

# Ferdinand Avenarius on the Fine Arts: Inaugural Issue of *Der Kunstwart* (October 1, 1887)

## Abstract

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Ferdinand Avenarius (1856–1923) studied science, philosophy, literature, and art history. In the 1880s, he worked as an author and publicist in Dresden. In 1887, he founded the magazine *Der Kunstwart*—loosely translated as *The Guardian of Art*—which he edited until 1923. The programmatic article reprinted below was published in the first issue of *Der Kunstwart* in October 1887. Here, Avenarius criticizes contemporary German society for favoring rationalism and science and neglecting the arts. He also laments the lack of consistent, unifying principles in German art.

## Source

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### Our Arts: An Overview

Before we commence a series of essays dedicated to examining important and contentious issues in our contemporary art scene, we will provide a quick overview of the present state of the arts. It should do nothing more than remind us once again of the path we are taking.

When future researchers characterize the reigning spirit of our generation, they will perhaps emphasize one thing: the virtually limitless esteem for rational education that operates at the expense of the development of sentiment and the imagination. And, if we are advancing at all towards a harmonious humanity, it will not be difficult for these researchers to prove on the basis of this fact alone that the intellectual culture of our period did not exist on a pure and lofty plane. Certainly, after the emotional wallowing of the era of sentimentalism—which was then followed by a period in which most educated minds participated in the one-sided cultivation of aesthetic indulgence—today’s cult of reason almost seems like the belated strengthening of a neglected organ. A generation, however, only marches on the heights of humanity once it has striven for and achieved the balanced development of all its powers.

As a result of the weakening of imagination in the recent past, the superficial aspects of works of art came to be prized more and more. We are not speaking of the main interest of the masses, of material things entirely removed from the artistic sphere; [we are not speaking] of an interest in the object of depiction rather than the depiction itself, not of the pleasure of the “what” instead of the “how.” We are speaking of the fact that enjoyment of a baser sort has increasingly displaced the loftier kind, even in purely artistic perception. The ear’s pure sensory delight in a melodious rhyme or agreeable sound, the eye’s delight in a pleasing line or charming color, had a dulling effect, making it difficult to perceive that perhaps this rhyme or sound, this line or color, was fulfilling its main duty very poorly: to inspire some kind of conscious experience in the listener or viewer by stimulating his or her imagination. For lovers of art, the expression of this attitude—against which an ever stronger opposition is forming—amounted to an increasingly diminished appreciation of art, which people became more and more accustomed to regarding, if not designating, as mere “entertainment.” And for the creators of art, it amounted to an increasingly high appreciation for and emphasis on the decorative element.

This is shown most clearly by a glance at the area of craftwork, which has undergone a revival. If the life of our imagination were more vigorous, we would succeed even more often in revealing the inner essence of an industrial product by way of its external appearance, and we would be less inclined to borrow from products that served other purposes in the past or to seize upon decoration that is purely

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superficial and thus in no way characteristic of the object to which it is applied. Until quite recently, a utensil whose form unmistakably expressed its essence, its intended function, was the exception and not the rule in many areas of craftwork. It is only in recent years that people have reflected upon the fact that material, function, and form are interdependent, and have attempted with ever more practiced imagination to give visual expression to this relationship.

Admittedly, a truly healthy flowering of craftwork, one that promises seed bearing-fruits, has not yet been reached in all of its branches. For this to happen, all the creative powers at work here have to express, reinforce, and foster one another in a formal language: in a formal language that is just as necessary here as a common verbal language is for the poetry of a country, even though the former is not considered nearly as important as the latter. Each and every style grows, ages, and dies; as of yet, we have no style that developed out of our own nature. On account of this, we appropriate sentiments and immerse ourselves in the modes of expression of past generations. Even an adopted child can become closely connected to our feeling, can further our feeling, if only we are able to raise it over the course of a prolonged period of togetherness. Even an appropriation of sentiment would allow us to gain something of our own, just as the German Gothic style became the German Renaissance style by appropriating the sentiments of the Italian Renaissance. Our misfortune, however, lies in a restless shifting from one style to the next. Through academic inspiration, the revival of craftwork was directed toward the forms of the Renaissance, which Vienna clung to most insistently, which Munich cultivated with an emphasis on the German national theme, and which Berlin absorbed as well, though with drier and poorer imagination. From the Renaissance, the shift towards the Baroque began soon enough, and this in turn was followed by the Rococo. And so we tried to become acquainted with an ever-changing formal language, although this was very much to the disadvantage of the artist-craftsmen, who had barely become familiar with the Renaissance, and equally disadvantageous to the public, which was torn away from a certain mode of expression before it had even become accustomed to it. It is clear that, because of this, the development of an autonomous formal language in which foreign forms merge with the sentiments of our people and our times has been repeatedly pushed into the distance.

Still, if we compare today's arts and crafts with the work done 20 years ago, we will not fail to appreciate for a moment the rich blessing that the arts and crafts have bestowed in intellectual terms as well. The artistic craftsmen's sense of form, which had almost faded away, has been enlivened again. Moreover, at least this one area has witnessed the awakening of a pronounced interest in art in all quarters, as a result of which one can hope for a gradual strengthening of our people's appreciation for the actual, or the high art. That craftwork has assumed a position of power within the consciousness of artists themselves can be seen in its influence on architecture and the plastic arts.

Let us turn to [contemporary] architecture. Like the fine arts of the nineteenth century in general, it exhibits no organic connection to its eighteenth-century counterpart. The [French] Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had torn tradition to pieces, and academic research on antiquity had prepared the ground for something new. In architecture, this something new blossomed in our "classicizing architecture," of which Schinkel was the major exponent. Starting where the ancients had left off was an abstraction; the historical sense proceeded forward from antiquity. In the process, one arrived at the manifestation most closely related to antiquity, the Italian Renaissance. With this, the way was paved, even in France, in the Netherlands, and above all in Germany, for a search for the link to the creative activity of today. It was the arts and crafts that sped the shift from the Renaissance to the Baroque and at the same time from a strictly constructive to a decorative style. Today, the Baroque prevails. The Rococo, however, is already peering in from all sides. All the while, important branches of our architecture along the Rhine and in Hanover continue to thrive merrily on the foundation of the Gothic. So now then, whence would a New German style arise, if one were to arise at all? Most likely, its seeds lie near that group of master builders who are seeking to infuse the enticing designs of the early German Renaissance with a modern spirit. After all, they seem to be initiating a process like the one that produced something

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truly national for us during the period of art's greatest unfolding.

Of all art forms, the sculpture of our century was able to train itself most directly on antiquity, which, unfortunately, was badly misunderstood by the majority of its admirers on account of the vast number of superficial copies that have survived. Schadow, the creator of a monumental sculpture that strives recklessly towards recognizability, countered the classicism of Thorwald, which is comparable to Schinkel's, with something national. Rauch combined both elements, achieving unity at least on the outside, and thus established a canon that was embraced for decades. Today's sculptors, though more so in Berlin and Munich than in Dresden, have once again become accustomed to the objective contemplation of nature, and the creative activity of those "who have a say" is characterized by a realism that is sometimes moderate and sometimes bold. In this context, the excitement that the question of polychrome generated among sculptors—a question simulated by aesthetics and one that would have hardly gained its current significance had it not been compounded by the emphasis on the decorative of which we have spoken—is characteristic of our times. That there is a future for colored sculpture can no longer be denied; how much monumental sculpture will gain from polychrome remains to be seen. For the time being, polychrome (once again in connection with arts and crafts) is supported mainly by small sculpture, which has been revitalized. And small sculpture, incidentally, will allow sculpture to achieve more popularity than it enjoys right now.

In the painting of our century, the models that we lack from antiquity are being replaced by the work of Italian artists, who, as our ecclesiastical painting proves, are still being imitated in manifold and various ways. Incidentally, the ideals have changed in essential ways. It was the influence of what was understood as "antiquity," together with the decline of a sense for color, which had petered out with the pale hues of the Rococo, that caused people (in this medium, too) to see the remedy only in terms of form and to neglect color. Today the tables have turned. Cornelius and the whole row of cardboard draftsmen are far removed from the present: however one-sided the overestimation of them was in the past, perhaps people today are underestimating them by focusing on their flawed brushwork and chalk application and by forgetting the intellect that infused their subjects—this infusion was achieved at least by the most original among them and indeed belongs to the "how" in art. With their colorists, Paris and Belgium provided the impetus for color's return to the world of pictures, and it then flared up in the Piloty School in Munich. But this approach to color is also fading away: The "golden hue" is no longer the most highly praised virtue of our painting. Essentially, this trend was also conventional, just like the previous one. These days, Piloty's palette is decried as "sauce," and Makart's much admired colorism is also viewed with skepticism. A delight in clear color—color as revealed by nature to the unbiased observer—stands at the heart of a movement that is spreading further and further: the so-called *plein-air*<sup>[1]</sup> painting coming out of Paris. One cannot deny that these young artists still frequently mistake the flaws of *plein-air* painting's virtues for its actual virtues; one cannot deny that by exaggerating a healthy reaction to the mannerism of beauty, *plein-air* painting often falls victim to a mannerism of ugliness. And one cannot deny that, on the other hand, this young school of painters, in its enthusiasm for reproducing objects as they are, sometimes falls victim to the errors that follow. Nevertheless, for anyone who wishes to see, views from all sides will open up into the future land of art, a kind of art that will also generate, with increasing frequency, something emotionally significant once certain technical difficulties have been completely overcome. It will not do so as a painting based on thought but as one based on perception; not as an art of the mind but as an art of the imagination.

Over the last two centuries, music was destined to experience a marvelously rapid growth, flourishing, and blossoming. Looking back to the period before Bach and Händel—a time whose musical creations have become completely alien to our emotional state—and then forward to the present, we cannot help but realize that no other art form progressed from a budding to a flowering state as quickly as music, and it takes its place as a third instance of unfolding (of which there is no fourth) alongside the astonishing flowering of Greek sculpture in antiquity and of painting in the Renaissance. Therefore, we need not

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claim that music advanced steadily from one artist to the next, that there were no sidesteps or even backward steps, since they also occurred in the history of the great blossomings of the other arts as well. To allow the moods, passions, and sentiments to work before us in general, in a purified way, i.e., dissociated from the admixtures of coincidence; to free ourselves in this way from the fetters of reality and move towards the intensified enjoyment of ourselves in a world of truthfulness: the art of music has done this better in our century than in any preceding epoch.

Undoubtedly, the enormous expansion of musical means of expression was a contributing factor. This expansion was brought about by instrument making, instrumental virtuosity, and, in connection with them, orchestration. A factor of even greater importance, however, was the art of singing, arguably the most important part of music. While the quest for deepening, for intellectualism resulted in a deplorable decline in vocal virtuosity, our vocal music was nevertheless saved from a complete fall backwards. Now it is vocal music that has achieved the most significant successes of our day, and not only in “musical drama,” but also in lyric and epic song. That purely instrumental music is becoming less important than vocal music may relate to the fact that our entire musical art strives toward character to a greater degree than it did in the past, and that it often believes that character cannot do without the supporting and explanatory word. A glance at our “program music” may provide one more piece of evidence in support of this view. It is probably neither as novel nor as dependent as its critics claim, nor does it correspond closely enough to the actual essence of instrumental music to be regarded as a perfect example of the entire genre.

The art of successive beholding, i.e., today’s dance, ranks immeasurably lower in its development. In fact, one can hardly speak in terms of development. After all, it is missing perhaps the most important prerequisite for any type of development: the means for recording its own creations, which the other two temporal arts have in the form of letters and musical notes. Whereas in these two arts, the achievements of high culture have far surpassed folk culture, which is unaware of its connection to the before and the after, in the art of dance we are encountering the opposite: national folk dances come much closer to the nature of art than the utterly inartistic dances of the “salon.” With very few exceptions, our ballet is an artistic nothingness as well. Other nations seem to have lost less of their appreciation for the beauty and character of expression than ours, which viewed an art form so new to Germany—one to which we were introduced by the English performances of the “Mikado”—with pleasure and acknowledgment. But that view, especially among the critics, was entirely without substance. Only with respect to the expressive, auxiliary art of drama, the art of actors, are things different. Here, two tendencies continue to develop side by side: one seeks to emphasize beauty in its achievements, the other character portrayal. The two schools are denoted, not entirely correctly, as the “idealistic” and the “realistic.” As in all the other arts, the latter is gaining in strength all the time.

It is impossible to render in a few broad strokes even the most cursory outline of the vague state of poetry today. In the literature of former periods, we could definitively identify “Romanticism,” “Young Germany,” and “Classicism” as distinct currents. But our poetry is like a point in the sea where all the various currents fight, impede, or jostle each other at one moment, and then become all mixed up the next: We cannot discern individual elements. Quite often, it proves impossible to classify the writers who are in their prime according to objective, aesthetic, or psychological commonalities.

Our lyric poetry, however, exhibits some of the external, material features of the genre that are traceable through all types of poetry. Even here, we find that public favor is carried far less by something original that emerges from the depths, than by something we might call “prescription poetry,” which involves creating new works according to models that are popular among the people. For some time, particular attention was devoted to the cultivation of antique lyric poetry and lyric epics. The lyric poetry of *Weltschmerz*, which is usually set in ancient meter, has never been as popular, but the same applies to it. Truly original creations were achieved only by a few poets, who, like Keller and Storm, needed decades to attract a small circle of readers who understood their works. Even their lyric poetry, though, is mostly

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a tranquil self-reflection upon a tranquil soul. The fact that almost all of our occasional poems, even when they owe their inspiration to the mightiest “occasions,” lapse into rhetoric reveals the following: that while the great movements of our times might well be approaching our poets’ intellect and sentiment, they do not yet dominate their inner perception and imagination, as is the case in other leading nations. Still today, many a poet in Germany, whether he wishes to admit or conceal it, would prefer to feel like a refugee from the world than a contributor to the shaping of his times. Very similar phenomena are revealed in our epic poetry. The antique genre of epic poetry was popular as well, especially in archaic novels, whose authors, both through their chosen subject and the archaizing style of their portrayals, finally exhibited a commonality that distinguished them from their predecessors. These days, one genre likely destined for a period of flowering is the German novella, which a number of highly intellectual men have elevated to a height that was never reached before and will be hard to surpass. If the narrow form of this genre virtually rules out its being anything more than a showcase for the storytellers’ mind, then this would not at all be the case with the modern novel. In it, however, we also rarely encounter the desire to feel the lifeblood of our culture pulsating through organic structures. With few exceptions, our fiction represents a revival of earlier literary currents, so that depending on the fancy, taste, and educational background of the individual in question, we repeatedly see gathered before us academics and rationalists, *Sturm und Drang* writers, Young Germans and Romantics, dreamers and pseudo-realists, and, finally, the most curious mixtures of the one and the other. A few glimpses of our drama would, *mutatis mutandis*, produce the same impression. Under such circumstances, it is no surprise that many members of our educated class are searching among the French, the Scandinavians, and even the Russians for what we are not yet capable of giving them.

Not yet—for it seems quite obvious to us that a turn for the better is discernible in our poetry. Joyfully we welcome one thing above all. The playful sort of literature—the sort that displays its wit on a superficial level and has been nurtured to maturity by the feuilleton—is being increasingly disparaged by the educated segment of art lovers, regardless of whether this literature assumes the form of a poem, a story, or a stage drama. Additionally, the creators of art themselves exhibit a greater seriousness, a fuller consciousness of the enormous tasks that today’s poetry will have to solve if it indeed aspires to be the poetry of our day. This consciousness has its share of errors of thought; it also has a sentiment that, having grown on the tree of our art, might yield only stunted boughs. But it also has powerful branches that generate new green leaves year after year, as well as freshly sprouted young shoots that are full of sap.

Thus, no art form, if we disregard only the withered art of dance—and today we have practically been weaned from thinking of it as art—gives us the right to look discontentedly at its creative activity. And best of all, wherever we do not yet find health, we at least find signs of recovery. Only when our nation arrives at an ever-greater understanding of how much inner strength it stands to gain from a full-fledged realization of a truly robust art can we look forward joyfully to the path ahead of us.

## NOTES

[1] Open-air painting, or painting directly from nature—ed.

Source: Ferdinand Avenarius, “Unsere Künste: Zum Überblick,” *Der Kunstwart. Rundschau über alle Gebiete des Schönen* (Dresden), vol. 1 (1887): pp. 1–4. Available online at: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/kunstwart1/0007>.

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