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REVIEWED BY CHRISTOPHER LONG

Pevsner on Art and Architecture

The Radio Talks

by Nikolaus Pevsner

Edited and with an introduction by Stephen Games

London: Methuen, 2002

When Nikolaus Pevsner arrived in

England in late 1933 as a refugee from Nazi Germany, he was virtually unknown. Although he had lectured for several years at Göttingen University and published an authoritative book on Italian Mannerist and Baroque painting (*Die italienische Malerei vom Ende der Renaissance bis zum aufgehenden Rokoko* [1927]), Pevsner did not share the lofty reputation of his more noted fellow exile scholars from Central Europe—Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, Rudolf Wittkower, and Ernst Gombrich. Three decades later, Pevsner had become, along with Gombrich and Kenneth Clark, perhaps the most recognized authority on the history of art in Britain. He was the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge to be reappointed for a second term and the first reappointed to the Slade Professorship at Oxford. He was the author of the most widely read English-language book on Modern architecture, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936; republished in 1949 as *Pioneers of Modern Design*), and of the forty-six-volume Penguin guide, the *Buildings of England*, known to most simply as “Pevsner.” He had also become, in large part due to his radio talks for the BBC over three decades, from the end of World War II to the late 1970s, one of the most visible “public intellectuals”

of the postwar years.

Pevsner's spectacular ascent to the Olympian heights of the British academic world was the result of an almost frantic work regimen. In addition to the *Buildings of England* (which would have more than filled the careers of most ordinary mortals), he authored several textbooks and numerous scholarly works, and was a regular contributor to, and, for a time, editor of, the *Architectural Review*. He was also founding editor of *The Pelican History of Art* and *The Buildings of Ireland, Scotland and Wales*, and he took on various consulting jobs, one of which resulted in the publication, in 1937, of *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, a landmark examination of the state of modern design in the country.

But it was less Pevsner's prodigious output than his ability to communicate his ideas clearly and forcefully that was responsible for his success. Throughout his life, he sought to heighten and extend the public's understanding of art and architecture by making them seem ordinary—or, at least, graspable—for those willing to make a small effort. In Pevsner's writings, the heady problems of art become vignettes about which one could make judgments and take positions. His prose is always a splendid amalgam of careful erudition, remarkable

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insight, scholarly conjecture, and unfettered opinion. To read Pevsner is to enter immediately into a dialogue, at times comfortable and affirming, at others, annoying and off-putting.

Anyone who has spent time with *Pioneers of Modern Design* knows what a brilliant and vexing work it is. It was based on a series of lectures Pevsner presented at Göttingen shortly before he departed for England. Pevsner is often incorrectly credited, as Stephen Games writes in his perceptive introduction to *Pevsner on Art and Architecture*, with first “assembling the chain of events that led from English utilitarianism to German functionalism” (xxii). But while *Pioneers* is not an entirely original book—many of its arguments are anticipated in Hermann Muthesius's *Stilarchitektur und Baukunst*, published in 1902, and in other pre-World War I writings—it does offer, on first reading at least, a lucid account of Modern architecture's early origins. Yet the book raises far more questions than it answers. How do French and Belgian Art Nouveau lead to German functionalism? How do two currents so seemingly in opposition—the new engineering of the 19th century, with its faith in science and the machine, and the Arts and Crafts movement, which sought to deny industrialization and rampant Capitalism—both fuel the rise of Modern design? Pevsner's answer, that all were the expression of a new *Zeitgeist*, is reassuring to some degree, but it also insistently begs the question.

Pevsner's recourse to the “spirit of the age” runs through many of his writings. It allowed him, as Games notes, “to connect national differentiation in mid-thirteenth-century architecture with the experience of Crusader knights, and to write of the late eighteenth century as a period when artists ‘were no longer satisfied with being servants of the ruling class’ and a new type of patron emerged, ‘self-made, self-assured and cultured’” (xix). Such “loose” scholarship by today's standards was very much part of the German academic world of Pevsner's earliest years, and it became a highly elastic tool for those engaged in the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the humanities, or, literally, the “sciences of the spirit”) to fashion broad and sweeping visions of the past, present, and future. On the one hand, it

could offer, in the hands of a historian like Jakob Burckhardt, an extraordinary panorama of an entire era like the Renaissance. But too often it led to the sort of cursory reading one finds in works like Egon Friedell's *Die Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit* (The Cultural History of Mankind, 3 vols., 1927-1932) or, worse, to the rabid nationalist drivel of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

Even Pevsner, who was born into an assimilated Jewish family and converted to Evangelical Lutherism when he was in his late teens, was not immune to the lure of German nationalism. Like many German intellectuals of the early 1930s, he was powerfully drawn to the Nazis' promise of political and spiritual redemption. He told one refugee worker he met in Birmingham in 1933, “There is much that is Puritan and moral in the [Nazi] movement—a great drive is to be made against luxury, vice and corruption. . . . For fifteen years we have been humiliated by outside Powers. No wonder that Hitler appeals to our youth when he tells them to believe in themselves again, that the future is theirs to mould, that if they are united Germany will no longer be the pariah of the world” (xxiv). That it was a Nazi edict that suspended his teaching privileges and forced him into exile should have forced Pevsner to reevaluate his views, but as late as 1934 he was writing articles in the German press defending Josef Goebbels and the principle of the state's right to determine cultural policy.

Pevsner did part company with the Nazis on the question of Modernism. Though he shared with Hitler and most of the Nazi leadership a disdain for abstract art, he remained an enthusiastic supporter of Gropius and the Bauhaus. Nonetheless, an essential element of Pevsner's belief in the importance of Modern architecture was that it was neither “personal” nor “subjective.” The new century, he wrote in the first edition of *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, “leaves less space for self-expression than did any period before” (quoted in Games's introduction, xxiii). Modernism was a product of an “overpowering collective energy,” and, because it was “a genuine style as opposed to a passing fashion,” it was also “totalitarian.” (When the book was republished after the war, some of the shriller language was altered and Pevsner's

call for a new totalitarian art was concealed behind a less threatening trend toward “universalism.”)

Pevsner was careful, however, not to talk about politics in public, and in the years after World War II he made the successful transition from an immigrant with a suspect past to a beloved national figure. He accomplished this feat of self-transformation in part through his radio talks for the BBC beginning in early 1945. At first, as Games notes, Pevsner's broadcasts were not a success. The problem rested not with his faint German accent, but, rather, with the fact that he sounded too strident, wooden, and unintentionally condescending. Over time, he found a friendlier and lighter tone, and when the BBC launched its “Third Programme,” which was devoted to more highbrow fare, Pevsner became a fixture of the broadcasts.

The forty-five written texts Games has collected in this book represent about half of Pevsner's radio talks. Games standardized the spelling, usage, and punctuation but otherwise has reproduced the essays as originally written. About a third of the texts focus on art, the remainder on architecture. Though they span most of the history of art since the Middle Ages, the majority center on the 19th and 20th centuries. There are lectures on Victorian architecture, John Ruskin, William Morris, Antoni Gaudí, the Viennese Secessionists, the problem of revivalism, and the state of architecture in the 1960s. All bear the hallmarks of Pevsner's prose style: at once informed, cultured, interesting, and sometimes elegant.

But why read Pevsner today? After all, many of his positions are dated now, and some of Pevsner's scholarship has been superseded by more recent research. One reason certainly is that these essays offer remarkable insight into the architectural discourse of the last century. In his 1961 talk, “The Return of Historicism,” for example, he describes—with some alarm—the reappearance of a new “emotionalism” in the works of Le Corbusier, Jørn Utzon, Eero Saarinen, and others. Tellingly, Pevsner ascribes this wave of “neo-Expressionism” to the failure of Modernism itself: “The style,” he writes, “was too exacting, too perfectionist, too puritanical and perhaps too inflexible to be a popular success.

It was never wholly accepted, certainly not in England or France, in the United States or Italy; and in Germany, where more than anywhere it was accepted, Hitler suppressed it" (273). This is a striking admission for one of Modernism's most ardent supporters—and it speaks volumes about the collapse in faith in the new architecture that began in the late 1950s. Pevsner sounds the same themes again in a later essay, "The Anti-Pioneers," broadcast in 1966, in which he decries the appearance of an anti-rationalist architecture, and what he writes at the end is both characteristic and wonderfully perceptive:

What is happening in architecture today is in the line of descent of the High Victorian Style, of Art Nouveau and of Expressionism, not the International Modern of Gropius and Mies. It is ill suited for most architecture now because the majority of buildings are built of industrially produced—that is, impersonal—materials, because the majority of buildings are built for large numbers of anonymous clients and because the first concern of the architect must therefore be with their practical and emotional needs and not with the expression of his own personality. And finally, the style of today is unlikely to last, just as Art Nouveau and Expressionism didn't last, because phases of so excessively high a pitch of stimulation can't last. We can't, in the long run, live our day-to-day lives in the midst of explosions. (307)

This might be a fitting epitaph for Deconstructivism, but it also offers an apt description of the dialectic of architecture in the machine age: neither extreme—pure rationalism or unfettered romanticism—has proven sustainable in the long run.

One of the most arresting sections of this book is the four-part series on "How to Judge Victorian Architecture," broadcast in July 1951. As an early and committed devotee of Modernism, Pevsner naturally found little to like about the architecture of the Victorian era. His judgment is summary: not only was there "an intrinsic deficiency in all Victorian architecture," but that it also represented "a very real collapse in val-

ues" (87). The failure of Victorian architecture was the result of historicism, by which Pevsner meant simply the inappropriate use of forms from former times. Historicism in his view could be creative, but never legitimate. And that failure in turn was the product of a misguided probing of the past. Historicism, he writes, is "the hallmark of Victorian thought. The nineteenth century is not a century of system-building as the eighteenth had been. It believed in gathering data rather, masses and masses of data, and in leaving a synthesis to the future" (92).

Here once more, Pevsner resorts to the idea of a *Zeitgeist*. The shortcomings of the Victorians can be put down to their obsession with history and with their inability to find more suitable responses, formal or intellectual, to the challenges of industrialization. What is irritating is that he is correct: the great problem of 19th-century architecture was the problem of historical knowledge and what to do with it. But we now prefer much more nuanced and detailed explanations, with ample equivocation, and few scholars today would be comfortable making such brazen statements. We now study periods like the Second Empire in France or the Edwardian era in Britain on their own terms, and we seek to understand the motives and thoughts of the various protagonists without falling into the trap of our own cultural assumptions.

And yet it is on this point, where Pevsner is most difficult and exasperating, that he has the most to teach us. The joy of reading these essays (one would like even more to be able to listen to the original radio talks) resides in the fact that he is unafraid to make sweeping generalizations or to express opinions. It is much the same in the writings of Gombrich, whose views, though often very far from Pevsner's, sprang from the same cultural soil in the German-speaking world, and who writes with a similar bravado. For both men, the discipline of art history was not merely an academic undertaking, but a means to communicate wider lessons about history and the human experience. It is precisely in their willingness to extrapolate and to teach-to say something that was not merely empirical or readily demonstrable—that much of the appeal of their works rests.

Pevsner recognized that the role of art history, in addition to being a serious subject of its own, was to "uplift" and to serve as "background" and a "parallel to history and modern languages" (161). But as he writes in "Reflections on Not Teaching Art History," which coincided with the beginning of his fourth year at Cambridge in 1952, he also saw his role to "stand on a platform and talk about all that fascinates me" (155). Pevsner's writings are indeed the outcome of, as we would say today, an "inquiring mind," one neither "compartmentalized" nor limited by the obligations of disciplinaryity. He saw it as his obligation to poke his nose into places where it may not have belonged, and he felt entirely comfortable in doing so. The wonderful sense of intimacy and familiarity one finds in his prose is a reflection of his delight in learning, in thinking, and in discussing. In a time when reading much of our scholarship is more chore than pleasure, maybe we, too, should follow Pevsner's lead.

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