academy, meeting at intervals of two to four weeks. The reception pieces became the property of the academy, and part of its collection of works of art. All professors were members. The academy could also vote in art connoisseurs and art lovers as members, or as honorary members. The king was normally the academy’s protector, and his heir or other close collaborator its preses – the highest ranking member. The members could call themselves “royal artist”, and were given a title in the formal hierarchy of nobility.

The art academy was the first modern organization of artists. It was elitarian, exclusive and privileged – and it was the product (and as we shall see, also an instrument) of cultural policy. As a collective, it had artistic autonomy from the state. Academy membership was a guarantee for artistic quality, giving members advantages in securing themselves both public and private commissions. With the large number of art academies all over Europe, receiving students and also professors from each other, academy membership became a symbolic currency accepted in every country. Right from its start, the field of art was international – an art world.

The Academy as Arts Council

According to its statutes, the academy should council the government in all aesthetic affairs, such as the design of public buildings, fountains, monuments, coins and medals, scholarships to artists, artisan’s licences, the embellishment of the vessels of the marine, purchase to the royal art collection, city regulation etc. This function relieved government officials from aesthetic judgements, thus freeing them from the critique of their taste that could be levied on them.

The art academy was the first modern art council – a body that distributes what the government grants. The academy established a mediating arena between government and art, between the field of politics and the emerging field of art. The academy was a social institution that made possible the later development of the idea of an arm's length distance between art and politics. Among artists, it was recognized as the supreme body of artistic judgement. By the government, it was recognized as the guarantee of artistic quality, the arbiter of good taste. It became a body that could confer high status on artists, perform the act of artistic consecration.

The Academy as Art Society

The academy was also given the obligation to be guardian, herold and mediator of good taste in society. It should spread the good taste – the standard of which it produced itself. With its system of ordinary and honorary membership – ordinary membership also for scientific and other art connoisseurs, and honorary membership for art lovers – it gave, in the German speaking part of Northern Europe and in England, impulse to the establishment of separate art societies for art lovers from about 1820. The close connection between art academies and art societies is seen among others in two tendencies: the academy members were active in founding the art societies, and where art societies were founded before the art academies, they usually took up some of the same functions, such as art collections and art schools – some times developing into independant art academies.

The art academy was the first art society, the first publicly recognized body with the duty to spread the good taste, the ruling taste of the academy itself. The later separate and private art societies saw themselves as the mediators of the artistic taste authorized by the art academies. This conservative position came under attack in 2nd half of 19th century, when a growing number of artists outside the academies revoltet against the academic restraints on artistic expression and the symbolic and political power they held over the field of art.

The Academy as Art School

Until 1771 the Danish art academy did only train future artists. Then an elementary drawing school was added to academy's responsibility – giving a free of cost and more or less compulsory training to any boy working as apprentice in artisan shops. The drawing school was open at nights, allowing the pupils to combine apprenticeship and school. At the same time, no apprentice could receive his bachelor sertificate and no bachelor his master sertificate without the accept of the academy of their bachelor or master pieces.

The art school had three levels – the elementary class where one drew after drawings and prints, the plaster class where one drew after plaster casts of antique or later sculptures, and the figure class who draw after live models. Only after successful completion of one class, one could move up into the next – most pupils never making it to the figure class. There would be also special classes that prepared for advanced craft and for building construction and architecture.

Only when a pupil had succeed in the art school and its figure class, could he start his higher artistic training as a more private student under one of the professors. This function of elementary drawing school was performed by most art new academies by the

early 19th century. The function of the art academy as a higher institution for the training of artists is an invention of the 19th century, according to Pevsner (:168).

The drawing schools gradually branched in two directions – technical schools, and schools for art and craft. The art and craft schools could become preparatory schools for the higher academy education, substituting their earlier drawing schools.

The art academy was the first public art school, and the origin of vocational training in the minor arts – the professionals designing porcelain, furniture, building details, textiles, tapestry, jewelry etc. – the whole area where both producer, distributor and consumer applied and displayed their good taste – the taste guarded over by the academy by order from the government.

The Art Academy as Higher Artistic Education

Only after successful completion of the drawing school, a pupil could fully devote his time to his proper artistic training – the training today often referred to as academic. He had to be accepted as the student of one of the professors – often in another academy in another country (we must remember this was at a time with many more countries in Europe than now, and with great freedom of travel between them). He left the classrooms of the art school, and worked partially in the private ateliers of the professor – often located in the academy-building itself. Only then he started working predominantly with painting or sculpting. Before becoming a painter or sculptor, the artist had to be an able drawer. Drawing corresponded to theory, painting and sculpting to praxis.

Pevsner has the opinion that the academy system established in France in mid 17th century “left less of the really decisive freedom to painter and sculptor than he had enjoyed under the rule of the guild, and infinitely less than had been his under the privileges of the previous French Kings” (:88). This underlines the political role of the early art academies.

The Art Academy as Grant Committee

Another part of the art school pedagogy was the principle of emulation, or competition. The pupils competed at all levels. They competed for entry into higher classes, for the right to choose the best places in figure classes, for small and large medals, and for scholarships. The pupils in the plaster and figure classes competed for small and large silver and gold medals – the large gold medal being the most prestigious and almost a guarantee for later artistic recognition and academy membership.

The winner of the large gold medal also won the right to a scholarship – a public grant that made it possible for the student to travel to another art academy in another country, and continue his training for several years as private student with a professor there. Along with the medal and money there came a letter of recommendation from the academy to professors at certain other academies.

The art academy was part of the first artistic grant scheme, the first committee distributing public grants.

The Academy as Expression of Artist Policy

The art school, the studies under the professors, the travelling grants, the academy (as society) and its professorates were parts of a conscious public policy – to educate, recruit and employ artists for public and national purpose. It was the motor of a circuit of production and reproduction of artists – you started as a pupil, became a student, travelled abroad with a grant, exhibited in the salon (see below), became member of the academy, and perhaps professor – teaching new recruits in the art school. This type of cultural economic circulation is a necessary element in any field of art.

The Art Academy as Art Museum

One of the basic elements of academic pedagogy was the principle of copy. At all levels in the art school the pupils copied particularly old, but also new masters. The pupils started copying small parts of bodies, then larger, and were finally allowed to copy whole bodies. In the building classes they started drawing copies of decorative details, then larger parts of buildings, and finally whole buildings. They also taught art history, predominantly antique, and classic history and religion.

The need for material to copy and to teach art history from made it necessary for art academies to assemble art, and to have access to art collections. The period of the rise of the art academies coincided with the rise of art museums and its corresponding profession of art history. The first art historians taught art history in the academies. The first chronological exhibition of art history opened as late as 1781, in Vienna. Far into the 19th century these art museums collected copies of paintings and plaster casts of sculpture as frequently as originals. Part of the art history was also told through prints of old paintings, sculpture and buildings. Print collections and collections of plaster casts became part both of the art academies and the new art museums.

The distinction between original and copy became essential only later in the 19th century, when originality also became an artistic virtue. This led to the fall of the traditional academy, but that story will not be told here.

The art academies were instrumental in bringing about art collections, art history and art museums, and had within themselves art collections. The foundation of public art museums was done partly to fulfill the needs of the art academies, partly to spread the good taste to the public. It is symptomatic that the Norwegian state museum of art, established in 1836, was made a department within the Norwegian academy-style drawing school established in 1818, a partnership lasting up to 1869.

The Art Academy as Salon – Art Exhibition

The art academy organized two types of exhibitions. One type was exhibitions of the works of pupils and students, and of reception pieces. These were held annually or more often. From this type of exhibition developed the second, the salon – the juried exhibition of the works of professors and artist members – who normally participated “hors concours” – and of other artists and advanced students. The salon became the perhaps most important event in the emerging field of art. Passing the jury of the salon and, even more difficult, receiving one of the medals conferred on the best of the young artists, was a widely published sign of quality and a dooropener for commissions, sales to museums and collector, and to membership in the academy or other equivalent of artist's organization. Some academies' salons were more important than others', and

most important was perhaps the salon of the French Academy of Art in Paris, that originated this type of exhibitions.

The salon combined the old and the modern publicity – the representative publicity of the court, with the monarch at its epicentre as the formally highest arbiter of good taste, and the citizens publicity, where taste became the object of discussion between citizens free to voice their opinion and quality thus became the object of subjective critique.

The salon became model for the art exhibitions that were organized as part of most of the great world exhibitions, the first in London 1851. The academies often had the responsibility of organizing these exhibitions – a kind of international salons where countries competed with each other for the large number of medals and other honorary rewards their juries had to their disposal.

The art academies developed the modern type of display of works of art we call temporary art exhibitions. This implied the development of competence in organizing exhibitions, and of the competence as visitor to exhibitions – the development of an audience trained in looking at and commenting on works of art in the context of exhibitions. The exhibitions became instruments of public inclusion and exclusion of artists, and as a consequence of this, of the ranking of artists according to their exhibitionary successes. Correspondingly, there developed a hierarchy of exhibition organizers – some having greater consecrating power than others. They also brought forward a new art profession – that of art critics writing for the public through the new mass media – the newspapers.

The Academy as Social Security Scheme for Artists

The Danish art academy in 1821 founded a scheme for supporting needy and older artists and their families after their death, and paying pensions to widows. Already from 1811 it paid out gratifications to individual artists. The incomes were derived from the surplus from the salon. From 1867 the scheme also supported the studies of young artists.

The Art Academy and the Art Market

The salon created a venue for non-commissioned works of art – the so-called anonymous art market, without the intervention of an art dealer. The new art market gave artists a new source of income, an income they could use to work more independently from the hegemonic artistic taste. To put it simply – may be too simply – the art academy was the precondition for the art market, and the art market was the precondition for the antiacademic art – the artistic position we call avantgarde. It is a widespread opinion that art policy was introduced to the field of art only after it had reached a high degree of autonomy. In my opinion, the opposite is true – the autonomous field of art was made possible by art policy.

Conclusion

Art academies were early instances of a conscious art policy on part of the state, and introduced many of the functions of the modern field of art. They were probably the historical precondition for the development of the field of art, and of its variety of institutions, values, roles and positions. It is tempting to imagine that similar processes

took place between the state and other arts, and to conclude that art policy greatly contributed to the development of a modern field of culture. However, this paper does not give sufficient background for such a conclusion.

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