

JAMES S. ACKERMAN

## *A Theory of Style*

I

ART HISTORIANS are especially preoccupied with defining the nature and behavior of style. For history to be written at all we must find in what we study factors which at once are consistent enough to be distinguishable and changeable enough to have a "story." In political-social history these factors are sometimes institutions, sometimes persons or groups—units which retain their identity over a span of time or shift of locale, yet change and develop as they react to their environment and its changes.

In the study of the arts, works, not institutions or people, are the primary data; in them we must find certain characteristics which are more or less stable, in the sense that they appear in other products of the same artist(s), era or locale, and flexible, in the sense that they change according to a definable pattern when observed in instances chosen from sufficiently extensive spans of time or geographical distance. A distinguishable ensemble of such characteristics we call a style.

JAMES S. ACKERMAN is professor of fine arts at Harvard University.

*This essay was written for a volume on Art and Archaeology which will constitute part of a general critique of the humanities in America for the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University. While it uses examples and, to some degree, terms that are art historical, the theory presented is intended to be applicable to the study of style in any of the arts. I am indebted to my colleagues in the Council for criticism, and I have been stimulated greatly by the ideas of Ernst Gombrich, George Kubler, Jesse Reichek, and Meyer Schapiro.*

We use the concept of style, then, as a way of characterizing relationships among works of art that were made at the same time and/or place, or by the same person or group. If we do not know where, when, or by whom works of art were produced, then the process may be inverted to allow hypotheses that works of the same style are from the same time, place, or person(s). In this second role, style is an indispensable historical tool; it is more essential to the history of art than to any other historical discipline.

Because works of art are preserved for reasons other than their historical or biographical significance, they often lose all extrinsic evidence of their historical position, so that no record survives of the artist(s), era, or locale which produced them. Without such evidence—coordinates of time and space—it is impossible to plot the graphs of consistency and change that are a prerequisite for the writing of history. But isolated fragments of evidence may be extended into a credible historic account by conclusions based on style; one signed work may be sufficient to construct the oeuvre of an artist, one dated work to associate a type of production with an epoch.

Style thus provides a structure for the history of art. Other structures are possible (e.g., the biography of artists), but that of style is the most comprehensive, since it is the only one that can be built with minimal external documentation on the evidence of works of art alone. Because our image of style is not discovered but created by ab-

strating certain features and combinations from works of art for the purpose of assisting historical and critical activity, it is meaningless to ask, as we usually do, "what is style?"; the relevant question is rather "what definition of style provides the most useful structure for the history of art?"

I suggested that the concept of style is a means of establishing relationships among individual works of art. In this it resembles the concepts of society and culture, which are based on similar definitions of relationships; anthropologists also use the word "style" to designate a complex of behavior patterns within a society. There is no objective correlative for our image of a style; we may observe and define certain traits or characteristics in a single work of art, but we cannot call them traits of Rembrandt's style, Gothic style, or Tuscan style without summoning our experience of other works by Rembrandt, or the "Gothic period" (which is itself a historian's invention), or from Tuscany. A particular work of art therefore may represent or exemplify characteristics of a style in the way that a person may be representative of a society, but to say that it "has a style," as we often do, is not illuminating. If we use the word "style" to define a certain artistic currency, it is inefficient to use it also to define the unique traits of single works of art. The virtue of the concept of style is that by defining *relationships* it makes various kinds of order out of what otherwise would be a vast continuum of self-sufficient products.

In using an image of style to establish orderly relationships among works of art, we follow the path of the artist, who—by choosing to accept or to alter certain features of the art around him—establishes a relationship which is the predominant factor in the formation of his individual style. For the artist and for his audience, style is a protection against chaos; it serves the same purpose as do cultural patterns and institutions in society. A class of works of art of any kind—pyramids, ruler-portraits, still lifes—is orderly and distinguishable because it is necessary to human beings not only to express themselves within established patterns, but to experience the world around

them in accordance with such patterns; our perceptual mechanisms cause us to interpret what we see in terms of what we know and expect. The factor of stability in style can be traced to a sort of instinctual inertia; presumably, if natural inclinations were undisturbed by imagination, ambition, and other desires, society and language would remain fixed and art would have a history of more or less competent copies of the work of some Daedalic demigod. But we are mercifully favored with instincts and passions that struggle with—though they never quite overcome—that inertia, and these contribute the flexible factor in style.

The artist submits to this tension between stability and change, between the reproduction of existing forms and the invention of new ones, by necessity, not by choice. Unlike a machine, he cannot reproduce without inventing, for when change is not prompted by inventiveness it is prompted by boredom. So art has never been static; when it is not vital, it actively degenerates. Conversely, the artist cannot invent without reproducing; in order to make a meaningful innovation he must be able to concentrate his forces upon the few aspects of his work where circumstances favor fresh departures; for the rest, he relies on the support of his tradition and of his environment. An artist cannot invent himself out of his time and, if he could, he would succeed only in making his work incomprehensible by abandoning the framework in which it might be understood.

The relationship of stability and change varies according to the pace and degree of individualization of a culture; in recent art a powerful factor of flexibility causes radical shifts of style in the course of a generation, while in ancient Egypt stability predominated to the point that barely perceptible innovations were sufficient to secure the vitality of a style for three millennia.

In the tradition of modern Western criticism, the forces that make for change in art have been praised more warmly than those that make for stability. Since the Romantic period the military hero has been admired more for his adventurousness than for his caution, and the artist-hero more for his in-

novations than for his ability to sustain tradition. This preference exemplifies a "progressive" view of art opposed, presumably, to a conservative view which would favor the forces of stability. Neither is really relevant to criticism. Change and stability simply are primeval forces in style and cannot be invested with value except in terms of some preconceived image of man's destiny.

## II

If the characteristics of the work of art that contribute to a definition of style must exhibit some stability and flexibility, then all of its possible characteristics cannot contribute in equal measure. Conventions of form and of symbolism yield the richest harvest of traits by which to distinguish style. I mean by conventions an accepted vocabulary of elements—a scale of color, an architectural Order, an attribute of a God or a saint—and a syntax by which these elements are composed into a still-life, a temple, or a frieze. We get an image of the style of an individual by observing the interaction of his private conventions and the public conventions of his time and place. Since conventions, like language, are the basic vehicle for the communication of meaning, society aids the artist in promoting their stability and in controlling the rate, the degree, and even the nature of their change. Religious symbolism, for example, is determined by religious establishments as well as by artists, and other less utilitarian conventions, such as those of landscape painting or of recent abstract art, are sustained, if not formulated, by the needs of an economically powerful class.

Other inherent characteristics help less in determining style; aspects of the work of art as a material object change so little in the course of history that they might appear almost anywhere at any time. So to say that a painting is done on wood, that a statue weighs three hundred pounds, or that a building is thirty feet high is to make a statement which, for all its precision, conveys little of style. Conversely, at the opposite pole, an evocation of the unique expressiveness of the work of art reveals character-

istics so ephemeral that they appear in that work alone, and have no currency. In short, material characteristics are not usually changeable enough, nor expressive characteristics stable enough to define style or to provide a structure for history; they may be called symptoms rather than determinants of style, since a disposition toward certain materials or expressive modes characterizes the production of any time, place, or person.

Technique, or the process by which matter is given form, is a more sensitive gauge of style than the strictly material aspect of the work of art, but less sensitive than the conventional character. To say that a temple is constructed of dowered ashlar blocks and that its trussed roof rests on lintels supported by columns is to reveal more of its style than to say that it is built of marble, wood, and iron; but it does not distinguish a Greek temple from a Roman or Neo-classic one.

Yet technique may be a fundamental stylistic determinant; this occurs because usually it is not merely a means, but serves important formal or symbolic functions. In Gothic architecture the ribbed vault, which represents a substantial advance in engineering, is not just a device for achieving an expressive form, it is itself an expressive form, whereas in the skyscraper design of the last generation, the aim to "reveal" the skeletal steel frame in the exterior design had a symbolic motivation—the skeleton, in fact, had to be covered for fire protection; its reflection in the façade design, often achieved artificially, symbolized "honesty." Gothic and early twentieth-century architects were uncommonly interested in structure, and this promoted an extraordinary flexibility in technique. Structural change in Gothic architecture was so rapid and so rational that it can be traced systematically in a succession of cathedrals started within the same generation; vaulting or buttressing methods alone are sufficient to provide a key to chronology. By contrast, the technical change in other great phases of European architecture—from 550 to 350 B. C. or from 1450 to 1650 A. D.—was negligible, almost an insignificant component of style.

## III

One of the most stubborn and challenging problems of art history is to explain the motivations and behavior of change in style. While this involves concentration on flexible factors, we could not separate one style from another, nor speak of a style, without first defining it in terms of stable factors. We create classes such as Impressionism, Baroque art, or Picasso's "Blue Period" on the assumption that a certain complex of elements common to a group of works is sufficiently stable, distinct, and relevant to justify characterizing it as a style. In a similar way, political historians distinguish "periods" within the constant flux of human action—the Middle Ages, the Reformation, or the Colonial Era—in terms of what they believe to be cohesive and significant social events. This definition of a style in terms of its stable factors is a hypothesis (and one which we must challenge constantly) that makes it possible to study change. While style usually can be defined in reference to a more or less fixed block of historical time, the study of its processes of change requires reference to the succession of events within that block.

For most of the five hundred years of modern art history the patterns of change have been described in biological metaphors. Vasari, the most scholarly historian of the Renaissance, believed that style, "like human bodies, has a birth, a growth, an ageing and a death." The scheme survived into the last century, when it got refinements from Darwin and his colleagues and when terms such as the "evolution" or "life" of style entered our vocabulary. Most of Vasari's followers before 1850 were interested chiefly in the art of two epochs—antiquity and the Renaissance—which were susceptible to being fitted into the biological life-cycle, and even those who turned from classicism toward the Gothic found that the formula still could be used. Toward the end of the last century, scientific scholarship and the broadening of taste encouraged a more specific and less normative model of evolution from an archaic to a classic to a baroque phase. There remained, however,

a bias in favor of the Classic; the Parthenon, Amiens, and Raphael were thought to be peaks of the cycle (as expressed in the terms "High" Gothic; "High" Renaissance) toward which earlier artists aspired and from which later artists retreated.

At the turn of the century, Alois Riegl, who supported his theory of style with studies of non-classical phases (Late Roman, Early Baroque art), was influential in persuading colleagues to grant equality to all phases. He promoted a principle which typifies art history in this century, that the best solution to an artistic problem is the one that best fulfills the artist's aim. But this relativism in the sphere of value was accompanied by determinism in explaining the dynamics of style; in place of the biological metaphor, Riegl put cycles of evolution from an early "haptic" to a later "optic" phase. At the same time, Heinrich Wölfflin offered a still more influential theory of preordained evolution from Classical to Baroque form in terms of polar formal categories: closed-open, linear-painterly, etc. As compared to the biological tradition, which had the disadvantage of being applicable to only three of the major styles of Western art, that of Riegl and Wölfflin describes more universal patterns of style, though eras remain—among them Carolingian and nineteenth-century art—which give little support to their systems. In the past half century no new theories of style have taken root; in this country none has even been proposed. This is not due so much to satisfaction with earlier theories as to the rise of a narrow scientism which has made philosophical speculation suspect. Although we cannot work without a theory of style, and although we continue to speak of classical, baroque, or painterly forms, we have allowed the systems that give meaning to these terms to slip into the unconscious, where they operate without the benefit of our control, as a barrier against new perceptions.

All of the major theories of style have been determinist in the sense that they define a preordained pattern of "evolution": the earlier phase of a style is *destined* to move toward the later. This is to say that at

any stage in the process some force other than the will of artists must be at work directing invention toward the goal that ultimately is to be achieved. Twentieth-century scholars do not grant a priority of value to any phase of the evolution, but a value-concept lurks in the shadows; if it is the destiny of styles to evolve as they did, then those works of art which promoted that evolution are destiny-fulfilling and those which did not are destiny-denying. The implication that the former are superior cannot be avoided. So, in our handbooks of the history of styles it appears that the chief function of any work of art is to contribute toward the works which follow it in a sequence; and the greater the contribution the more "significant" the work. The history of art has been fashioned into another version of the materialist success-story.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to understand how historians studying Greek, Gothic, or Renaissance art first formulated a biological model and later a more sophisticated theory of an innate dynamics of style; in those periods the sequence of works is so evident, the number of "unsuccessful" productions so few, that it appears almost inevitable that the Temple of Hera at Olympia should have led ultimately to the Parthenon, or the portal sculpture of the façade of Chartres to that of Rheims and finally to that of Claude Sluter. The process is orderly; it is similar in those two otherwise dissimilar epochs of Western civilization and finally it is so familiar from our experience of living things that we are tempted almost irresistibly to define it as a natural or necessary one. At the least it would seem that the designer of Olympia and the sculptors of Chartres were making the first steps toward the goal that was gained by their successors.

But even that apparently factual account of a sequence of increasingly successful solutions to a problem contains a concealed germ of determinism. It introduces a trap into which historians habitually fall, as a result of the benefits of hindsight. When we review the surviving evidence of a process in the past, we can see the effects as well as the causes of any event within the proc-

ess. We can, for example, designate a work from a later moment as a "classic" solution and judge any earlier work according to what it contributed or failed to contribute to that solution. Or, with Wölfflin, we can praise—or cite as especially significant—solutions in the classic phase that contributed most to the making of the baroque phase.

We cannot erase our image of the totality of a style process in the past, but this need not discourage us from trying to interpret a work of art in terms of its proper context rather than its effects by gaining perspectives *within* the process at points short of its termination. At any one of these points we shall find an artist making a statue or designing a cathedral. He, too, is aware of works preceding his, and of works being made by his contemporaries, and these constitute an important source in the formation of his style. Given our habits of hindsight, it is necessary to add that he is not aware of the works which follow his; he knows only past and present. He accepts and rejects aspects of what he finds in things about him and he adds something of his own. By his choice and by his contribution he moves a step—sometimes a leap—away from the past. Are we, then, justified in saying that he has moved toward the future?

In his terms the future is a void—how can he move toward it? If he dreams of its wonders, the dreams themselves, like his art, are creations of the present. He may happen to contribute to the future, but only by having concentrated all his powers on the making of something intrinsically worthwhile in the present. If the sculptors at Chartres had visualized as the ultimate goal of their effort something like the Rheims figures, they surely would have carved something like the Rheims figures. Artists communicate experiences rather than expectations; they are not prophets. For these reasons the modern myth of the *avant-garde* in art (adopted from a military term designating troops nearest the objective), though it has sustained lively polemics, really makes no sense, and threatens to degrade the artist. Anyone who seeks to alter

or to accelerate the change of style in the hope of anticipating the future is likely to become, like the fashion designer, an expert in and purveyor of taste.

What ultimately prevents an artist from successfully anticipating the future is the unpredictable behavior of his successors. His effect upon them is partly a matter of chance. It depends on his work being seen by someone and, if it is, on the receptivity of those who see it. Powerfully expressive works are more likely to be influential than weaker ones, but often they are rejected vigorously even by artists—not only when they are considered too radical (Michelangelo's late Pietàs; William Blake's painting) but even when they are considered not radical enough (Botticelli in 1505, Ingres in 1860).

These observations suggest a different approach to defining the process of change in style. What is called "evolution" in the arts should not be described as a succession of steps toward a solution to a given problem, but as a succession of steps away from one or more original statements of a problem. Each step, for the artist who takes it, is final and definitive; he cannot consciously make a transition to a succeeding step, for if he visualizes something he regards as preferable to what he is doing, he presumably will proceed to do it, unless he is constrained in some way. So we cannot speak properly of a sequence of solutions to a given problem, since with each solution the nature of the problem changes.

We might visualize a style as a great canvas on which generations of artists have painted. The earliest ones sketch a composition, later ones keep some of it, rub some out and add some of their own, the next do the same and so on. At any moment in the process there is a complete picture, but no indication of what it will look like after the succeeding artist has done his share. At the close of the process, when some artists have started on another picture, this one is abandoned. But the final image, although composed of contributions from every artist, cannot be said to represent the aims of the earlier ones, nor to represent a solution to the problem posed by the first of them.

The pattern of style change, then, is not determined by any destiny nor by a common goal, but by a succession of complex decisions as numerous as the works by which we have defined the style. We can detect a pattern or distinguish a common problem because each decision in turn, by its choice of elements which are to be retained or rejected and by its innovations, gives to the whole a determinable configuration. The configuration may *appear* purposeful or predestined because each successive work retains something of those that precede it and because its innovations, though not anticipated in earlier works, are coherently related to them. But what actually motivates the process is a constant incidence of probings into the unknown, not a sequence of steps toward the perfect solution.

So we return to an earlier observation that the pattern of change is a product of the tension in society and in the artist between the instinct for the stability and security of established schemes and the human capacity (resulting partly from biological and psychological differences) for creating something unique and individualized. Change is slow when the former is stronger, rapid when the latter prevails. As a rule, the factor of stability gets more support from society and its institutions, and the factor of change from the individual imagination; creative vision seldom is granted to groups. On the rare occasion when inspired patronage (Emperor Frederick II, Louis XIV) does more than the artist to motivate a style, the patron proves to be a creative individual who deserves to be called an artist. Given our background in the dialectic of German art history, it is necessary to emphasize that a nation, a religion, a *Zeitgeist*, is likely, except in its formative stage, to *resist rather than to promote* change in style. The idea that Germans, Catholics, or Baroque Man embody a creative expressive will (I am recalling Riegl's *Kunstwollen*) apart from the contributions of their artist I find incomprehensible and distasteful. If German art is German, it is not because any creative innovation in it has been produced by a mystical German Spirit, but because the

nation and its artists show a tendency to keep certain kinds of innovation and to cast out other kinds. It is by this conservative, *post-facto*, pressure that society affects art.

In proposing an alternative to current interpretations of patterns of change in style, I do not want to overrate the significance of chronological succession. To do so is to imply that each work necessarily is related more closely to its immediate predecessors than to others of an earlier stage of a style or in what we have defined as different styles. Indeed, the demands of society and the inclinations of artists make the innovations of the latest work by contemporaries in the same culture especially interesting, because they represent attempts to solve in a familiar language the kind of problem which is challenging at the moment. But the creative process is complex enough to be stimulated at many points; often the art of earlier times or of foreign places offers solutions to such problems, too—it even may suggest new problems, since its language is less familiar. So inspiration may come from far as well as from near; sometimes, especially, in the formulation of a new problem, the distant past is actually closer than yesterday, as Roman art was closer than Gothic to the early Renaissance or primitive sculpture closer than Impressionism to some painters of the early 1900's.

In visualizing a style process, then, we must keep in mind that the individual innovations which give it pattern may be motivated as easily from outside as from within the style itself. Since the artist may experience and put to use in making a work of art anything in his environment, the historian must reconstruct as much of that environment as possible. Each work of art can be considered a repository of experiences entering from every direction in the artist's surroundings. That it owes a special debt to great predecessors in the same tradition, to the artist's teachers and colleagues, is no more than a plausible hypothesis; the role of these likely contributors must be weighed against that of all the works of art and other possible visual and non-visual stimuli available to the artist.

This contextual approach—establishing

an open, as opposed to a closed system—has been used by the best modern historians and need not be described in detail, but the absence of it in a majority of studies, particularly those devoted to the work of individual artists, causes the assumption of an internal "evolution" from one work to the next to gain precedence over a deep analysis of the genesis of each work in succession.

#### IV

My primary aim is to explain change in style as the manifestation rather of the imagination of individual artists than of historical forces that guide the actions of men and nations. But if we attributed every aspect of change to the operation of individual free will, we should not be able to explain the crucial phenomenon that originally encouraged deterministic and evolutionary theories: that sequences in quite different cultures may reveal similar patterns of change. In Greek, Gothic, and Renaissance art there appears to be a phase of equilibrium (usually described as "classic") preceded by a more formalized, and followed by a freer phase. The fact that this pattern cannot be found in every sequence (e.g., Roman, Carolingian, nineteenth-century art) does not lessen our responsibility to explain it where it can be found, if it really is, as I believe, justified by the evidence of the monuments themselves. The problem is to discover an explanation of recurrent patterns that avoids on the one hand the tyranny of external historical forces or laws, and on the other hand the anarchy of mere chance.

Perhaps the clearest instance of a recurrent pattern in art is in the development of techniques from a stage of crudity and exploration to a stage of refinement. Sculptors, for example, may learn to carve with greater finesse or to cast more and more complex forms up to a point at which they attain—within the requirements of their style—a maximal potential for their body, tools, and materials. But technique does not always behave in this way; desire for progress in finesse occurs with variable intensity and even may be absent. Nor is it

always possible, for some problems are solved at the start of a sequence, as when the Van Eycks, the first great painters to adopt oil glazes, achieved in their earliest surviving pictures a technical perfection that was never surpassed and rarely equalled.

There is no predetermined law of technical progress any more than there is a law of stylistic evolution. Even where we find techniques systematically refined to a point at which they reach their maximal potential, the succeeding steps cannot be predicted; at that point, artists may abandon the benefits of finesse (Manet as against the *Salon* painters); maintain the level achieved (Renaissance sculpture after Donatello); or be unable to prevent a decline (mosaics and stained glass after 1300).

But while technique need not progress in refinement, it often does, and where technical problems are similar in different styles, the pattern of the progress is similar. Figural stone sculpture in the round is found in many diverse cultures; the typical pattern of change begins with stiff, frontal, and blocky figures and passes on to more mobile and rounded ones. One reason for this is that the technique of carving stone with a metal instrument does not change fundamentally; in any epoch the beginner has difficulty in turning a block into a human figure without retaining a blocklike character. The stone and the chisel impose their own laws which the artist must obey, and this is true at the most refined as well as at the most primitive level; there is a limit to freedom, to the length an unsupported arm can be extended without breaking, to the amount that can be cut from the lower position of the block without weakening the superstructure. This—together with the classical heritage—explains certain similarities between highly developed techniques in different eras (the figure in Hellenistic sculpture, Bernini, Canova).

We find another example of the pressures exerted on the artist by technique in the development of skeletal structure in Gothic architecture. The invention of the rib vault and the flying buttress made it possible to lighten vaults and walls, which had

been uniformly massive in Romanesque building, by concentrating stresses in chosen points. The lightening process was barely noticeable in the first experiments with bulky members, but once conceived, it was continued to the limit of the structural strength of stone (and even beyond, as demonstrated by the collapse of the choir of Beauvais cathedral). A similar development of skeletal structures occurred with the introduction of the steel frame in the last century, in that it encouraged a systematic development away from massiveness and a metamorphosis of the masonry wall into glass, as in Gothic architecture.

In discussing figural sculpture and skeletal structure I have implied that there is something about the posing of the technical problem that suggests the direction in which a succession of solutions is likely to move. But what that something is cannot be explained in terms of technique alone; it is also a matter of formal and symbolic aims. What impels an artist along the path toward finesse is not so much a love of skill for its own sake as the conception of forms that are beyond the reach of existing skills. In figural sculpture this conception often has something to do with imitation; the style is drawn from its blocky beginnings to freer and more rounded forms because the human body is freer and more rounded than a block. So long as each artist in turn is intrigued by the problem of mimesis the process is likely to continue along the scale from the blocky to the illusionistic. The aims seldom are so simple; in one sense archaic Greek figural sculptors followed such a path, but at the same time they became increasingly intrigued by a sophisticated linear refinement which was non-illusionistic; sculptures of the early fifth century had to reject that refinement vigorously in order to resume the mimetic process; but they in turn were drawn to idealization and generalization as well as to imitation of the human body.

The appeal of illusion best illustrates how the acceptance of a problem directs the artist, for he continually may adjust his art to conform to his perceptions of the world about him. The notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci are evidence of just this



process of adjustment; nature is taken to be an objective goal toward which art can and should strive, and minute observations of it are systematically translated into the terms of painting. But the example of Gothic architecture proves how problems which cannot be solved by models in nature may still guide the process of solutions. The development of the skeletal structure was motivated, among other things, by a continuing desire to get more light. So long as this desire prevailed, the revision of forms was bound to be in the direction of substituting glass for stone—first, by concentrating stresses in the skeleton, and second by reducing the mass of the skeleton itself.

These observations do not modify my earlier strictures against predetermined patterns. The artist involved in such a process need not be striving toward a distant and unobtainable goal; he merely may be refining the solution of his predecessor. So the Gothic architect might say: "At Soissons they managed to get more glass and thinner piers than at Paris but I shall do still better." He did not have the "classic" solution of Amiens in mind. The same psychology would apply even in cases where it might be said that there is only one correct solution, for example, the geometrical projection of a three-dimensional figure onto a two-dimensional plane in Renaissance painting.

One plausible explanation, then, for patterns of change in style is that where a certain problem posed at the start of a style continues to challenge artists over an extended span of time, and only where it suggests one type of solution rather than another, the process will show progressive refinement toward the preferred type of solution. When similar patterns are exhibited in different cultures, it is likely that the preferred type of solution is in some way similar. Refinement of this kind is neither inevitable nor necessarily desirable. The stability of Egyptian art is due to the fact that the solutions arrived at an early stage were considered optimal for centuries; by contrast, Roman and nineteenth-century art tended to shift often from one problem to another. In short, the psychology of ar-

tistic production admits but does not demand systematic and recurrent patterns of change in style.

## v

On what grounds may we establish the limits or extent of a style, and differentiate it from other styles? Sometimes the question is partially answered by social-historical phenomena, as in epochs when a new style is started abruptly to satisfy a new need (early Christian architecture) or terminated by disaster or acculturation (Aztec, Northwest Indian art); or when it is co-extensive with a closed political or geographical unit (ancient Egypt). Most of Western art, however, from Greek antiquity to the present day is a great mega-style within which we attempt to find plausible subdivisions that help to clarify the historical process.

Style is not the only framework within which historical process can be studied in the arts. Classes of works exemplifying a particular technique or a formal or symbolic convention reveal processes which may span several styles (e.g., the history of the dome, of perspective, of landscape painting, of the iconography of the Immaculate Conception). Another kind of framework is formed by the entire body of work produced within an arbitrarily chosen span of time such as a decade, a century, or a political reign. But limits of this kind, which presume some special significance to mere contemporaneity, are less likely to prompt fresh perceptions than those suggested by criteria of style deduced from works of art themselves. The framework most highly favored by students of Renaissance and Modern art—the oeuvre of a single artist—is subject to similar deficiencies. It has the apparent advantage that its limits are inexorably fixed by mortality, and that it normally is coextensive with a consistent personal style that behaves as a minuscule echo of larger styles. But the presumption of consistency in human beings is unwarranted; the life span of an individual can be as insensitive a measure of style as any arbitrarily chosen segment of time. One artist or the artists of a

century may adhere to a single style or shift from one style to another, and in our time such shifts are more the rule than the exception.

We distinguish one style from another by noting differences in the use of conventions, materials, and techniques. We do this by referring to an image of the norms of a style as a whole—style in the stable sense; but the image does not help to determine chronological or geographical limits. We can define easily generic differences between a Gothic and a Renaissance statue without being able to specify the first works of Renaissance sculpture.

This is because the creative process involved in contributing to the formation of a new style is not of a different order from other creative acts. Both radical and conservative artists choose what they want to retain and what they want to reject from their tradition and contribute something of their own. When the balance favors retention, styles survive; when it favors rejection, they dissipate—though they may flourish, particularly in the provinces, long after desertion by the adherents of a new current. Since the extinction of one style is neither the prerequisite for nor, necessarily, the result of the initiation of another, old and new styles may exist side-by-side and mutually influence one another; and several new ones may coexist even in the same locale: in Paris of the early twentieth century: Cubism, the Fauves, Futurism, etc.

A style, then, may be thought of as a class of related solutions to a problem—or responses to a challenge—that may be said to begin whenever artists begin to pursue a problem or react to a challenge which differs significantly from those posed by the prevailing style or styles. It is easy to detect a “significant” difference when artists vigorously reject major features of a traditional style and consciously aim to eliminate them from their work (Carolingian and Renaissance architecture, most early twentieth-century movements); but the distinction is quite unclear when the inventions of an artist who thinks of himself as a faithful bearer of tradition become the nucleus of a wholly new style, and one style

flows into another without perceptible deflections. I think of Giotto and Duccio in this category; they represent the flowering of the late Middle Ages and/or the origins of the Renaissance, according to the historian’s needs—to his definition of what is significant.

If we accept, then, a theory of confluent, overlapping, and interacting styles in place of a cyclical-evolutionary one, the problem of fixing limits becomes much less urgent. The cycles of traditional art history must have beginnings and ends and new cycles need to be started by somebody; but the limits of confluent styles such as Gothic-Renaissance or Renaissance-Baroque can be fixed wherever the problem at hand requires, since they admittedly have no objective reality.

So long as it matters a great deal when and by whom a new style is initiated, it is difficult to distinguish the innovator from the genius, for the premium tends to be placed rather on novelty than on quality. While the two are not necessarily antithetical, a theory that exaggerates the importance of the initiation of styles cannot admit a dispassionate examination of the relationship of novelty to quality. The great artist is often an innovator, but his genius does not consist so much in the innovations themselves as in his ability to make them expressive and forceful. Innovations can be made by anyone, and often minor artists have conceived novelties that gained significance and force only in the hands of their betters. It is useful to designate as the start of a style the work of a great master, but often he is only one, and not always the first, to employ the new elements that characterize the style. But by the power of his art he frames the innovations into problems or challenges that continue to absorb his successors for generations. These successors are expressing their respect, not for the novelty but for the quality and authority of certain works of art. Being artists and not chroniclers, they tend to be indifferent to the question of whether those works were the first of their kind.

By taking a neutral position with respect to innovation, we awaken our perceptions to the realm of qualities that distinguished

artists evoke from traditional elements in their art. Equally important is the evaluation of "minor" and "unsuccessful" styles, which are forced into the background by cyclical or dialectic theories which allow only one "major development" at one time. Because Leonardo and Raphael were so effective around 1505, the powerful and original art of Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo at the same period has been relegated to obscurity. It is revealing that this art, at the close of the Florentine early Renaissance, should have suffered more from our historical biases than other comparable terminal expressions—the late Michelangelo, El Greco, Vermeer, Turner. I believe that this is because this second group, which produced little following in their time (younger artists could not emulate or understand their achievement), was "successful" in modern times once our own art had trained us to appreciate it. A theory that properly accredits the so-called "minor" and terminal expressions by accentuating the complexity of the context of any work of art should promote a subtler and more penetrating criticism.

If our image of a style is formed about a succession of works that develop the potential of a given problem, then styles of a relatively modest extension make the most rewarding frame for study. Grand, epochal frames such as Renaissance and Baroque are too large to help in making critical distinctions; we cannot agree on defining their problem. Renaissance scholars generally recognize this difficulty, but the monolithic image of the Baroque still causes works of radically opposed styles (Bernini and de Hooch!) to be forced into a single category. At the opposite extreme, the channel of works by a single artist may be too constricted, for reasons which I have already stated.

The subdivision of large epochs into lesser spans (Early and High Renaissance, Mannerism) is a compromise—partly a

hangover of the old biological metaphor—which confuses criteria of style (Mannerism is a style-term) with vague chronological spans ("early Renaissance" means about 1400–1500 in Italy and something else in other countries). Categories that are created for the purpose of making distinctions of style should be built logically on criteria of style. Furthermore, since the selection of a style as the object of study inevitably involves a presumption of cohesiveness, it should follow and not precede the hypothesis that a certain group of works is closely integrated and clearly distinguished from other groups. If we assume the existence of a style at the start (a danger with pat concepts such as "Classic" and "Romantic" periods, etc.), we shall delude ourselves into crowding into it what does not belong.

In this essay I have tried to define principles based as far as possible on the examination of the creative process, so that the individual work of art, and not the force of some vague destiny, might be seen as the prime mover of the historical process revealed by style. So I have interpreted the concept of a style and of its limits as a generalization which we form, by comparing individual works, into shapes that are convenient for historical and critical purposes. I hope that my image of confluent and concurrent styles, by avoiding the implication of a predetermined evolution and hierarchy of values, may admit a method which is sensitive to the actual causes and effects of works of art and that it may encourage the interpretation of any creative act in terms of the total context in which it was performed.

<sup>1</sup> See Meyer Schapiro's classic survey and critique of style theory in *Anthropology Today* (Chicago, 1953), pp. 287–312. My earlier statement on the subject (in *The Visual Arts Today* [Middletown, 1960]) has been criticized by Thomas Munro in the *JAAC* XIX (1961), 414 f.