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book review of

*Wilhelm Schadow: Werkverzeichnis der Gemälde mit einer Auswahl der dazugehörigen Zeichnungen und Druckgraphiken* by Cordula Grewe, edited by Bettina Baumgärtel and Hans Pafrath

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Athanasius Raczynski dedicated the first volume (1836) of his Geschichte der neueren deutschen Kunst (History of Modern German Painting) to Wilhelm Schadow (1788–1862), who plays a major role in the book’s narrative from his early years in Rome as a member of the Nazarene brotherhood to his rise to fame as the director of the Düsseldorf Art Academy. In contrast, Julius Meier-Graefe did not refer to Schadow once in his 1904 Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst (translated as Modern Art, 1908), and none of his paintings appeared in the 1906 Jahrhundertausstellung deutscher Kunst (the Centennial Exhibition of German Art), an important survey of German painting from 1775 to 1875 held at Berlin’s National Gallery. Such were the critical fortunes of an artist who had two strikes against him in the writing of modern art history: he was a Nazarene (and thus a painter of religious themes), and an influential academy director.

Given the commitment of Schadow and his fellow Nazarenes to a representational and imitative form of painting, it is not surprising that most critics and historians in the first half of the twentieth century ignored or condemned their work. In the postwar period, there was some important scholarly work devoted to the Nazarenes, such as Jens Jensen’s publications on Friedrich Overbeck and Keith Andrews’s The Nazarenes (1964), but it was only in the late 1970s that art historians began to reassess their work in its specific historical context, rather than judge it according to modernist standards.[1] In 1989, Gerhard Gerkens and Andreas Blühm, in the catalogue to the only major exhibition devoted to Overbeck in the twentieth century, argued that historical phenomena are now approached “less dogmatically as well as with less self-certainty.” This tendency, which they described as “vaguely postmodern,” has facilitated an engagement with Overbeck’s anti-modernist stance, his “going-against-his-time.”[2] This critical shift began in a 1977 exhibition at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, the first devoted to the Nazarenes since 1926. The accompanying catalogue did not portray members of the Lukasbund as backward-looking and marginal, but rather praised their “restorative stance,” which went “hand in hand with political developments in Germany.”[3]
Moreover, the Nazarenes’ importance was expanded beyond their early paintings in Rome. Their later work, especially their monumental painting in Germany, was also given pride of place, as was their widespread influence on European art.

But even with this critical turn, Schadow, for the most part, did not fare well. The reassessment of the Nazarenes developed new narratives: on the artists’ early accomplishments in Rome, Overbeck’s constancy to the Nazarene ideal of purity in religious painting and devotional life, and Cornelius’s masculine, Germanic school of fresco painting in Munich and Berlin. Indeed, Cornelius and Overbeck, who were sometimes called by their contemporaries the Michelangelo and Raphael of the nineteenth century, have over the past forty years received the lion’s share of attention in monographs and exhibitions or in scholarly works dedicated to the group as a whole. Even Franz Pforr, who died in Rome in 1812 at the age of twenty-four, has been the subject of a series of monographs, and Philipp Veit, who became the Director of the Städel Art Institute, had his paintings documented in a catalogue raisonné in 1991. The limited scholarly attention paid to Schadow was mostly in the context of the Düsseldorf School. On the occasion of the centennial of his death in 1962, the Düsseldorf museum devoted an exhibition to his work, but his standing was hardly improved by a catalogue which claimed that his reputation as a painter is “controversial” and that his work lacks “the convincing certainty and creative power” of the Old Masters.

One of the practical challenges facing Schadow scholars, which was noted in the 1962 exhibition catalogue, lies “in the neglect of his work in art-historical literature and the lack of documentation.” Schadow did not have a nineteenth-century devotee like Margaret Howitt, who published a two-volume documentary biography of Overbeck in 1886. Moreover, many of Schadow’s patrons were members of the Prussian aristocracy and “kept his pictures in places that are unattainable for us today.” Cordula Grewe’s Wilhelm Schadow, an incredible achievement of labour and love, thus fills a large lacuna in German nineteenth-century art history. This catalogue raisonné of his paintings with a selection of accompanying drawings and prints appeared last year, but it has been over twenty years in the making. The first version was completed as her 1998 dissertation for the Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg. In the revised “king of the discipline” [Königsdisziplin], as the editors describe the catalogue raisonné format in the forward to the volume, Grewe begins with a short introduction, which succinctly outlines Schadow’s life and his important contributions to nineteenth-century culture as a painter, art and pedagogical theorist, academy director, and influential teacher. Two parts follow the introduction: a catalogue of his major works, which includes long essays and briefer pieces on individual or groups of paintings, and a catalogue raisonné, which lists all his known works according to the standard categories (title, location, material, size, annotations, inscriptions, provenance, and literature). Both the catalogue of major works and the catalogue raisonné are further subdivided into two sections, history paintings and portraits, both organized chronologically. Grewe’s decision to organize the catalogue in this way, rather than list all the works chronologically, clarifies in some ways her assessment of Schadow’s oeuvre in its socio-historical context and in its relation to the work of his fellow Nazarenes, as I will discuss below. The catalogue raisonné also includes lost works and copies after his paintings (mostly prints), and the appendix contains the most extensive bibliography on the artist to date.
Grewe’s *Wilhelm Schadow* is informed by the significant work she has done on the Nazarenes since completing her dissertation. During this time, she has published two important books and a series of insightful essays, which have reassessed Schadow’s achievements and the Nazarene movement. To get a better sense of how Grewe reclaims Schadow’s importance in the nineteenth century, it is important to understand not only the general criticisms made against the Nazarenes, such as their lack of originality or their devotion to religion in a secular age, but also the specific accusations made against Schadow. Such criticism is evident in a survey text of modern art that appeared between Raczynski’s and Meier-Graefe’s, Richard Muther’s 1893 *Geschichte der Malerei im XIX. Jahrhundert* (translated as *History of Modern Painting*, 1895). In Muther’s text, Schadow only gets a brief mention in the section on the Nazarenes, as a member of the group and as one of the artists who painted the Bartholdy frescoes, which led to their European fame. His importance to nineteenth-century art, Muther suggests, lies more in his contribution as director of the Düsseldorf Art Academy, which Muther purposefully describes as a school of painting in contrast to Cornelius’s school of drawing in Munich. For an art historian like Muther, the defining feature of the nineteenth century was the abandonment of aristocratic and religious culture in favour of “a culture for all,” by which he meant Realism, as exemplified in Millet and Meunier’s depictions of labour. Following this line of thought, Muther found no central place for the Nazarenes and the Düsseldorf School in his history of modern art. But his remarks about Schadow and the Düsseldorf School, to which he devoted an entire chapter, are enlightening. Muther condemns Schadow for lacking “any personal distinction as an artist,” but he praises him for “a tendency towards perfection of technique,” which he had inherited from his father, the great Berlin neoclassical sculptor Johann Gottfried Schadow. According to Muther, Schadow and his Düsseldorf students pursued “earnest studies and serious work” in the medium of oil painting, which “led to surprising progress” in naturalism and assured them “a technical superiority” over other schools. Muther, however, was wary of the “authoritative influence” that the school still exercised in his day. What bothered him most was the hybridity of their paintings, how naturalism was “retouched by ‘Idealism,’” which romanticized and generalized the subject matter. Schadow and his school, Muther concludes, “anxiously avoided all manly and strong, energetic and characteristic expression, all that could remind one of nature.” Their paintings are “insipid in a modern way, feeble, colorless, and sentimental.” Meier-Graefe similarly referred to the “vapid sentimentalities” of the Düsseldorf school.

Grewe’s important intervention into Schadow and Nazarene scholarship has involved, among other things, the reassessment of such concepts as sentimentality and hybridity in art and theology in German-speaking nations of the nineteenth century, an era as much of sacred devotion and religious revivalism as industrialization and modernization. Grewe attends to Schadow’s hybridity when she discusses his “naturalistic idealism” in the introduction to her catalogue, as a different, yet compatible position to the more ascetic Nazarene ideal exemplified in Overbeck’s art and theory. In an earlier essay on the relation of the Nazarenes to the Düsseldorf School, she explains that Schadow’s attention to facial expression and portraiture in history painting emphasized a type of corporality in order to “convince us that what we are looking at—however idealized this pictorial world might be—is reality.” Here, Grewe is elucidating and developing Schadow’s own position. In *Die moderne Vasari* (1854), Schadow explains how Overbeck’s method developed during the early years in Rome, when the Nazarenes (including Schadow himself) painted pictures “purely
from memory” due to the fear that the model would make the work “too naturalistic” and weaken the artist’s “inner ideal conception.” But after returning to Germany, Schadow questioned such an approach. For the older Schadow, it is “an awkward thing” if a painter of large compositions (history paintings) “cannot paint a good portrait.”[17] While ultimately different from Overbeck’s ascetic style and fear of materiality (Overbeck stated that he would never draw after the nude or cadavers), Schadow’s approach, Grewe maintains, can still be understood within a Nazarene paradigm of religious painting. His notion that the poetic idea had to take on a “perfect bodily form” evolved from a central dogma “of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the incarnation.”[18] Distancing himself from Overbeck’s pure and immaterial religiosity (Meier-Graefe would later mock Overbeck for treating the brush as “a phallus,” which “only lost this dubious symbolism if one purified it with holy material”), Schadow conceived of religious painting as both a conceptual and material process.[19] “One believes wrongly,” he wrote in 1828, “that the actual poetic invention ends with the completion of the design. . . . I hold that invention only ceases at the moment when the painter puts down his brush.”[20]

Grewe is not the first scholar to question the notion of a unified Nazarene style. Frank Büttner persuasively made a claim for difference where earlier art historians and critics only saw similarity.[21] Her integration of Schadow’s art and theory into a broader use of the term “Nazarene,” however, is an important aspect of her reevaluation of the period. In Grewe’s two books on the Nazarenes, Schadow plays a more prominent role than he does in earlier analyses and more recent reassessments of the movement. This change of focus is due in part to Grewe’s treatment of Nazarene art as a nineteenth-century phenomena that went well beyond the artists’ early works in Rome, Overbeck’s later Catholic paintings, and Cornelius’s German frescoes. For Grewe, Nazarene symbolic imagery should be understood, as she argues in Painting the Sacred in the Age of Romanticism (2009), as functioning through a conceptual framework, which championed “reading” over “viewing.” Grewe contextualizes this form of visual literacy in nineteenth-century theological and artistic contexts that considered painting a form of worship and reading a type of praying.[22] Approaching the Nazarenes in this way, Schadow’s Pieta and Vanitas (1841) and The Wise and Foolish Virgins (1842), for example, evidence the Nazarene call for a re-enchantment with the world through stylistic revolution and religious fervor, inseparable concepts for all Nazarene artists. In The Nazarenes: Romantic Avant-Garde and the Art of the Concept (2015), Grewe furthers her investigation of the conceptual nature of Nazarene painting through the conviction that Nazarene revivalism offers an important rethinking of modernist art practices and their critical reception from the nineteenth century to today. Schadow again plays an important role in her narrative in the presentation of him as a counterweight to Nazarene asceticism. She explains that the “physiognomic realism” evident in Schadow’s religious paintings needs to be interpreted psychologically: the goal of Schadow’s naturalism was for the viewer to identify with a work’s subject matter through empathy. Schadow both “perpetuated the Nazarene paradigm of historical symbolism” and at the same time reconfigured it through “greater naturalism and increased sentimentalization.”[23] While art historians like Muther and Meier-Graefe, in their gendered understanding of proper art production as a masculine engagement with nature, dismissed sentimentality outright, Grewe, following more recent trends, takes it seriously as a historical phenomenon.[24] For Schadow, feeling, she argues, was an essential element in the production and reception of a painting, as a communicative act and a religious performance.
In her well-illustrated and finely produced *Wilhelm Schadow*, Grewe incorporates many of these ideas into her analysis of Schadow’s paintings. Each entry in the first part, the catalogue of the major works, gives all the necessary information one would expect in a catalogue raisonné about the painting or paintings under discussion, including patronage, historical background, and iconography, which Grewe has impressively and painstakingly gathered from a plethora of published and archival sources. But each entry also asks important questions about the social contexts of the paintings, their receptions, and their historiographies, the types of concerns Grewe raises in her books on the Nazarenes. I will give just one example: Schadow’s *Christ on the Way to Golgotha* (1818, cat. no. 13), a small oil panel from 1818, which was in the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen’s collection and is now in the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen. After explaining the context of its production, Grewe cites positive early responses to the painting, such as in Dorothea Schlegel’s diary, and later more negative reactions. Given the reservations of later viewers, Grewe reflects on a question that could be asked of many a Nazarene painting: what was it about Schadow’s *Christ on the Way to Golgotha* “that moved contemporaries like Dorothea Schlegel or Bertel Thorvaldsen so much?” She begins her answer with a discussion of the semiotics of imitation, that is, how Schadow’s reference to an old-German (*altdeutsche*) style was perceived at the time. Citing authors as diverse as literary critic and philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, who like Schadow and Overbeck converted to Catholicism, and art historian and Cornelius biographer Ernst Förster, Grewe demonstrates how the old-German style was understood in Schlegel’s terms as a strict and serious handling of material appropriate to the symbolic nature of all Christian subject matter in painting. The revivalist qualities of the painting, Grewe explains, connected it not only to Dürer, whose works Schadow studied in Dresden on his way to Rome, but also to a series of contemporary works, like Overbeck’s drawing *Carrying of the Cross* (1815) and his painting *Entry into Jerusalem*, (1809–24; destroyed 1942) as well as to other historical treatments of the theme, some known through widely disseminated prints. Like other Nazarene paintings, Schadow’s panel conspicuously shows his indebtedness to works from the past, though the painting is hardly a copy of a Renaissance work. *Christ on the Way to Golgotha*, however, also moved contemporary viewers through Schadow’s treatment of the subject matter, specifically, as Grewe notes, the way the painter represents through gestures and facial expressions the emotional bond between Mary and Christ. Grewe points out that the motif of such mother/son devotion originated in the Gospel of Nicodemus, an apocryphal text, and was popularized in early nineteenth-century Christian devotional literature and passion plays. Schadow’s painting, through its old-German style and treatment of its subject matter, moved contemporaries because, as Grewe convincingly demonstrates, it demanded empathy in its representation of a mother’s love and motherly suffering. Grewe’s reading of Schadow’s *Christ on the Way to Golgotha* is thus much more than a dry catalogue entry. It is a holistic analysis of Schadow’s painting, in which contemporary texts, historical references, social developments, iconographical sources, and theoretical concerns are stitched together in a way that mitigates the possibility of reading the work merely as a copy of an older style or as a piece of sentimental kitsch. In this entry, Grewe also puts into effect her concept of “controlled openness,” which she developed in *Painting the Sacred*. For Grewe, source material and historical references do not limit the reading of a Nazarene painting, but rather offer “a starting point for the interpretative process,” which in the case of Schadow’s *Christ on the Way to Golgotha* produced affective and empathetic responses on the part of contemporary viewers.
Feeling, “the first element of Schadow’s art theory,” as Grewe maintains in her entry on Schadow’s two versions of *Poesie* (1826, cat. no. 31, and 1827, cat. no. 32), “is the origin of the poetic idea,” but its material realization in the medium of painting was as important for the painter. Grewe discusses Schadow’s “naturalistic idealism” in great depth in history paintings like *The Daughter of Herodias* (1838, cat. no. 50), *Piety and Vanity* (1841, cat. no. 52), and *The Wise and Foolish Virgins* (1842, cat. no. 53). Just as some of Schadow’s history paintings feel like portraits—*Poesie* and *St. Hedwig* (1844, cat. no. 58) were modelled after individuals—so some of his portraits have the weight of history paintings. As Grewe explains in her discussion of Schadow’s portraits from his second trip to Italy in 1830–31 (cat. nos. 141–147), Schadow claimed that portraiture could “reproduce the character, indeed the entire biography of a person,” and it was this claim, “which catapulted portraiture into the category of history painting.” Such was the case in Schadow’s *Young Girl Reading* (1831–32, cat. no. 145) and *The Templer* (1833, cat. no. 148), in which individuals were modelled to represent ideal types of virtue. The elevation of portraiture to history painting was also an aim in many of Schadow’s group portraits. His *Self-Portrait with Brother Ridolfo and Bertel Thorvaldsen* (1815–16, cat. no. 84) depicts the strong bond between the two brothers, who travelled together to Rome in 1811 through a stipend granted by Alexander von Humboldt, with the great Danish sculptor and their mentor. It also represents a typical Romantic friendship portrait, which helped Schadow position himself in the Nazarene circle in Rome, whose members believed that inner connectedness between like-minded artists, as depicted in this triple portrait, was integral to artistic productivity. In her discussion of the double portrait *Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig of Prussia and Wilhelm zu Solms-Braunfels in Cuirassier Uniform* (1830, cat. no. 136), Grewe comments on the remarkable naturalistic details in the imitation of the clothing and in the reflection in Friedrich Wilhelm’s armour plate. This technical virtuosity was put to good use in a painting that combined a private concern, the sincere affection of the half-brothers, with a public display of Prussian military power. And in *The Family Bendemann and their Friends* (1892, cat. no. 152), Schadow emphasizes the ideal of community (*Gemeinschaft*) in the depiction of the painter Edouard Bendemann with his family and fellow members of the Düsseldorf school, including Theodor Hildebrandt, Carl Ferdinand Sohn, and Schadow himself. In the unified composition and depiction of close relations between family and friends, Schadow expresses the importance of communal and familial bonds. For Grewe, this group portrait can also be considered an artistic manifesto for it demonstrates Schadow’s life-long belief, Nazarene at its core, that an individual’s artistic achievement is secondary to that of the group, which supports the individual. Schadow developed this faith in community in his early years in Rome, especially during the Bartholdy fresco group project, and it continued in his work with like-minded students and colleagues in Düsseldorf.

Like all well-researched catalogues raisonnés, Cordula Grewe’s *Wilhelm Schadow* affords the reader the opportunity to reflect on an artist’s entire output, from well-known to little-discussed works. In the case of Schadow, it forces the reader to reconsider the important contributions he made to nineteenth-century religious painting (especially the similarities to and differences from his Nazarene colleagues) and portraiture, much of which from the 1820s is devoted to the Prussian aristocracy. Because of Grewe’s approach, this catalogue also compels the reader to question a modernist account of nineteenth-century art, which continues, to a certain degree, to have a hold on the field. Schadow’s work demonstrates how an artist’s oeuvre can change and develop over time, even if there are consistencies in theory, approach, and style. And the catalogue, through the high quality of the color reproductions,
is able to give the reader a good sense of Schadow’s paintings in all their “naturalistic idealism,” even if this concept takes different forms at different times in the artist’s career. On the one hand, Wilhelm Schadow is, like all catalogues raisonnés, a work in progress, especially, as Grewe notes, when it comes to issues of provenance. On the other hand, it is a very finished work of scholarly research. In its engagement with matters of social history, reception, and art theory, it restores Schadow’s important place in nineteenth-century culture as a Nazarene painter of religious subjects, a portraitist of the Prussian aristocracy, and a director of the Düsseldorf Academy, whose influence spread not only throughout Europe, from Switzerland to Norway to Russia, but also as far as the United States.[26] In hunting down Schadow’s paintings (extant and lost), preparatory drawings and all the relevant source material (primary and secondary), Grewe has produced an impressive catalogue, full of pertinent information and astute observations, which will be central to Schadow scholarship and Nazarene studies for years to come.

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Notes


[22] Cordula Grewe, Painting the Sacred in the Age of Romanticism (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 3.


[26] See The Düsseldorf School of Painting and Its International Influence.