

Critically assess the uses and limitations of the concept of style for the practice of art history

In this essay, I will evaluate the concept of style and its usefulness for the practice of art history. The first part of this essay aims to show that style is a necessary tool for art history, but that on its own it is not sufficient. I make this argument by reference to what Elsner dubs the 'stylistic reflex' and by conducting a stylistic analysis of two artworks, namely *Globular* (1928) by Noguchi Isamu and *Spring* (1966) by Barbara Hepworth. Having argued this, in the second part of this essay I proceed to explore the limitations of style: firstly by outlining the worry that it can lead us to a historicising approach to art history, and secondly showing that its use as a concept is inapplicable to all art following postmodernism.

There is no single accepted definition or understanding of 'style.' A good starting point is Schapiro's definition, which states that style refers to "the constant form – and sometimes the constant elements, qualities and expression – in the art of an individual or a group..."¹ Style is thus used as a way of grouping similar artworks under a single style. This is what Elsner calls the basic stylistic reflex: a "grouping of like with like and the disjunction of unlikes, on the basis of morphological or formal analysis."² It is important here not to reify style, but instead to treat it as a heuristic device, that is, as a tool for the practice of art history. As Ackerman points out, style is not a discovered entity but rather a "generalization which we form, by comparing individual works, into shapes that are convenient for historical and critical purposes."³ While this simple definition has been challenged extensively, it matches the common sense or layperson's understanding of what a 'style' is. So for now, it is a meaningful definition to proceed with, given that it follows how we use it in everyday language.⁴

¹ Schapiro 1994:51

² Elsner 2003 [1996]:102

³ Ackerman 1962:237

⁴ Wittgenstein 2014 [1953]:25e

Style-based art history is an approach that is based on formal analysis, which means looking closely at how things are depicted and making judgements based on size, colour, medium, composition and so on. Style-based art history therefore becomes an empirical activity, where the historical practice is grounded by observation of evidence that is directly presented to a viewer of artworks.

This stylistic reflex is impossible to avoid; indeed, even choosing artworks for this essay required making use of the basic stylistic reflex. While the two chosen sculptures have some contextual similarities, being made from similar mediums by sculptors in the 20th century, I believe them to also have enough formal similarities that would lead to them being grouped together by viewers with no knowledge of creator or context. They are both large ovoid-like forms, with smooth surfaces and distortions, placed such that a viewer may circumambulate them. In an essay for an art history course where I am looking to critique the concept of style, I am unable to escape using style as a tool. Along with this, there is continuing and regular discourse in contemporary art history literature: style is the “the father [who] has been impossible to lay entirely to rest.”⁵ Hence I argue that ‘style’ serves an inescapable function in art history when seen as a tool for formal analysis, and is therefore necessary for the practice.

I shall return to a theoretical assessment of the concept of style presently, but first I want to turn to a stylistic analysis of two artworks.

Globular by Noguchi is a single ovoid-like form. The lower section of the sculpture has the appearance of a three-dimensional teardrop, which stretches upward and morphs into a bulbous mass, pointing horizontally outwards. It is made of brass. It has a smooth texture all over; there are no visible seams or other marks that hint at its manner of creation. It is half a metre tall, rests upon a marble plinth and conveys a feeling of weight. The abstract shape may represent a person with their head bowed, or a bent finger, or perhaps an upright animal, maybe a penguin or a lemur; it is clear the artist is not aiming to depict any one thing. A viewer is able to walk around it and observe it from all angles, and, in doing so,

⁵ Elsner 2003 [1996]:98

observe a blurred yellow-gold reflection of themselves and the room in which the sculpture is situated.

Spring by Hepworth is also a single ovoid form. The sculpture is presented as a single piece, with a concave cutaway that passes through the entirety of the sculpture. Inside this cutaway is a stringing in two crossed-over series. One series passes from the top right at the front to the bottom left at the back, threaded along the rim to make the return; the other series follows the opposite course on the opposing sides; the two series cross over in the middle. The sculpture is made of bronze, but in two colours: the outer face of the sculpture has a mottled brown patination; the inside has a blue-green patination. It is around 80 centimetres tall and rests upon a bronze plinth. The external shape could be said to resemble an egg, but the cutaway and stringing prevent the sculpture from being a simple depiction. A viewer may walk around the sculpture and observe the whole thing, and, in doing so, may look directly through the cutaway section, seeing (through strings) whatever it is that is situated on the other side.

Comparing the two, we see that there are clear similarities. Both are ovoid-like sculptures made from industrial materials. They are similar in size and convey a similar sense of weightiness. Neither are perfectly symmetrical but both allude to symmetry. They are similarly abstract, making no attempt to accurately depict any natural object. There are differences too: *Globular* is yellow-gold, allowing for reflections, whereas *Spring* is muted and absorbs light. *Globular* has a clear distortion, the mass at the top which protrudes sharply in one direction, whereas *Spring* has an overall symmetric shape. And most notably, *Globular* is intact, whereas *Spring* has a form removed, a circular cutaway passing straight through that has been joined with internal strings.

What conclusions can we draw from this stylistic analysis? We can argue that both sculptures evoke a sense of a natural form; they are both clearly man-made but indicate something primal or primordial. Moreover, both have a mechanism for moving a viewer's focus beyond the bounds of the artwork itself. The dull reflection of Noguchi's sculpture allows the viewer to see the world around it; Hepworth's cutaway surrounds empty space with form, allowing the viewer to see the world through it. Winterson writes that by looking

“...into a Hepworth hole ... you are looking at what matter normally conceals — everything that matter cannot express.”⁶

However, there is far more that can be said about these two artworks if we go beyond a strictly formal analysis and consider the wider context. Factual knowledge about the artists may reveal new information: Noguchi was born in Los Angeles and had an uncommon ethnicity, being half-Irish-American, half-Japanese; Hepworth was born in Yorkshire and moved to Cornwall at the outset of the second World War. Or perhaps their respective influences can shed new light. Noguchi studied under Constantin Brâncuși, and became friends with Buckminster Fuller; Hepworth had a friendly rivalry with Henry Moore and moved to St Ives with then-partner Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo. Or maybe their genders, or social class, or financial statuses could broaden our understanding of their art. Or, we could turn to an even wider context, looking beyond the artists themselves. We could explore how abstract sculpture has been received in the contemporary art world, or examine which museums have hosted these artworks, or look at how they have been grouped with other artworks.

A strict stylistic analysis would even prevent us from making judgements based on the names of the artworks. *Globular* being named as such could make us aware of the near-spherical nature of the sculpture, or perhaps points us towards considering the astronomical term ‘globular cluster of stars,’ which we could connect to the shimmering appearance. *Spring* could bring to mind the season, which, when linked with the egg-like shape, may lead to ideas around fertility; or maybe it brings to mind the verb, i.e. the action of something springing outward from within.

However, being restricted to a purely formal analysis means relinquishing all of these points. We become limited to looking at the artworks without any contextual information at all.

Moreover, it’s impossible to ever perceive an artwork without any contextual information anyway. I will not enter into a lengthy discussion of reception here, but, in brief, any viewer

⁶ Winterson 2003

brings their own pre-existing knowledge and preconceived notions with them: it is impossible to approach an artwork with a tabula rasa.

Therefore, the practice of art history requires more than a purely formal or visual analysis of artworks, what Wölfflin calls the 'internal art history.'⁷ It also requires context. Hence, although the concept of 'style' is necessary for art history, when used as a tool or method in isolation, it is not sufficient.

In the next part of this essay, I will look in more detail at the limitations of the concept of style. I start by exploring its fall from grace in contemporary practice.

Over recent years, 'style' has become "a source of deep dissatisfaction in art-historical methodology"⁸ according to Pinotti and other art historians. Elsner writes metaphorically that, "since the revolution of the seventies and eighties the king has been dead."⁹ One reason for this dissatisfaction comes from style being tied up with a historicist approach to art history. Sauerländer's essay pinpoints the genesis of this connection to an 18th century German art historian, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who transformed the concept of style into a "means or periodization."¹⁰ Winckelmann's project was motivated by a passionate commitment to a Greek ideal; he sought not only to document Greek art and culture in detail, but to trace its remains in the modern world. Winckelmann writes that:

The history of art should inform us about the origin, growth, change, and fall of art, together with the various styles of peoples, periods, and artists, and should demonstrate this as far as possible by reference to the remaining works of antiquity.¹¹

Therefore, previous styles of art are seen as ways of mirroring history, and so stylistic developments in art can be associated with political and cultural changes in different societies. According to Winckelmann, classical art in 5 BCE held a normative status of perception, and correlates with the political liberty prevailing in Greece at the time; the

⁷ Wölfflin 1950 [1915]

⁸ Pinotti 2012:75

⁹ Elsner 2003 [1996] :98

¹⁰ Sauerländer 1983:259

¹¹ Winckelmann 2006[1764]:71

later decline of art is attributed to the fall of Greek city-states and the rise of monarchical rule.

This deterministic linking of art movements with historical movements can be labelled as a historicization. A historicist approach explains phenomena by studying the process by which they came about, i.e., their history. It stands in contrast to other ways of explaining phenomena, such as functional, rationalist, reductionist approaches.

I am unable to explore the problems with a historicist approach to art history in depth here, but will summarise three major criticisms with it. They are as follows:

- (i) A historicising approach ‘aestheticizes’ the historical context of artworks, i.e., renders entire historical periods as mere background scenery, instead of engaging with the causal impact historical events had on artists and artworks.
- (ii) A historicising approach relies on a notion of artistic autonomy, i.e., that art was ‘emancipated’ from the 15th century onwards, and became an activity in and of itself, distinct from craft. This view of art is biased towards Western art, and moreover, obscures class interests and disregards social, cultural and economic factors involved in the production of art.¹²
- (iii) A historicising approach assumes that “historical prediction is the primary aim [of art history] attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ ... that underlie the evolution of history.”¹³ While stylistic analysis is an empirical practice, the narratives that a historicising approach gives rise to are fundamentally idealistic. Popper writes critically of Hegelian idealism and determinism, claiming that they have the potential to lead to a totalitarian society.¹⁴

So, style as a concept is problematic if it ties us to a narrativized or historicised approach to art history which disregards contextual analysis, as many scholars in the last three decades think it does.

¹² Clark 1995 [1974]

¹³ Popper 2002 [1957]:3

¹⁴ Popper 2002 [1957]

A further limitation of style is that it is not a useful tool for art historical practice with regards to postmodern and contemporary art. Some critics go so far to claim that a stylistic analysis of any such art is impossible. Terry Smith claims that “since late high modernism (pop, minimalism, conceptual art), there has been no period style.”¹⁵ To understand why this is, we have to first look at how style applies to modernism.

Modernist art grew out of the enlightenment. The enlightenment championed the possibility of a perfect human nature; modernism criticised the structures that were holding humanity back. Modernist artworks aimed to be timeless and based on human rationality, and the individual artistic authors claimed to be able to reach a resolved aesthetic totality through which they could express profound emotional responses. Artworks from this period have a ‘modernist style,’ and we can meaningfully talk about different substyles.

However, by the late 1960s modernism had become an orthodoxy in itself, which claimed to offer an objective truth and sense of progress. As Krauss puts it, Greenberg’s

...whole relationship to art was incredibly teleological. His idea was that art had to end up in a certain place, and if it didn’t contribute to that trajectory then he dismissed it.¹⁶

Krauss can be seen as a bridge from modernism to postmodernism. Her approach to art history is that individual subjects produce their own original meanings, rather than meaning being produced by an artist following some formal configurations. Importantly, Krauss’ art history does not take on a context-based or content-focused approach, which may be an obvious direction if moving away from style-based approach, nor does she resign to characterising postmodernism by its diversity of styles. Instead, she develops a theory inspired by structuralist theories of language, where words gain meaning by the relationships between them rather than by the individual words’ referents. Analogous to this, artworks gain meaning not by what they resemble, i.e. as icons, but by what they point to and indicate, i.e. as indexes. Postmodern artists become manipulators of pre-existing systems of signs.

¹⁵ Smith 2009:251

¹⁶ Plante 2013

Consequentially, this means that any notion of 'style' evaporates. Postmodern and contemporary art do not have a neat causal link from an artist's intentionality to artwork depicted in a certain style; rather, artworks cease to be necessarily linked to any creator whatsoever. What counts as a work of art cannot be determined by any formal character of the work or intentionality of the artist, as shown by Duchamp's readymades. Meaning becomes something unstable and shifting, which cannot be pre-determined nor even relied upon to persist.

Therefore, it no longer makes sense to consider any unifying styles, and the concept loses the methodological force it once had. This is not to say that 'style' as tool is impossible to use: it is still possible to conduct a formal analysis for a work, and we still have the initial stylistic reflex on reception of such works. However, there is little that can be meaningfully said about such works by referring to their style, and so style itself becomes irrelevant for the practice of art history from the late modern period onwards.

The first part of this essay has shown that 'style' as a concept is necessary but not sufficient for the practice of art history. Its necessity comes from its unavoidability, considering the instinctive stylistic reflex we have when presented with artworks. Its lack of sufficiency comes from the breadth of information there is to gain from contextual analyses of artworks beyond a pure formal analysis. The second part detailed an issue with the concept: that it can lead to a historicising approach to art history, which is problematic, and according to Popper, fundamentally dangerous. It also detailed a limitation: that style becomes irrelevant for art historical practice after modernism.

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List of artworks

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2. Hepworth, Barbara. 1966. *Spring*. Barbara Hepworth Museum, St Ives. Photograph from <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hepworth-spring-t12278/>> [accessed 6 February 2022]

Photographs of artworks

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2.

