

*Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy*. By PHILIP SOHM. Cambridge U.P. 2001. pp.xii + 315. £65.00

The cover of this book displays a self-portrait by Parmigianino in which the artist's hand figures strongly in front of his face. As *mano* (hand) is the etymological root of *maniera*, the artist's display of his hand, like the writer's use of his *stilus*, draws attention to a cause, in Aristotle's sense, of his style. The cover signals the fact that the reader is about to enter into a study of the play of language. It's a rare breed of art historian that is deeply interested in the formation of critical language and there's an even rarer breed of intellectual historian who is interested in the history of art theory. But although this book targets a highly specialist audience, it should attract the philosopher interested in the problem of style: how one accounts for its presence in an artist's work and how one extends its use outwards to group artists together.

The book consists of two sections 'Style and Language' and 'Definitions of Style' prefaced by an introduction that identifies a central problem: the general reluctance to theorise the notion of style. On the one hand, art historians come up with a remark like Kubler's 'style is a word of which the everyday use has deteriorated in our time to the level of banality. It is now a word to avoid, along with déclassé words, words without nuance, words gray with fatigue.'(2) On the other, as the author remarks, 'perhaps art historians are too busy practicing stylistic analyses to define their terms.'(9) The author quotes Wollheim 'Failure to recognize what style is persists, I believe, into current theory' and then adds 'This statement by Richard Wollheim is certainly true and remains true despite his own worthy attempts to remedy the situation.'(9) So what kind of a problem is the problem of trying to identify style?

Most of us familiar with the development of art history over the twentieth century will recognise that Heinrich Wölfflin's approach to stylistic analysis, while very influential, has had its day. Right from the very beginning it was subjected to criticism, famously by Erwin Panofsky and later by Ernst Gombrich, who was, by the way, a Viennese member of the class of '33. It went through a crisis with the flurry of scholarship around Mannerism in the 60's and fell apart with deeper investigations into the art of the 'periods' of Renaissance and Baroque. Svetlana Alpers has declared her deep unease with the term, preferring to avoid it wherever possible, while the author suggests that the notion of style is still useful as a heuristic device, though

while-fraught with difficulty. What makes this book so important, and revealing, for me is that right at the beginning of a fully-fledged practice of art criticism and description, its originators themselves acknowledged its difficulty.

As the author demonstrates, the very notion of style had become tainted back in antiquity: ‘The dubious status of style can be traced back at least to Aristotle, who called it the most “vulgar” part of rhetoric, “a mere outward show for pleasing the listener” that “beguiles” or “lures” the audience into judging by sense instead of intellect.’ This attitude towards style reverberated through history and writing in the seicento, the classicist Giovan Pietro Bellori took the view [that](#) “the vulgarity of style assimilates a broader polemic against color, cosmetics, and fancy dress as deceits of masking and feminine guile.”(4) A number of writers felt that it should be possible to be style-less. There was both an art of painting, which was one, and there were styles of painting, which were plural. It was thought that artists could be encouraged to pursue art and thereby avoid style. This results in the paradox that an artist’s work could be recognised as his by his employment of a distinctive style as, for example, in the case of Michelangelo but there comes a point, amongst the receptive audience, when it is no longer *stylish* but *stylised*. An artist’s work exemplifies a certain manner but then can become regarded as mannered. Once you have seen one Michelangelo figure, a [sixteenth](#) century writer complained, you’ve seen them all. Style, by going out of style, becomes unstable: it swerves from a form of natural transparency to a conspicuous display of itself. It applied to the critics themselves. Bellori ‘wanted to write as Poussin painted: clearly; without ornamental flourishes; truthfully’ but, as the author comments, by ‘1750 his style came under attack as “extremely verbose and diffused ... according to the style of that time”; it was said to bring “tedium,” just that quality that Bellori was hoping to avoid.’(48)

There is nothing so apparently natural as speaking one’s own language. The author remarks that ‘The heritage of style’s vulgarity is still felt today. William Strunk and E. B. White brought up generations of writers with the seemingly stoic advice that “a careful and honest writer does not need to worry about style,” although what they really meant by this was a version of Castiglione’s *sprezzatura*: “to achieve style, begin by affecting none.” Style may be necessary but it should remain invisible.’(7) It is for this very reason that Julius von Schlosser chose to distinguish between the history of artistic language and the history of artistic style. His pupil, Gombrich, followed him and argued that the possession of style depended on the ability to make

a choice. The author points out that in the sixteenth century, style could simply be a matter of the way that an artist did things (there was no choice involved) and that if an artist chose to emulate another artist he could not help but betray himself involuntarily. That particular idea was belied by the number of stories about artists who sought to fool the connoisseurs by adopting other artists' styles. On the other hand, there was the case of Poussin who felt able to paint in a number of different styles at the same time. 'I am not at all like those who always sing in the same key', he wrote to Chantelou, 'I know how to vary the key when I want.' (130) Poussin, like Gombrich much later, took a rhetorical view of style. The question is how much flexibility was there in artists' abilities to paint their choice of themes? The author observes that '—from visual evidence, art critics knew that artists worked simultaneously in different styles, and did so deliberately even if their motives sometimes remained obscure.' Furthermore, 'The articulation of motives assigned to artists for wilfully manipulating their styles also became more specific in the seventeenth century, as did the range of perceived motives.' Guido Reni critiqued Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* by doing it again in a 'contrary' style. (133)

The author points out that some sixteenth century writers adopted a rhetorical approach to style, others adopted a physiognomic approach, which reads the art as a manifestation of the artist's character. At this point it is salutary to remember Gombrich's stress on approaching artists through understandings of their institutionalisation and professionalisation. A good professional can be called upon to role-play, which is precisely what ~~a good many~~ some artists did. Another way of describing this would be in terms of the Death of the Author, which is a position that Gombrich maintained through his life.

One of the many delightful things about this book, and indeed its central theme, is its analysis of the language that artists, critics and theorists used to characterise their perception of stylistic features of the paintings of the day. This raises interesting questions that Michael Baxandall ~~himself~~ raised in his book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford 1972) and later in *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London 1985). The author's view is less extreme than Baxandall's. While Baxandall referred to language as 'a conspiracy against experience' (44) ~~the author~~ takes a more positive view of the ways in which writers articulated their experiences. His appendix listing critical terms used in Italian art criticism between 1550 and 1750 demonstrates

a greater degree of fluidity than the repertoire listed by Baxandall for the quattrocento. His analysis of the one term ‘*macchia*’ is particularly revealing: “a congruity exists between understanding the visual and verbal languages of *macchia*. Verbally, *macchia* is an autonomous concept that disorients the reader. Visually, a painted *macchia* casts necromantic spells, confuses, terrorizes, and terrifies viewers; it even drives them insane. ... The Crusca definition of *macchia* as a dark forest, a forgery, and a deep cloaking shadow opens another area of transgressive meaning.’ (151) And that is just the tip of a fairly big iceberg of description. The question is whether we can appreciate the painting and the language today as they were undoubtedly appreciated by contemporary readers. The difficulties reflect back on the notion of style. As new styles emerge the spectator’s response to the older styles changes, stylishness itself shifts. The very instability of style is a point that the author brings home quite conclusively: ‘style has a way of evaporating under scrutiny, being “extremely fragile and evasive”.’ (185) His final chapter “A Conclusion on Indeterminate Styles” explores its *non so che*, or its *vaghezza*. Agostino Mascardi in a “digressione intorno allo stile” in his book *Dell’arte historica* (1636) compared the debate on style with the debate on love. It’s never resolved because ‘discouraging about love was like falling in love. We each find our beloved to be uniquely beautiful, and so too our idea of love is uniquely correct.’ (1) As for *vaghezza*, it has a ‘semantic *non so che* that wavers in between concepts of beauty, desire, femininity, ornament and cosmetic prettiness. The term itself contains ambivalent attitudes towards feminine beauty and sensory attraction’ (194) ... and that is only the beginning of the matter. It could be the start of another story, the emergence of the aesthetic itself.

This is not an easy book to read because its author’s style itself is far from plain. In a sense it has to be for it to match the complexity of its subject. It is essential reading for any philosopher who wants to do full justice to the concept of style. I can’t recommend it highly enough.

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