

Period Style

The concept of period style first appeared in the writings of the German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768). Often called the father of art history, Winckelmann developed a historical framework for Greek sculpture that was based on the way the objects looked. The Greeks and the Romans also had written about the works, but their histories and guides primarily discussed specific masterpieces or great artists. Winckelmann, on the other hand, created a structure that relied upon visual characteristics, which he defined with beautiful ekphrastic passages about individual sculptures.⁴³ This meant that it was possible to relate anonymous works about which little was known to the most famous art of the Ancient world. It also meant that an individual object could be considered, for example, a late example of a style. Date of making no longer determined the group in which a work was placed.

At least as important as Winckelmann's definition of style was his adoption of a biological model for its structure. Every style has to have boundaries, places where it begins and ends, and Winckelmann conceived of these in terms of the sequence of natural growth. Each style began with its birth (the early stage), progressed to maturity (the middle or classic phase), a decline (the late) and, finally, disappearance. Using this scheme arranges works into a very specific order and it is an order that implies value judgments. Early or late examples, which in Winckelmann's view stand at the beginning or end of a style, are necessarily incomplete and thus imperfect. The mature, often called the classic, represents the fullest, the best, definition of the style.⁴⁴ This order is so common in modern art history that it is hard to conceive of it as the result of choices. Lang's definition of style, however, explained above, reminds us how much this scheme too depends upon interpretation.

Using variations of Winckelmann's model, historians and critics have created definitions of period style for many other kinds of art. One of the most important was developed by Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) in *Principles of Art History*, published in German in 1915 and still read in English translation today. Two aspects of his book have been particularly influential. First is the way Wölfflin defined period style. He believed that analysis of particular works of art would "reveal the connection of the part to the whole"⁴⁵ and he decisively rejected the "analogy of bud, bloom, decay."⁴⁶ He created groups, not sequences, and defined their boundaries by opposing different uses of the same formal elements. This method of analyzing by opposition and comparison is still the way many art historical lectures are organized. Wölfflin took for granted that his groups were ultimately arbitrary, and discussed how many other ways the same material could be divided.⁴⁷

The specific concepts used by Wölfflin to define certain period styles have been very influential. The idea of "linear" versus "painterly," linked to a fundamental change in the way European art from the 15th and 16th centuries looks compared to that from the 17th century, still appears in survey texts today.⁴⁸ Historians also continue to use the word "painterly." The other pairs Wölfflin explained in *Principles* have been less influential: plane/recession, closed/open form, multiplicity/unity, and clearness/unclearness.⁴⁹

Even in translation, Wölfflin's analyses of particular works of art are exceptional. Like Winckelmann, he wrote about what he saw masterfully. His application of the concept of the

painterly to sculpture, for example, results in a beautiful and vivid description of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's bust of Cardinal Borghese (Borghese Gallery, Rome):

The surfaces and folds of the garment are not only of their very nature restless, but are fundamentally envisaged with an eye to the plastically indeterminate. There is a flicker over the surfaces and the form eludes the exploring hand. The highlights of the folds flash away like lizards, just like the highlights, heightened with white, which Rubens introduces into his drawings. The total form is no longer seen with a view to the silhouette. . . . [The shoulders have] a contour which, restless in itself, at all points leads the eye beyond the edge [of the sculpture]. The same play is continued in the head. Everything is arranged with a view to the impression of change. It is not the open mouth which makes the bust baroque, but the fact that the shadow between the lips is regarded as something plastically indeterminate. . . . [I]t is fundamentally the same design that we found [above] in [paintings by] Frans Hals and Lievens. For the transformation of the substantial into the unsubstantial which has only a visual reality, hair and eyes are in this case always especially characteristic. The "look" is here obtained by three holes in each eye.

Wölfflin summed up the alternative, the linear style, in one sentence about a portrait bust of Pietro Mellini by Benedetto da Majano (Museo Nazionale, Florence): "The essential point is that the form is enclosed in a firm silhouette, and that each separate form – mouth, eyes, the separate wrinkles – has been given an appearance of determinateness and immobility based on the notion of permanence."⁵⁰

Through this and many other comparisons, Wölfflin argued for a division between the two periods, based on a fundamental change in the artistic style. "The whole notion of the pictorial has shifted. The tactile picture has become the visual picture – the most decisive revolution which art history knows."⁵¹ Although he found the linear and the painterly in other places and periods – Impressionist painting, for example, was painterly – it was the movement from what we still call the Renaissance to the Baroque that interested him most deeply.

References:

43. David Irwin, ed., *Winckelmann. Writings on Art* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1972), 4-5 and 53-4.
44. Alex Potts, "Winckelmann, Johann Joachim," in *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com> (accessed August 22, 2008).
45. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M.D. Hottinger (orig. publ. 1915; New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 6.
46. Wölfflin, 13.
47. Wölfflin, 14.
48. See, for example, "painterly" listed as a term of stylistic analysis in Stokstad, xxviii.
49. Wölfflin, 15-6.
50. Wölfflin, 56-8.
51. Wölfflin, 21.