

Style

Style is any distinctive, and therefore recognizable, way in which an act is performed or an artifact made or ought to be performed and made. The wide range of applications implied in this definition is reflected in the variety of usages of the word in current English. (Definitions and illustrations in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* take up almost three columns.) They may be conveniently grouped into descriptive and normative usages. Descriptions may classify the various ways of doing or making, according to the groups or countries or periods where these were or are habitual—for example, the gypsy style of music, the French style of cookery, or the eighteenth-century style of dress; it may take its name from a particular person, as in ‘Ciceronian style,’ or even denote one individual’s manner of doing something (‘This is not my style.’). In a similar way institutions or firms may have a distinctive way of procedure or production, publishers have a ‘house style’ and provide authors with a ‘style sheet’ indicating how to quote titles of books, etc.

Often styles are described by some characteristic quality that is experienced as expressive of psychological states—a ‘passionate style,’ a ‘humorous style’; frequently, also, these characterizations shade over into intrasensory (synesthetic) descriptions, as in a ‘sparkling,’ a ‘drab,’ or a ‘smooth’ style of writing or playing. Equally often, the distinctive quality to be described is derived from a particular mode of performance or production and transferred to others of similar character, as in a ‘theatrical’ style of behavior, a ‘jazzy’ style of ornament, a ‘hieratic’ style of painting. Finally, there are the terms now reserved for categories of style, such as the ‘Romanesque’ or the ‘Baroque’ style, which have sometimes been extended in their application from the descriptions of architectural procedures to the manner of performance in other arts and beyond to all utterances of the societies concerned during the periods covered (Baroque music, Baroque philosophy, Baroque diplomacy, etc.).¹

As in most terms describing distinctions—including the very words ‘distinction’ and ‘distinguished’—the term ‘style’ stripped of any qualifying adjective can also be used in a normative sense, as a laudatory term denoting a desirable consistency and conspicuousness that makes a performance or artifact stand out from a mass of ‘undistinguished’ events or objects: ‘He received him in style,’ ‘This acrobat has style,’ ‘This building lacks style.’ Huckleberry Finn, describing a ‘monstrous raft that was as long going by as a procession’ remarked, ‘There was a power of style about her. It *amounts* to something being a raftsman on such a raft as that’ (Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, chapter 16). To the anthropologist, perhaps, every raft has a ‘style’ if he chooses to use this term for the way of producing any such craft habitual in any society. But to Mark Twain’s hero the term connotes a raft with a difference, one sufficiently elaborate to impress. This connotation is illustrated in Winston Churchill’s reply to a barber who had asked him what ‘style of haircut he desired’: ‘A man

of my limited resources cannot presume to have a hair *style*—get on and cut it’ (*News Chronicle*, London, December 19, 1958).

Intention and description. It might have saved critics and social scientists a good deal of trouble and confusion if Churchill’s distinction had been applied in the usage of the term—that is, if the word ‘style’ had been confined to cases where there is a choice between ways of performance or procedure. Historically, this is clear. Thus, the word ‘style’ was adopted for the alternative forms of dating in use during the period between the introduction and acceptance of the Gregorian calendar in England. When the ‘old style’ gradually fell out of use, nobody continued to speak of the ‘style’ of dating a letter.

But usage apart, the indiscriminate application of the word ‘style’ to any type of performance or production which the user, rather than the performer or producer, is able to distinguish has had grave methodological consequences. It may be argued (and will be argued in this article) that only against the background of alternative choices can the distinctive way also be seen as expressive. The girl who chooses a certain style of dress will in this very act express her intention of appearing in a certain character or social role at a given occasion. The board of directors that chooses a contemporary style for a new office building may equally be concerned with the firm’s image. The laborer who puts on his overalls or the builder who erects a bicycle shed is not aware of any act of choice, and although the outside observer may realize that there are alternative forms of working outfits or sheds, their characterization as ‘styles’ may invite psychological interpretations that can lead him astray. To quote the formulation of a linguist, ‘The pivot of the whole theory of expressiveness is the concept of *choice*. There can be no question of style unless the speaker or writer has the possibility of choosing between alternative forms of expression. Synonymy, in the widest sense of the term, lies at the root of the whole problem of style.’²

If the term ‘style’ is thus used descriptively for alternative ways of doing things, the term ‘fashion’ can be reserved for the fluctuating preferences which carry social prestige. A hostess may set the fashion in a smaller or wider section of the community for a given style of decoration or entertainment. Yet the two terms may overlap in their application. A fashionable preference can become so general and so lasting that it affects the style of a whole society. Moreover, since considerations of prestige sometimes carry with them the suspicion of insincerity and snobbery, the same movement may be described as a fashion by its critics and as a style by its well-wishers.

Etymology. The word ‘style’ derives from Latin *stilus*, the writing instrument of the Romans. It could be used to characterize an author’s manner of writing (Cicero, *Brutus*, 100), although the more frequent term for literary style was *genus dicendi*, ‘mode of speech.’³ The writings of Greek and Roman teachers of rhetoric still provide the most subtle analyses ever attempted of the various potentialities and categories of style. The effect of words depends on the right choice of the noble or humble term, with all the social and psychological connotations that go with these stratifications. Equal attention should be paid to the flavor of archaic or current usages.⁴ Either usage can be correct if the topic so demands it. This is the doctrine of *decorum*, of the appropriateness of style to the occasion. To use the grand manner for trivial subjects is as ridiculous as to use colloquialisms for solemn occasions (Cicero, *Orator*, 26). Oratory, in this view, is a skill that slowly developed until it could be used

with assurance to sway the jury. But corruption lurks close to perfection. An overdose of effects produces a hollow and affected style that lacks virility. Only a constant study of the greatest models of style (the 'classical' authors) will preserve the style pure.⁵

These doctrines, which also have an application to music, architecture, and the visual arts, form the foundation of critical theory up to the eighteenth century. In the Renaissance, Giorgio Vasari discussed the various manners of art and their progress toward perfection in normative terms. The word 'style' came only slowly into usage as applied to the visual arts, although instances multiply in the late sixteenth century and in the seventeenth century.⁶ It became established as a term of art history in the eighteenth century, largely through J. J. Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1764). His treatment of Greek style as an expression of the Greek way of life encouraged Herder and others to do the same for the medieval Gothic and, thus, paved the way for a history of art in terms of succeeding period styles. It is worth noting that the names for styles used in art history derive from normative contexts. They denote either the (desirable) dependence on a classical norm or the (condemned) deviations from it.⁷ Thus, 'Gothic' originated from the idea that it was the 'barbaric' style of the destroyers of the Roman Empire.⁸ 'Baroque' is a conflation of various words meaning 'bizarre' and 'absurd'.⁹ 'Rococo' was coined as a term of derision about 1797 by J. L. David's pupils for the meretricious taste of the age of Pompadour.¹⁰ Even 'Romanesque' started its career about 1819 as a term denoting 'the corruption of the Roman style,' and 'mannerism,' equally, signified the affectation that corrupted the purity of the Renaissance.¹¹ Thus, the sequence of classical, postclassical, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, mannerist, baroque, rococo, and neoclassical originally recorded the successive triumphs and defeats of the classical ideal of perfection.¹² While the eighteenth-century Gothic revival brought the first challenge to this view, it was only in the nineteenth century that the whole repertory of 'historical styles' was available for the architect, a state of affairs which made the century increasingly style-conscious and led to the insistent question, 'What is the style of our age?'.¹³ Thus, the concepts of style developed by critics and historians reacted back on the artists themselves. In the course of these debates the relation between style and the progress of technology came increasingly to the fore.

Technology and fashion

The distinctive way an act is performed or an artifact made is likely to remain constant as long as it meets the needs of the social group. In static groups the forces of conservatism are, therefore, likely to be strong and the style of pottery, basketry, or warfare may not change over long periods.¹⁴ Two main forces will make for change: technological improvements and social rivalry. Technological progress is a subject extending far beyond the scope of this article, but it must be mentioned because of its effect on choice situations. Knowledge of better methods might be expected to change the style of artifacts irresistibly, and indeed, where the technical aim is paramount—as in warfare, athletics, or transport—the demonstrably better method is likely to change the style of procedure as soon as it is known and mastered.

What is relevant here for the student of style is that the older method may yet be retained within certain limited contexts of ritual and ceremony.

The queen still drives to Parliament in a coach, not in an automobile, and is guarded by men with swords and lances, not with Tommy guns. The Torah is still in scroll form, while the world has adopted the more convenient codex. It is clear that the expressive value of the archaic style will tend to increase with the distance between the normal technological usages and the methods reserved for these distinctive occasions. The more rapid technical progress becomes, the wider will be the gap between adoption and rejection. In our technological society, even the retention of the 'vintage car' is symptomatic of a 'style of life.'

We are here touching on the second factor making for change—the element of social rivalry and prestige. In the slogan 'Bigger and better,' 'better' stands for technological improvement with reference to a statable purpose, 'bigger' for the element of display that is such a driving force in competitive groups. In medieval Italian cities rival families vied with each other in building those high towers that still mark the city of San Gimignano. Sometimes civic authority asserted its symbolic rights by forbidding any of these towers to rise higher than the tower of the town hall. Cities, in their turn, might vie with each other to have the biggest cathedral, just as princes would outdo each other in the size of their parks, the splendor of their operas, or the equipment of their stables. It is not always easy to see why competition suddenly fastens on one element rather than another, but once the possession of a high tower, a large orchestra, or a fast motorcycle has become a status symbol within a given society, competition is likely to lead to excesses far beyond the need of the technological purpose.

It might be argued that these developments belong to the realm of fashion rather than of style, just as the improvement of method belongs to technology. But an analysis of stability and change in style will always have to take into account these two influences. The pressures of fashion, like those of technology, provide an additional dimension of choice for those who refuse to go with the fashion and, thus, desire to assert their independence. Clearly, this independence is only relative. Even a refusal to join in the latest social game is a way of taking up a position toward it. Indeed, it might make those who adopt this course willy-nilly more conspicuous than the followers of fashion. If they have sufficient social prestige, they might even find themselves to be creators of a non-conformist fashion which will ultimately lead to a new style of behavior.

The above distinction between technical and social superiority is of necessity artificial, for technological progress tends to create prestige for the society in which it originated, which will carry over into other fields. Admiration for Roman power and for the ruins of Rome led to the fashion for all things Roman in the Renaissance, and the admiration of Peter the Great and Kemal Pasha for Western superiority even led to a forced change to Western dress and hairstyles in their countries. The fashions for American jazz or American slang so much deplored by conservative Europeans on both sides of the Iron Curtain are reminders of the legendary prestige of American technology and power, just as the rush to learn the Russian language can be traced back to the success of the first Sputnik. Here, as always, however, the reaction of the non-conformist provides the best gauge for the potential attractions of the style. Leaders of underdeveloped nations, such as Gandhi, have defiantly resisted

Westernization in their style of dress and behavior and exalted the virtues of uncorrupted technological primitivity.

Style in art has rarely been analyzed in terms of these pressures, but such an analysis might yield worthwhile results, for the various activities which, since the eighteenth century, have gradually become grouped together under the name of art¹⁵ once served a variety of practical purposes in addition to increasing prestige. In architecture both aspects interacted from the very beginning, the erection of the Egyptian pyramids, for example, displaying both technological and organizational skills and competitive pride. Opinions tend to differ about the relative proportions of technological and prestige elements in the succession of medieval architectural styles; the technology of stone vaulting offered a clear advantage in view of fire risks, but it is still an open question whether the introduction of the Gothic rib and the subsequent competition in light and high structures was motivated principally by technical considerations. Clearly, considerations of prestige, of outdoing a rival city or a rival prince, have always played a part in architectural display. At the same time, architectural history exhibits many reactions away from these dual pressures, toward simpler styles or more intimate effects. The rejection of ornament in neoclassical architecture, the conspicuous simplicity of Le Petit Trianon—not to speak of Marie Antoinette's *hameau* at Versailles—are cases in point. The Gothic revival drew its strength from the associations of that style with a preindustrial age. Indeed, the history of architecture provides perhaps the most interesting conflict of motives. When, in the nineteenth century, technology and engineering improved the use of iron constructions, architects adopted, for a time, the ritualistic attitude that this new material was essentially inartistic: the Eiffel Tower was a display of engineering, not of art. But ultimately, it was the prestige of technology within our industrial society that assured the embodiment of the new methods in a new technological 'functional' style.¹⁶ Now even functionalism, the conspicuous look of technological efficiency, has become a formal element of expression in architecture and, as such, sometimes influences design at least as much as genuine adaptation to a purpose. The best example for this interaction of technology and fashion in the visual arts is the adoption of 'streamline' patterns to designs not intended to function in rapid currents.

Even the development of painting and sculpture could be seen in the light of these dual influences if it is accepted that image making usually serves a definite function within society. In tribal societies the production of ritual masks, totem poles, or ancestral figures is usually governed by the same conservative traditions of skill as is the production of other artifacts. When the existing forms serve their purpose, there is no need for change and the craftsman's apprentice can learn the procedures from his master. However, foreign contacts or playful inventions may lead to the discovery of 'better' methods of creating images—better, at least, from the point of view of naturalistic plausibility. Whether these methods are accepted, ignored, or deliberately rejected will depend largely on the function assigned to images within a given society. Where the image functions mainly in a ritualistic context, changes will be discouraged even though they cannot be entirely prevented. The conservative styles of Egypt and Byzantium are cases in point. On the other hand, when the principal function of painting and sculpture lies in their capacity to evoke

a story or event before the eyes of the spectator,¹⁷ demonstrable improvements in this capacity will tend to gain ready acceptance and displace earlier methods, which may then only linger on in confined, sacred contexts. This prestige of improved methods can be observed at least twice in the history of art: in the development of Greek art from the sixth to the fourth century B.C. and in the succession of styles in Europe from the twelfth to the nineteenth century.

The invention of such illusionistic devices as foreshortening, in the fifth century B.C., or of perspective, in the fifteenth century A.D., gave to the arts of Greece and Florence a lead which is expressed in the prestige and the diffusion of these styles over the whole of the civilized world. It took centuries until the momentum of such spectacular superiority was spent and a reaction set in.

Even in this realm of artistic styles, however, the introduction of better illusionistic devices could and did lead to tensions where rejection was as powerful a means of expression as was acceptance. This reaction became particularly important after the method of achieving the then main purpose of art—convincing illustration—had been mastered in fourth-century Greece and sixteenth-century Italy. It was felt that technical progress was no longer needed once the means had been perfected to suit the ends, as in the (lost) paintings by Apelles or in the masterpieces by Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo. Subsequent innovations in the dramatic use of light and shade (Caravaggio and Rembrandt) or in the rendering of movement (Bernini) were rejected by critics as obscuring rather than helping the essential purpose of art and were considered an illicit display of technical virtuosity at the expense of clarity. Here lie the roots of that philosophy of style that is essential to the whole development of criticism in the Western tradition. The perfect harmony between means and ends marks the classical style,¹⁸ periods in which the means are not yet quite sufficient to realize the ends are experienced as primitive or archaic, and those in which the means are said to obtrude themselves in an empty display are considered corrupt. To evaluate this criticism, we would have to ask whether display could not and did not develop into an alternative function of art with its own conventions and code.

Evolution and disintegration of styles

It is clear that from the normative point of view there is an intrinsic destiny which artistic styles are likely to follow and that this will overtake different activities at different points in time. The classic moment in epic poetry may have been achieved in Homer; that of tragedy, in Sophocles; that of oratory, in Demosthenes; that of sculpture, in Praxiteles; and that of painting in Apelles or Raphael. Symphonic music may have reached its perfect balance between ends and means, its classic moment, in Mozart, three hundred years after Raphael's paintings.

It has indeed been argued that such phenomena as mannerism or the baroque, however they may be valued, occur in the development of any art which has reached maturity and, perhaps, overripeness. In that 'late' phase, the increasingly hectic search for fresh complexities may lead to an 'exhaustion' of the style when all permutations have been tried.¹⁹ Although there

is a certain superficial plausibility in this interpretation, which accounts for some stretches of historical development, it must never be forgotten that terms such as 'complexity' and 'elements' do not here refer to measurable entities and that even the relationship of means to ends is open to contrasting interpretations. What may appear to one critic as the classic moment of an art may carry, for another, the seeds of corruption, and what looks like the final stage of exhaustion of a style to one interpreter may be seen from another point of view as the groping beginnings of a new style. Cézanne, the complexity of whose art is beyond doubt, saw himself as the primitive of a new age of art, and this ambiguity adheres to any great artist, who can always be described as representing the culmination of a preceding evolution, a new beginning, or (by his adversaries) an archcorruptor. Thus, the naturalism of Jan van Eyck can be seen as the climax of late Gothic tendencies in the descriptive accumulation of minute details²⁰ or as the primitive start of a new era. The style of J. S. Bach can be experienced as late complexity or as archaic grandeur. For the same reasons almost any style can be convincingly described as transitional.

It is evident, moreover, that the units, or styles, by which the evolution is traced will always be rather arbitrarily chosen. Aristotle gave the lead in his famous sketch of the evolution of tragedy (*Poetics* 1448b3–1449a) but to do so, he had first to set off tragedy from comedy or mime. In a similar way, we may either describe the evolution of painting or of one of its branches, and we may find, for instance, that what was a late phase for portrait painting (e.g., mannerism) was an early one for landscape painting.

If the analysis of styles in terms of the inner logic of their evolution has, nevertheless, yielded illuminating results, this must be attributed less to the validity of alleged historical laws than to the sensitivity of critics. Heinrich Wölfflin,²¹ for example, used this framework in order to draw attention to the artistic means available to a given master and developed a vocabulary for a debate, which, however inconclusive it is bound to be, will increase our awareness of the traditions within which the masters concerned operated. By placing an *oeuvre* into a continuous chain of developments, we become alerted to what its creator had learned from predecessors, what he transformed, and how he was used, in his turn, by later generations. We must only guard against the temptation of hindsight to regard this outcome as inevitable. For every one of the masters concerned, the future was open, and although each may have been restricted in his choice by certain characteristics of the situation, the directions the development might have taken are still beyond computation. Ackerman has provided a fuller criticism of this type of stylistic determinism.²² But these strictures do not invalidate the search for a morphology of style that should underpin the intuitions of the connoisseur.

Style and period. The analysis of stylistic traditions in terms of the means peculiar to individual arts cuts across another approach, which is less interested in the 'longitudinal' study of evolution than in the synchronic characterization of all activities of a particular group, nation, or period. This approach to style as an expression of a collective spirit can be traced back to romantic philosophy, notably to Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (1837). Seeing history as the manifestation of the Absolute in its growing self-awareness, Hegel

conceived of each stage of this process as a step in the dialectical process embodied in one particular nation. A nation's art, no less than its philosophy, religion, law, mores, science, and technology, will always reflect the stage in the evolution of the Spirit, and each of these facets will thus point to the one common center, the essence of the age. Thus, the historian's task is not to find out what connections there may be between aspects of a society's life, for this connection is assumed on metaphysical grounds.²³ There is no question, for instance, whether the Gothic style of architecture expresses the same essential attitude as scholastic philosophy or medieval feudalism. What is expected of the historian is only to demonstrate this unitary principle.

It matters little in this context whether the historian concerned thinks of this unitary principle as the 'Hegelian spirit' or whether he looks for some other central cause from which all the characteristics of a period can be deduced. In fact, the history of nineteenth-century historiography of art (and its twentieth-century aftermath) can largely be described as a series of attempts to get rid of the more embarrassing features of Hegel's metaphysics without sacrificing his unitary vision. It is well known that Marx and his disciples claimed to do precisely this when they turned Hegel's principle upside down and claimed that material conditions are not the manifestation of the spirit, but rather the spirit is an outflow or superstructure of the material conditions of production. It was these conditions (to remain with our previous example) which led to medieval feudalism and which are reflected in scholastic philosophy no less than in Gothic architecture.

What distinguishes all these theories from a genuinely scientific search for causal connections is their a priori character. The question is not whether, and in what form, feudalism may have influenced the conditions under which cathedrals were constructed, but how to find a verbal formula that makes the assumed interdependence of style and society immediately apparent. In this conviction the various holistic schools of historiography agreed, regardless of whether they belonged to the materialist Hegelian left-wing or to the right-wing of *Geistesgeschichte*. As Wölfflin, one of the most subtle and sophisticated analysts of style, formulated his program in his youth, in 1888: 'To explain a style then can mean nothing other than to place it in its general historical context and to verify that it speaks in harmony with the other organs of its age'.²⁴ What matters in the present context is that this holistic conviction became widely accepted by historians and artists alike. As Adolf Loos, the pioneer of modern architecture in Austria, put it: 'If nothing were left of an extinct race but a single button, I would be able to infer, from the shape of that button, how these people dressed, built their houses, how they lived, what was their religion, their art, and their mentality'.²⁵

It is the old classical tag *Ex ungue leonem* ('The claw shows the lion') applied to the study of culture. By and large, historians and anthropologists have preferred to display their skill for interpretation where the results were foreknown rather than risk being proved wrong by fresh evidence.

Stylistic physiognomies

Seductive as the holistic theory of style has proved to be, it is still open to criticism on methodological grounds. It is true that both individuals and groups exhibit to our mind some elusive unitary physiognomy. The way a

person speaks, writes, dresses, and looks merges for us into the image of his personality. We therefore say that all these are expressions of his personality, and we can sometimes rationalize our conviction by pointing out supposed connections.²⁶ But the psychologist knows that it is extremely hazardous to make inferences from one such manifestation to all the others even when we know the context and conventions extremely well. Where this knowledge is lacking, nobody would venture such a diagnosis. Yet, it is this paradoxically which the diagnosticians of group styles claim to be able to do.²⁷ More often than not, they are simply arguing in a circle and inferring from the static or rigid style of a tribe that its mentality must also be static or rigid. The less collateral evidence there is, the more easily will this kind of diagnosis be accepted—particularly if it is part of a system of polarities in which, for instance, dynamic cultures are opposed to static ones or intuitive mentalities to rational ones.

The weaknesses of this kind of procedure in both history and anthropology are obvious. The logical claims of cultural holism have been subjected to dissection and refutation in K. R. Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957). There is no necessary connection between any one aspect of a group's activities and any other.

This does not mean, however, that style cannot sometimes provide a fruitful starting point for a hypothesis about certain habits and traditions of a group. One of these possibilities has been mentioned already. There certainly are conservative groups or societies which will tend to resist change in all fields, and other societies (like ours) in which prestige attaches to experimentation as such.²⁸ It might be argued that contrasting characteristics of style may flow from these contrasting attitudes. The static societies may tend to value solid craftsmanship and the refinements of skill, while the dynamic groups may favor the untried even where it is the unskilled. But such generalizations are subject to the same qualifications as the ones criticized in the preceding section. There is no real common gauge by which to compare the skill of Picasso with that of a conservative Chinese master. Once more, therefore, the evaluation of expressiveness will largely depend on a knowledge of choice situations. In such a situation the twentieth-century art lover may indeed prefer originality to skill, while the Chinese would select the skillful, rather than the novel, painting. The same applies to such dominant values of a society as love of luxury or its rejection. What constitutes luxury may change, but it may still be true to say that at the fashionable courts of Europe, around 1400, the more precious and shiny artifact or painting would have been preferred, while a Calvinist paterfamilias would have thrown the same gaudy bauble out of the window. Such basic attitudes may, indeed, color the style of several arts at the same time.

It might even be argued that social values such as the traditional English love of understatement will influence the choice of means and styles in various fields and favor the rejection of display in architecture, of 'loud' colors in painting, and of emotionalism in music. But, although there is an intuitive truth in such connections, it is only too easy to point to opposite features in the grandiloquent vulgarity of English Victorian town halls, the shrill colors of pre-Raphaelite paintings, or the emotionalism of Carlyle's tirades.

What is true of national character as allegedly 'expressed' in art is even more conspicuously true of the spirit of the age. The baroque pomp and display of the *Roi soleil* at Versailles is contemporaneous with the classical restraint of Racine. The functionalist rationalism of twentieth-century architecture goes hand in hand with the irrationalism of Bergson's philosophy, Rilke's poetry, and Picasso's painting. Needless to say, it is always possible to reinterpret the evidence in such a way that one characteristic points to the alleged 'essence' of a period, while other manifestations are 'inessential' survivals or anticipations, but such *ad hoc* explanations invalidate rather than strengthen the unitary hypothesis.

The diagnostics of artistic choice

To escape from the physiognomic fallacy, the student of style might do worse than return to the lessons of ancient rhetoric. There, the alternative vocabularies provided by social and chronological stratifications provided the instrument of style. We are familiar with similar stratifications in the styles of speech, dress, furnishings, and taste which allow us to size up a person's status and allegiance with reasonable confidence. Taste in art is now similarly structured between the cheap and the highbrow, the conservative and the advanced. No wonder that artistic choices offer themselves as another badge of allegiance. But what is true today need not always have been true.²⁹ The temptation to overrate the diagnostic value of artistic style stems partly from an illicit extension of our experience in modern society.

It is possible that this situation in art did not fully arise before the French Revolution, which polarized European political life into right-wing reactionaries and left-wing progressives. While the champions of reason clung to the neoclassical style, its opponents became medievalizers in architecture, painting, and even dress to proclaim their allegiance to the age of faith. From then on, it was not exceptional for an artistic movement to be identified with a political creed. Courbet's choice of working-class models and subjects was felt to be an act of defiance that stamped him as a socialist. In vain did some artists protest that their radicalism in painting or music did not imply radical political views.³⁰ The fusion and confusion of the two was strengthened by the critics' jargon, which spoke of the *avant-garde*³¹ and revolutionaries in art, and by the artists who copied the politicians in issuing manifestoes.

But, although the divisions of our societies are possibly reflected in the range of our art, it would be rash to conclude that the allegiance can be read off the badge, as it were. There was a time, in the early 1920s, when abstract painting was practiced in revolutionary Russia and when opposition to these experiments could rally the opponents of 'cultural Bolshevism.' Now abstract art is denounced in Russia, where 'social realism' is extolled as the healthy art of the new age. This change of front, in its turn, has made it possible for abstract art to be used as a subsidiary weapon in the cold war, in which it now has come to stand for freedom of expression. The toleration of this style of painting in Poland, for instance, is indeed a social symptom of no minor importance.

There are perhaps two lessons which the student of style can learn from this example. The first concerns the 'feedback' character of social theories. Soviet Russia, having adopted the Marxist version of Hegelianism as its official creed, could not look at any artistic utterance but as a necessary expres-

sion of a social situation. Deviation and nonconformity in art were therefore bound to be interpreted as symptoms of potential disloyalty, and a monolithic style appealing to the majority became a theoretical necessity. We in the West, happily, do not suffer from the same state religion, but the Hegelian conviction is still sufficiently widespread among critics and politicians to encourage a political interpretation of stylistic changes—our newspapers prefer to ask of every new movement in art or architecture what it stands for, rather than what its artistic potentialities may be. The second lesson suggested by this contemporary experience in East and West is that one cannot opt out of this game. Once an issue has been raised in this form, once a badge has been adopted and a flag hoisted, it becomes hard, if not impossible, to ignore this social aspect. One might pity the anticommunist Pole who would like to paint a brawny, happy tractor driver, but one would have to tell him that this subject and style has been pre-empted by his political opponents. The harmless subject has become charged with political significance, and one person alone cannot break this spell.

These two observations underline the responsibility of the social scientist in his discussion of style. Here, as always, the observer is likely to interfere with what he observes.

Morphology and connoisseurship

The distinctive character of styles clearly rests on the adoption of certain conventions which are learned and absorbed by those who carry on the tradition. These may be codified in the movements learned by the craftsman taught to carve a ritual mask, in the way a painter learns to prime his canvas and arrange his palette, or in the rules of harmony, which the composer is asked to observe. While certain of these features are easily recognizable (e.g., the Gothic pointed arch, the cubist facet, Wagnerian chromaticism), others are more elusive, since they are found to consist not in the presence of individual, specifiable elements but in the regular occurrence of certain clusters of features and in the exclusion of certain elements.

We become aware of these hidden taboos when we encounter an instance of their infringement in a bad imitation. We then say with conviction that Cicero would never have ended a sentence in that fashion, that Beethoven would never have made this modulation, or that Monet would never have used that color combination. Such apodictic statements seem to restrict severely the artist's freedom of choice. Indeed, one approach to the problem of style is to observe the limitations within which the artist or craftsman works. The style forbids certain moves and recommends others as effective, but the degree of latitude left to the individual within this system varies at least as much as it does in games. Attempts have been made to study and formulate these implicit rules of style in terms of probabilities. The listener who is familiar with the style of a piece of music will be aware at any moment of certain possible or probable moves, and the interaction between these expectations and their fulfillment or evasion is a necessary part of the musical experience. Not surprisingly, this intuition is confirmed by mathematical analysis, which shows the relative frequency of certain sequences within a given style of composition.³² Music, with its limited number of permutations of discrete elements, is, however, a rather isolated case, which cannot be readily general-

ized. Even so, the analysis of literary style in terms of word order, sentence length, and other identifiable features has also yielded promising results for statistical morphology.³³ No systematic attempt to extend this method to the analysis of style in the visual arts is known to the present writer. Certainly, methods of prediction and completion could even be applied in these cases. We would not expect the hidden corner of a brownish Rembrandt painting to be light blue, but it may well be asked if observations of this kind stand in need of statistical confirmation.

The limitations of scientific morphology are perhaps all the more galling when we realize that a style, like a language, can be learned to perfection by those who could never point to its rules.³⁴ This is true not only of contemporaries who grow into the use of their styles and procedures in learning the craft of building or gardening but also of the most skillful forger, mimic, or parodist, who may learn to understand a style from within, as it were, and reproduce it to perfection without bothering about its syntax. Optimists like to state that no forgery can be successful for a long time, because the style of the forger's own period is bound to tell and tell increasingly with distance, but it must be recognized that this argument is circular and that any forgeries of the past which were sufficiently successful simply have not been detected. The possibility exists, for instance, that certain busts of Roman emperors which are universally held to date from antiquity were in fact made in the Renaissance, and it is equally likely that many Tanagra figures and Tang horses in our collections are modern. Some forgeries, moreover, were unmasked only on external evidence such as the use of materials or of tools unknown in the alleged period of their origin.³⁵ It is true that this achievement of the successful forger also suggests that the understanding of style is not beyond the reach of the intuitively minded and that the great connoisseur who is pitted against the forger has at least as much chance as has his opponent.

Confronted with a painting, a piece of music, or a page of prose attributed to a particular author or age, the connoisseur can also say with conviction that this does not look or sound right. There is no reason to doubt the authority of such statements, though it would be incautious to consider them infallible. It has happened that an essay published under Diderot's name was deleted from the author's canon on stylistic grounds but had to be restored to it when the original draft in his hand was found. If such independent evidence came more frequently to light, the fame of the connoisseur would probably suffer, but he would still be sure to score quite an impressive number of hits. For the time being, at any rate, the intuitive grasp of underlying *Gestalten* that makes the connoisseur is still far ahead of the morphological analysis of styles in terms of enumerable features.