

Abstract

The aim of the presented work is to show what role the touch and associated tactile perception played in the history of art between 1890-1960. Its main argument is that without the sense of touch, art history would not be able to build its conceptual apparatus. Constantly coming to terms with tactile experience as opposed to sight has provided art historians with a number of methodological tools for classifying works of art, many of which have become the backbone of formal analysis. The theses systematically covers German and selectively English art-historical discourse, thematizing touch, and traces how the selected authors worked with it.

Already Johann Gottfried Herder laid the foundations of the aesthetics and noetics of touch, which were followed on an ideological level by the arthistory. Herder argued that touch gives us knowledge of space, while sight can only perceive colors. Touch is therefore much more reliable sense than sight. Herder connected different kinds of art with specific senses - music with hearing, sight with painting, and touch with sculpture. If the sense of touch is more reliable and truer than the sight, the art associated with it is also an art with a higher aesthetic and noetic value.

Art historians around 1900 shared Herder's belief that touch is the creator of space. Inspired by the esthetician F. T. Vischer and supported by the knowledge of contemporary psychology, they, therefore, constructed different ways of seeing (haptisch/optisch in Riegl) or of perception in general (Schmarsow), which in the case of Wölfflin resulted in the search for the "basic principles" of sensory perception, which always entails a corresponding artistic production. Along with coming to terms with touch as a valid part of the artistic process came a new appreciation of bodily, multisensory experience (early Wölfflin, Schmarsow).

The psychology of perception and the associated experimental aesthetics enabled the history of art to observe haptic elements not only in sculpture but also in painting, or other media. Berenson therefore appreciated the tactile qualities of Italian Renaissance artists. German art historians (Hamann, Hetzer) developed the term plastisch on a similar principle, which they used to denote the tactile elements of a work of art. But touch was not a neutral sense. Tactile characteristics of fine art often acquired negative connotations, as more "primitive" compared to optical ones (Riegl). Riegl and concurrently Warburg built an outline of a cultural theory based on the distinction between the potencies of tactile and optical perception.