

Style

From "Critical Terms for Art History"



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To the historian of art, style is an essential object of investigation.

—Meyer Shapiro, "Style"

Style is an indispensable historical tool; it is more essential to the history of art than to any other historical discipline.

—James S. Ackerman, "Style"

Today the sentiment expressed in my epigraphs is almost unthinkable—although as recently as 1990 Whitney Davis considered that "most working art historians probably still" believed it (Davis 1990, 18). For nearly the whole of the twentieth century, style art history has been the indisputable king of the discipline, but since the revolution of the seventies and eighties the king has been dead. The point is proved by the first edition of this very book (1996), whose carefully selected critical terms in the history of art excluded not only "style" but also its key cognates—"form," "connoisseurship," even that interesting and frequent entailment of stylistic art-historical analysis, "the artist." And yet, to change my (male) metaphor from monarchy to paternity, the father has been impossible to lay entirely to rest. It is not just that the moment an academic discipline enters a paradigm shift we begin to experience a certain nostalgia for things as they used to be. It is also that the new art history—so much more methodologically and theoretically grounded, so much more historicist and contextually subtle, so much more politically nuanced and socially explicit—seems to lack the empathetic, almost tactile, closeness to objects that is the special quality of style art history at its best. Moreover, most of those whose insights guide the field in its new guise were trained and are expert in its old ways: hidden in (post)semiotics the stylistic reflex may still lie. Dead though the father may be, we cannot be entirely sure how much his children are fashioned in his likeness.

So what do we mean by "style art history," and how does it remain both evident and relevant? Let me begin with a picture (as all good formal analysis should) and with some old art historians from a long way back.

Plate 7.1 is a detail from the Arch of Constantine, a monument set up near the Colosseum on the edge of the Forum in the city of Rome and dedicated in **a.d.** 315. The makers built the arch and decorated it with a selection of marble relief sculptures, some specially commissioned at the time and some culled from earlier monuments (which perhaps had fallen into disrepair or may even have been dismantled for the purpose) and reused. None of this need be particularly surprising in the context of late antique Rome, except that the juxtaposition of objects from different periods (roughly two centuries separates the oldest sculptures on the arch from the latest ones) was to cause significant concern to some of the most influential founding fathers of art history.

In **Plate 7.1**, two medallions dating from the reign of Hadrian (**a.d.** 117–38) are juxtaposed above a frieze from the time of Constantine, executed in about **a.d.** 315. The Hadrianic scenes, showing the emperor and his party standing over a lion slain during the chase (left) and the emperor conducting sacrifice to Hercules (right), are elegant examples of classicizing naturalism, obeying the rules of perspective and fashioned in deep-cut relief with the chisel. One can imagine these scenes taking place in the "real world." The Constantinian frieze, which shows the emperor offering largesse to the populace of Rome, is radically

different in style. The imperial figure (whose head has been lost in the vicissitudes of time) is central, frontal, surrounded by a symmetrical arrangement of acolytes and larger than the other figures. The people around him are arranged schematically, virtually stacked in the central section, and without any of the illusionistic overlappings of the Hadrianic figures (or of “real life”). The proportions of the figures, their draperies, their stances and postures are all rendered as if they were signs rather than naturalistic imitations of real people. If one compares the draperies of the Constantinian sculptures with those of the Hadrianic roundels, the latter fall naturalistically imitating real clothing in stone, while the former—cut with a running drill rather than a chisel—simply indicate the mark of clothing rather than attempting to imitate any actual form of dress.

In about 1519, Raphael, in his official role as the papal agent responsible for antiquities, wrote a famous report to Pope Leo X, in which he said:

Although literature, sculpture, painting, and almost all the other arts had long been declining and had grown worse and worse until the time of the last emperors, yet architecture was still studied and practiced according to the good rules and buildings were erected in the same style as before. . . . Of this there are many evidences: among others the Arch of Constantine, which is well designed and well built as far as architecture is concerned. But the sculptures of the same arch are very feeble and destitute of all art and good design. Those, however, that come from the spoils of Trajan and

Reliefs from the Arch of Constantine, Rome, Italy. Photo courtesy Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

Antoninus Pius are extremely fine and done in perfect style.

(Goldwater and Treves 1945, 74–75)

Half a century later this same line was picked up by Giorgio Vasari for the preface to his 1568 edition of the **Lives**, the masterpiece that inaugurated art history as a modern discipline. Vasari wrote:

For lack of good masters not only did they make use of marble reliefs carved in the time of Trajan, but also of spoils brought to Rome from various places. Those who recognize the excellence of these bas-reliefs, statues, the columns, cornices and other ornaments which belong to another epoch will perceive how rude are the proportions done to fill up gaps by the sculptors of the day. Very rude too are some scenes of small figures in marble below the reliefs

and the pediment, representing victories, while between the side arches there are some rivers, also very crude and so poor that they leave one firmly under the impression that the art of sculpture had begun to decline even before the coming of the Goths.

(Vasari 1963, 7)

While some of the “facts” reported by Raphael and Vasari are no longer considered correct (the **spolia** are now believed to come from works commemorating Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius, not Antoninus Pius, and are probably all from Rome itself), the facts are not crucial to the methodological strategy that these descriptions display. Both accounts choose to describe the arch by virtue of the stylistic bricolage of its sculpture, and both use that stylistic analysis to create a historical picture of decline. Here style is brilliantly summoned into art history to make a polemical point. The argumentative method employed is one of stylistic disjunction or difference (between the “good” second-century reliefs and the “bad” fourth-century ones). But this process of rhetorical contrast itself rests on stylistic art history’s characteristic strategy of comparing like with like. Although this step is only implicit in the narratives that have come down to us from Raphael and Vasari, the arch’s groups of stylistically similar sculptures (which come in two broad categories of all the second-century panels and all the fourth-century ones) have already been collected together through their stylistic likeness in order to be radically separated from the stylistically dissimilar sculptures on the same monument. The key reflex of style art history in grouping sets of objects by close visual analysis and defining their difference from other objects was already firmly in place by the sixteenth century.

Moreover, the power of these early accounts lies in their attribution of good and bad to the different styles and hence in their assimilation of what is apparently neutral objective description to a heavily rhetorical moralizing discourse. The final leap from this kind of formal description into art **history** lies in the use of historical extrapolation from stylistic observations. By defining his visual contrast through different periods, Raphael sketches a picture of chronological development that he rhetorically defines with hardly neutral terms like “declining” and “feeble.” Vasari accepts this general story, but extends its historicity to deduce a “lack of good masters” in work he calls “rude,” “crude,” and “poor.” This trope dominated discussions of this particular monument through to and including that of Bernard Berenson, who not only insisted on decline (Berenson 1954, 3; and note the subtitle of his book: ‘The Decline of Form’) but was able to push the analytic process of discovering artists to the point where he could assert that all the good sculptors had deserted Rome in the years **a.d.** 312–15 (34–35) except one (“perhaps a court artist accompanying the High Mightinesses”) who carved the fourth-century imperial portraits on the arch and was a genius (56–59). Any other possibilities (historical, political, aesthetic, social) that the arch’s sculptural bricolage might potentially suggest were rigorously excluded in this discourse and remained so until very recently. By the time Edward Gibbon had incorporated the arch into **The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire** (1776–88) as “a melancholy proof of the decline of the arts and a singular testimony of the meanest vanity” (Gibbon 1946, 331), the arch’s stylistic features—and hence the stylistic analysis of objects by art historians in general—had come to do genuine **historical** work within history proper.

Despite its dominance in the stylistic story arising from the study of the Arch of Constantine, the narrative of decline was not the only possible account. In 1901, Alois Riegl, arguably the most creative of all the great German-speaking “style art historians,” mounted an argument against decline by arguing that the fourth-century reliefs on the arch reflected a new kind of artistic perception with new ideas of space, symmetry, and coloristic intention that were to be the antecedent of the art of the Middle Ages (Riegl 1985, 52–57, 76–78). For our purposes, what matters is the entirely stylistic and formal nature of Riegl’s descriptive analysis (esp. 52–54) coupled with the fact that he was able to tell an entirely different story. From the stylistic reflex in front of the object (which he shared with Vasari and Berenson), Riegl’s account led not toward artists and decline but rather toward profound cultural and historical changes in perception that he took to be embodied in the stylistic disposition of objects.

The basic stylistic reflex, then, is the grouping of like with like and the disjunction of unlikes, on the basis of morphological or formal analysis (which may amount to the swift taxonomic action of an expert eye, passing over the material and registering its relationships with a body of other material stored in the mind). There are plenty of similarities among objects that may or may not need to be excluded (weight, color, kind of stone, and so forth, depending on the particular comparison in hand), and the decision of **relevance** as to what one

must take account of is one of the great critical judgments inherent in the function of the art-historical eye. For all the jargon of objectivity, stylistic analysis is subjective and judgmental (and rightly so)—which does not mean it cannot be persuasive. This subjectivism is perhaps what Shapiro (1994, 53) is alluding to when he comments, apologetically, that “styles are not usually defined in a strictly logical way . . . and resist systematic classification into perfectly distinct groups” (cf. Gombrich 1968, 357). But the process of stylistic grouping by formal characteristics is merely a first step: the key visual reflex. What is far more ideologically loaded and potentially problematic is the direction one takes with the data and the (art) historical extrapolations made. Vasari, Raphael, Gibbon, and Berenson told a story of development as decline, with Vasari and Berenson adding a narrative of incompetent artists. Riegl, by contrast, created a tale of cultural change that explicitly rejected the concept of decline but instead talked of a “necessary transition made by the human mind” (Riegl 1985, 232). The move from objects to the history we may deduce (or assume or fantasize) from them is of course the principal claim for stylistic analysis to benefit art **history** (as opposed to criticism). It allows us to take the minute analysis of a limited set of objects on the small scale (something professionally manageable) and project from it a set of very much grander inductions on the large panorama of historical change itself (something wonderfully ambitious but always speculative, to be sure). The defense against overambitious speculation lies apparently in the sharp detail of good stylistic description, but of course no amount of brilliant analytical insight on the level of comparing a finite sample of objects can be a sufficient methodological justification for a grand generalization away from precise analysis to history.

As a subset of the impulse to history, the move that takes us from the object to the artist is one of the discipline's most frequent stylistic gestures. From the grouping of objects may be generated individual makers and whole schools or workshops, as in Sir John Beazley's spectacular connoisseurship of ancient Greek pots (Whitley 1997; Neer 1997) or Giovanni Morelli's and Bernard Berenson's brilliant and sometimes flawed attributions of paintings (on the method, see, for example, Wollheim 1974, 177–201; Wind 1985, 30–46). Fundamental here is the assumption, famously expressed by the Comte de Buffon in the eighteenth century, that “style is the man” (a maxim repeated by Beazley [see Neer 1997, 24] and discussed by Wittgenstein [see Wiesing 1995, 114–18]). The notion of personal style—that individuality can be uniquely expressed not only in the ways an artist draws but also in the stylistic quirks of an author's writing (for instance)—is perhaps an axiom of Western notions of identity. Axioms of this sort are, of course, unprovable assumptions whose usefulness rests on where they take us rather than on how true they are. But this one has the good fortune to lead us (if we believe the maxim and trust the method) to real artists (virtually psychological personalities) revealed behind a correctly assembled collection of images (Wollheim 1979, 1995).

Yet equally the grouping reflex may be taken to lead not to people but to places, defining objects by provenance and implicitly labeling their artists according to ethnicity and race. In the case of the earliest surviving Christian icons, discovered by the academic community in the 1950s, this is precisely the way the scholarship went. The panels, dating roughly from the sixth and seventh centuries, were attributed to Constantinople or Alexandria or Rome, according to the instinct of the art historians concerned and depending on what kinds of comparanda they chose to adduce. More worryingly, the racist German art history of the prewar years used style to determine ethnic origin in an overtly ideological program of reshaping the canon according to Aryan and Nordic principles. It attributed the demise of Classical art forms in late antiquity, for example, to the dread, indeed specifically the Semitic, influence of the Orient (racial spin that could never have been predicted from the initial outline of late antique “decline” in Raphael and Vasari), when “Hellas was suffocated in the embrace of the Orient” (Strzygowski 1905, 23).

These moves from the initial process of comparison and contrast of stylistic details entail more than the simple induction of artists or provenances. They generate further data by offering implicitly a narrative of place (where the artists came from, where the objects were created) and of historical process (whether evolution, development, or decline). In the case of large numbers of objects, like Greek painted pots or the carved capitals of Romanesque columns, the reflex to group stylistically (and to generate artists from these groups) may allow the creation of a chronology based on likeness and influence. In traditional art history the issue of chronologically and contextually related styles (“Romanesque,” “Gothic,” and so forth in western European art) has given rise to the notion of period or general styles in addition to the individual styles of artists. This distinction, and the development of an increasingly subtle analysis of period style, was one of

the monumental contributions of the art-historical tradition of Heinrich Wölfflin's **Principles of Art History** first published in 1915 (see Wölfflin 1950, 1–17; for an example of this tradition, see Panofsky 1995; for a cogent critique of “general style,” see Wollheim 1995, 46–48). It underwrites not only much contemporary practice in matters of dating and attribution, but also provides a classificatory nomenclature (paradigmatically “classical,” “mannerist,” “baroque,” “rococo”) that has come to define the categories not only of post-Renaissance but also of Greco-Roman art as we habitually refer to them today. Without these names (and therefore the residual stylistic analysis that gave rise to them) we would have no easy or shorthand way of dealing with our material in these fields.

That an object may be like another may give rise to the subtle inference that it was influenced by it (or did the influencing)—creating (in contexts where we have no other data) a time line by which to plot our works of art diachronically. This is precisely how the invention of the Four Styles of Pompeian wall painting developed—not in the direction of identifying painters’ hands (but see Richardson 2000) but rather to define ever more precise chronologies and hence to date the buildings in which the frescoes were disinterred (Mau 1882; Ling 1991). While “influence”—another word deeply embedded in the canon of stylistic analysis—is a term studiously avoided by the first edition of this book, it is replaced there by “appropriation.” Here we have a good example of the way style art history lingers in the discipline even when we may believe the father to be long buried. “Appropriation” has very different implications from “influence,” especially in its reversal of the dynamics and motivations of imitation (allowing the makers of a later work to choose creatively rather than copy slavishly), but—in many cases—the connections between related works of different dates will be stylistic and formal (or, to put the same thing in a different way, are best described in these terms).

All these entailments from stylistic observation are essentially ekphrastic. That is, they build a **descriptive** (and usually historical) narrative based on an apparently simple method and assumptions, so simple and transparent as to be common sense. As we have seen in the case of the Arch of Constantine, such narratives may be radically different, despite sharing a similar stylistic method for accumulating the data judged to be relevant. Of course, as we have seen, that method—which may appear so natural, so unjudgmental in its initial application—is itself **descriptive**. It is determined by a linguistic translation of the seen (the objects observed) to the level of a formal literary discourse (the objects analyzed), which amounts to a taxonomic classification, an act of labeling. On the basis of the stylistic label, a whole art-historical world becomes possible: dates, places, artists, and hence patrons, contexts, influences, the mental constructs of a culture. I call this kind of story “ekphrasis” (the rhetorical description of works of art) because we tend to objectify “history” as a kind of truth and to imagine that the results of a stylistic inquiry (otherwise known as “art history”) consequently have the status of hypotheses approximating to truth, unless they can be disproved (Van Eck, McAllister, and Van de Vall 1995, 6–7). But in fact, what stylistic analysis (perhaps all art history and perhaps all history proper) has to offer are descriptions constructed according to certain rhetorical and disciplinary conventions that answer to particular and usually canonical kinds of questions, themselves constrained by the specific axiomatic patterns underlying the methods used for generating the data. I am not convinced, despite the killing of the monarch, that the revolution has engineered a radical change in the ways we gather that data.

For, most fundamentally, style art history is the product of empiricism. That is, when one chooses to look empirically (and with an open mind) at the existing material in any branch of art, it is necessary to find a method to make sense of the data. Stylistic analysis—so close (worryingly so perhaps) to the initial viewing of the objects—has long been the favored reflex “to sort out the stuff.” It is, in this sense, pretheoretical, and it may appear instinctive (as we imply when we say that this or that person “has an eye”). As long as empiricism—the attempt to reach out to and to know a corpus of objects—is with us, the stylistic reflex will underlie our ways of viewing, however careful we may be about the narratives we tell. I am not arguing here against the value or inevitability of empiricism, style art history, or the kinds of stories that we tell. But it is important to recognize that none of these fundamental building blocks of the discipline are natural, neutral, transparent, or true. They entail a particular and, in the context of art history as it exists today, an inevitable process of translation by which we understand (in a particular way) what it is we have been looking at. The trouble is that this understanding is not “pure” or “true,” it is the result of conventions long learnt and made second nature (Maginnis 1990, esp. 114–16) and needs to be regarded with a certain skepticism even when argued for most passionately.

Underlying all these moves—including the empirical method, the formal analysis of like and unlike, the narratives to which this process gives rise—is a fundamental idealism. The key assumption is that what matters about a work of art and what stylistic analysis may reveal is its origin and its moment of creation. Style rarely has any truck with the afterlife of objects, their messy history in the real world as they are bashed about, adapted, reused, and altered. The stylistic ethos affirms an almost romantic idealism about the pristine and creative beginnings of the work of art. The stylistic eye effectively turns away from most works of art as they actually are to a mythical and idealizing vision of how they once were. When the morphology of objects has revealed a grouping, this takes us not to reception, for instance, but to an initial creation, whether cast in the guise of the artist or the originating location or the date of making. Perhaps it is because art itself has for so long occupied a special status in modern Western society as a product of genius, whose value is incomparably greater than that of the raw materials that went into its production, that art history as a discipline remains so intimately, even lovingly, linked with idealism.

I have been arguing that style is effectively a matter of art-historical discourse—an element (explicit or suppressed but nonetheless always present) within the art historian's armory of analysis. As a discursive item, the result of a process of expert naming, style is a rhetorical tool whereby the visual practices of periods of the past or the different works of particular individuals (unconsciously similar through their shared stylistic quirks) may be defined. Style as an academic rhetoric makes this unselfconsciousness of past practice into an explicit category and hence a substantive item capable of critical discussion. What is interesting here is that the art-historical concept was born, as we have seen, from a vocabulary generated by Renaissance artists (rather than scholars), in that Raphael and Vasari were primarily artists rather than (or at least as much as) they were art historians. Their interest lay in defining good and bad practice in relation to canons of contemporary production (hence the significance of style to the thematics of “decline”).

Interestingly, within artistic practice (as opposed to art criticism or art history writing) the rise of a consciousness of style in the Renaissance among artists and patrons meant that Renaissance and post-Renaissance artists would never be entirely innocent or unselfconscious about the stylistic choices they made (and still make) in the production of images. Just as the “copying” of canonical works within Greco-Roman antiquity implied a self-conscious set of aesthetic choices—an option of and among styles (see, e.g., Zanker 1988, 239–64; Marvin 1997), so post-Renaissance art in its very construction of, and creative play with, a canon offers the possibility for artistic self-definition through different styles. The issue here becomes one of “stylishness” or “stylization” in such movements as mannerism or art nouveau or surrealism (Sontag 1982, 140–41). In medieval or archaic art the presence of “style” (whether “period style” or “personal style”) is largely unselfconscious; the style is made explicit through art-historical analysis and hence made conscious to the modern consumer (whether purchaser, exhibitor, or viewer) through catalogues and labels. By contrast, post-Renaissance and especially modern art practice (and here I include all visual media such as film and advertising) is wholly self-conscious and deliberate about its artistic evocations. Moreover, modern consumers of visual culture are equally attuned to the significance of different stylistic messages for issues of self-definition and identity in what is effectively a “style market” in the “life-style” culture of consumer capitalism (Ewen 1988, 14–23). One thinks not only of the adoption of “styles” with grand art-historical pedigrees (such as “classicism,” “realism,” and the like) and of their inversion (in “abstraction,” for instance, or “punk”) but also of their ironic handling (for example in “camp” style) as well as self-conscious period evocations (“thirties style,” “sixties style,” and so forth) and, in the extraordinary cacophony of images that characterizes today's style culture, of the ability to borrow, juxtapose, and hijack multicultural stylistic idioms at will. If we need a paradigmatic artist in the modern era as the supremely self-conscious poseur in any style you like, it is surely Picasso, whose moves from postimpressionism to cubism to classicism opened a remarkable pick-and-mix set of possibilities in what rapidly became established as the pinnacle of modernism.

The awareness of style, then, is a linguistic or descriptive (hence a rhetorical or ekphrastic) response to objects, exactly on a par with the way fashion writing is a different semiotic system from fashion photography despite the fact that both relate to the same referent—the actual objects of fashion themselves (Barthes 1983, 3–18). Indeed, it is not for nothing that the etymological roots of the word “style” reach back to ancient rhetorical theory and particularly to the word “stilus,” meaning “pen” (Sauerländer 1983, 254–55; Gombrich 1968, 354, 359). But once that response of naming has been made, it feeds back immediately into the

making of new objects and the ways they are seen (whether we talk of the Versace spring collection or the careful referencing to the Great Tradition in an artist like Picasso or for that matter to the evocation of previous films in modern filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino or Woody Allen). “Style”—and its various cognates including “stylization,” “stylishness,” and especially “form”—have the advantage of apparently not being concerned with the content or subject of a work of art (Sontag 1982, 137–38, 141–42). That is a matter of “iconography” or “iconology.” This distinction between form and content is not, of course, true in any actual example; but it has proved rhetorically extremely useful. For it allows the art historian to claim a kind of objectivity (or at least disinterestedness) in being concerned only with the “how” of the way art is done and not the “what” or the “how good.” Likewise, it allows the artist, in adopting a pose in some other artist's clothes, to shift a certain amount of responsibility for the work onto the models appropriated. Hence, for instance, the pornographic photographs in Madonna's book **Sex** (1992) shelter behind the fig leaf (if I may use this term in this context) of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Koons, which she imitates and parodies (Lloyd 1993, 46, 64, 107). Anything may be justified by its reference to an authoritative tradition. And yet that very act of referencing is a form of undermining or at least commenting ironically on the tradition. In art practice, stylization “reflects a certain ambivalence (affection contradicted by contempt, obsession contradicted by irony) toward the subject matter” (Sontag 1982, 142; cf. 105–19). Again, in the mass adoption of different styles (of dress, say) as affirmations of varied levels of identity within the fabric of modern social, political, and economic life, the assertion of a particular style on a particular day always carries with it the potential “let out” of being but a surface impression, not necessarily a real, concrete or ultimate definition of oneself as one really or ideally is (Ewen 1988, 22–23, 106–8).

I have been conscious in writing this essay of the constant danger of slipping into a historiography of style within art history (a good subject this, but not for this book!). Yet that danger also reveals one of the fundamental values of “style” for today's history of art. As culture becomes increasingly postmodern and multicultural, we risk losing the sense of a history to the things we do, the ways we do them, the objects we appreciate. Style, with its very particular and profound past as one of the key formulating concepts of the discipline, was once the Master, was then reviled, may perhaps now perform less of a straw man's role in being largely forgotten. Yet style remains a crucial reminder of our discipline's depths—the follies, the idealisms aspired to and unachieved, the rigor of an unsurpassed formal analysis supported by a compendious firsthand visual knowledge. This is the lineage of the discipline we practice. If we abandon it entirely, we do so at our peril.

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