

Periodization and its discontents*

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Not so long ago it could simply be assumed that every art historian knew how to date and localize a work of art. The discipline carried on according to the principles that visual appearance was an index of history, and that style marked historical periods in art (as well as in the work of individual artists). The organization of art history courses in colleges and universities together with displays in museums necessitated periodization, or reinforced it. Although disagreement might exist about whether something was to be called late Renaissance or early Baroque, such debates were often productive, much as disagreements about attributions could be. New artists, styles, and even whole types of art were identified; new period concepts, like Mannerism, were discussed. Concern with the definition and description of periods of art and culture (in Europe) thus continued through at least the 1970s, as witnessed by the books originating in the popular series published by Penguin Books that was devoted to 'style and civilization'.

Things seem much different now. Many of what used to be considered basic skills are not universally possessed by art historians, while other competences (for instance familiarity with relatively recent theoretical tracts, frequently not related to art or to history) are often taken to be imperative. While questions of or about style may again, or still, be of interest to some scholars, issues of dating and localization, though basic to further interpretations, hardly seem to generate much productive debate. Periodization in particular has encountered many discontents.

Problems were already apparent at least fifty years ago, when E. H. Gombrich presented a powerful critique of periodization.¹ In a series of papers published c. 1960 Gombrich spoke of 'classification and its discontents', regarding the use of generalizations as a tool, which was a necessary evil. He evoked the scholastic tag '*individuum est ineffabile*', that there is an epistemological need to classify, but proceeded to dismantle essentialist arguments for periodization. Gombrich also revealed the origins of concepts like Mannerism in the historiography of art history. He suggested

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¹ Ernst Gombrich, *In search of cultural history. Philip Maurice Deneke lecture, 1967*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969; Ernst Gombrich, 'Norm and Form: The stylistic categories of art history and their origins in renaissance ideals', *Norm and Form, Studies in the art of the Renaissance*, London/New York: Phaidon, 1971, 81-98; 'Mannerism: The historiographic background', *Studies of western art*, 2, *The Renaissance and Mannerism*, (seminar, New York, 1961), reprinted in Ernst Gombrich, *Norm and Form*, 99-106.

that the whole armature of stylistic terminology rested on normative criticism, which depended upon the fundamental polarity of classic and non-classic. He concluded that neither this form of criticism nor any morphological description would ever produce a theory of style, even if one were necessary. Furthermore, Gombrich forcefully argued against the determinism he saw rooted in the Heglianism which he demonstrated was endemic to most essays at periodization in art and cultural history.

At about the same time George Kubler presented another formidable challenge to what he called the classing of things. In *The Shape of Time* (1962) Kubler offered a different way to treat objects and their duration in time.² Among other things, he proposed conceptions of formal sequences, prime objects and replications, and serial positions. All of these and much more in Kubler's far-ranging arguments contradict or undermine any simple or straightforward notions of periodization. That Kubler himself may have nevertheless felt the need to employ some such concepts is suggested by his *Art and Architecture in Ancient America*, also published in 1962, which still utilized terms such as "Classic" in dating the arts of various Amerindian peoples.³

Contemporaneously Jan Białostocki's essay on 'Das Modusproblem' (1961)⁴ and Allan Ellenius's *De Arte Pingendi* (1960)⁵ also complicated notions of style and their relation to history. Though rooted in traditions of humanistic scholarship and philological methods, as well as having precedents in earlier art historical scholarship, their approach disrupted clear relationships of style to visual forms, hence to history. Białostocki specifically considered as problematic notions of style as a '*Manifestation der Kultur als Ganzheit*' or '*sichtbarer Zeichen ihrer Einheit*', posing instead the notion of modes and their variety. Ellenius's book also related art theory to the liberal arts and especially to rhetoric, thus anticipating the fuller reevaluation of the 'language of art' that has subsequently occurred. In recent interpretations modes, genres, functions, techniques and materials have been employed to account for formal variation, contradicting the assumption that periods in the work of an individual artist, much less of a whole interval of time, can be clearly marked by simple visual relations.

Gombrich and Kubler represent some of the earliest harbingers in English of disciplinary self-critique conjoined with an approach to questions of method through historiography. Although it was probably not their intention, this sort of self-critique propelled many of the newer expressions of scholarship and writing on art and history in English that began in the early 1970's (and which were paralleled on the continent by post-1968 developments). As the discipline awakened from its theoretical somnolence (at least in English), debates moved on and through questions of the relation of art to

² George Kubler, *The shape of time: remarks on the history of things*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962.

³ George Kubler, *The art and architecture of ancient America: the Mexican, Maya, and Andean peoples*, Harmondsworth and Baltimore: Penguin, 1962.

⁴ Jan Białostocki, 'Das Modusproblem in den bildenden Künsten: zur Vorgeschichte und zum Nachleben des "Modusbriefes" von Nicolas Poussin', Cologne: Dumont 1981 (2nd ed.), 12-42.

⁵ Allan Ellenius, *De Arte Pingendi: latin art literature in seventeenth-century Sweden and its international background*, Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1960.

society, culture, race, class, gender, and psyche, and began utilizing a host of concepts, related to the universe of discourse of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and beyond.

The newer approaches to art history that began to flourish in the 1970's did not necessarily diminish a concern with periodization, however. On the contrary: one of the most admired books of the time, and one that is now sometimes taken as paradigmatic for art history *tout court*, Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy; A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* of 1972, explicitly deals with style in relation to a 'period eye'.⁶ The *magnum opus* on which Baxandall was working at the time (*The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, 1980) similarly evoked national, ethnic concepts, speaking about the 'Deutsch' or 'demotic' characteristics of sculpture north of the Alps.⁷ While *Painting and Experience* was variously (and largely positively) received, it is thus not surprising that Gombrich reportedly heard echoes of *Zeitgeist* in Baxandall's notion of period eye, much as the present author found *Volkgeist* lurking amidst the limewood sculptors.

Reasons for discontent with the approach to periodization practiced by even such a subtle scholar as Baxandall are more than subjective or personal, contrary to what has sometimes been imputed. Efforts at periodization flatten out the diversity of artistic phenomena that appear in any particular time by giving them a unified label. Broad generalizations according to periods do not fully account for the specific characteristics of any single work of art (or architecture). Such efforts at historical explanation seem all the more unsatisfactory when notions of "experience" are generalized to refer to an entire culture, whose features do not however remain constant over time.

Periodization relies on the historicist assumption that not everything is possible in all times, but it is also true that not everything is possible in all places. Attempts to periodize must therefore take into account the dimension of space or place as well as that of time. As many scholars have argued in the last decades, painting is, for example, not the same all over fifteenth-century Italy (if that geographical notion itself is valid and not anachronistic as a framing conception). Fifteenth-century Ferrara, Venice, Milan, and Naples all have been seen to possess their own distinctive visual cultures, related to experiences that are different from those encountered in Florence or Umbria.

Moreover, as the study of the history of art has continued to expand throughout the world, interests as well as practices in the discipline have become increasingly global. The geographical parameters of art history have thus become ever more evident. Treating objects or monuments according to categories including periods that are derived from considerations of western European art is obviously questionable when they must be related to different sorts of places both within and outside Europe. Forms, contents, and functions of art in Aztec Mexico, Momoyama Japan, and Renaissance Italy, are manifestly not the same. Labels such as Renaissance or Baroque do not describe the same phenomena when they are applied to Central Europe or Latin America and when

⁶ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and experience in the fifteenth century Italy: a primer in the social history of pictorial style*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

⁷ Michael Baxandall, *The limewood sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

they are used to accounts for supposedly similar phenomena in Italy, in regard to which such terms were originally derived.

Several recent books and essays have consequently again come to address the geography of art.⁸ They have recognized that geographical factors are involved in consideration of the definition (literally) of stylistic change, its diffusion, and its inherent environmental factors. I myself have tried to trace the way such issues have been handled (or mishandled) in the past, pointed to some basic problems, and called for renewed attention to be paid to the geography of art.⁹ The geography of art has long informed and inspired approaches to its history, and it is also implicated in questions of periodization. For time is inseparable from space, history from geography. These questions deserve further consideration.

Some recent scholars have however gone even farther, and sought for laws and rules in the geography of art. In place of historical determinism, they posit a kind of geographical determinism caused by environmental or even neurological forces. But the geography of art is as much bound by history as is the history of art by geography. It does not seem necessary to argue for laws and regularities that apply to all places, as opposed to creating syntheses or offering descriptions and interpretations of places as they change in history. Moreover, nomothetic approaches, those that posit that the geography of art is governed by laws, do not seem to date to have supplied any more valid bases for localization than has the Hegelianism present in most art historical attempts at periodization.

There thus appears to exist little reason to give credence to approaches that merely seem to echo earlier, questionable theses concerning the geography of art. These include arguments for the importance of a *genius loci*, for constants in local or national visual culture, and for the ethnic qualities of art, many of which have often simply been taken over without further reflection. Yet all have been rightly discredited in the past, when they led to catastrophic results.

Does this mean that the 'chronotopological' principles of historiography are to be

⁸ Katarzyna Muraska-Muthesius ed, *Borders in art ; revisiting 'Kunstgeographie'*, (seminar, Norwich, 1998), Warsaw: Institute of Art, 2000; John Onians, *Atlas of world art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.; Enrico Castelnuovo, 'La frontiera nella storia dell'arte'; 'Le Apli, crocevia e punto d'incontro delle tendenze artistiche nel xv secolo'; 'Per una storia dinamica delle arti nella regione alpina nel Medioevo', *La cattedrale tascabile: scritti di Storia dell'arte*, Livorno: Sillabe, 2000; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann (*Ost-*)*Mitteleuropa als Kunstgeschichtsregion?*, Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Elizabeth Pilliod eds, *Time and Space: essays in the geohistory of art*, Aldershot and Burlington, Vermont; Ashgate, 2005; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'Der Ostseeraum als Kunstregion: Historiographie, Stand der Forschung, und Perspektiven künftiger Forschung', in Martin Krieger, Michael North eds, *Land und Meer. Kultureller Austausch zwischen Westeuropa und dem Ostseeraum in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Cologne/Weimer/Vienna: Böhlau, 2004; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'The geography of art: historiography, issues, perspectives', in Kitty Zijlmans, Wilfried van Damme eds, *World art studies: exploring concepts and approaches*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008.

⁹ Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Towards a geography of art*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

abandoned? So it has been argued in the pages of the *Art Bulletin* and elsewhere, in an 'effort to excavate the anachronic underhistory of the work of art'.¹⁰ The intention here is to "challenge enlightened historical models." But such arguments (which in addition seem to confuse the complicated processes related to time and memory involved in the making of the artwork with the historian's attempt at categorization), like many others of a supposedly innovative fashion, may also just take over some of the very elements of a 'chronologically rationalist approach', which they decry. For example, while criticizing previous definitions of the period, they nevertheless remain enmeshed in concepts of periodization and its perils when they speak of 'Renaissance anachronism'. In the end, like other arguments against the Enlightenment they nevertheless retain some of the more questionable prejudices of that movement: in particular their arguments often seem to exemplify Voltaire's witticism that 'History after all is nothing but a pack of tricks we play upon the dead'.¹¹

The essays in the present number of *Perspective* therefore may be regarded as returning to a vexed problematic, for which there are no easy solutions. Nor is it clear that they will ever be solved easily. The expansion of art history into a global dimension (and world art history has been described as the most pressing problem of art history) further renders it increasingly difficult to offer effective periodizations, and even opens the question if this is necessary at all. This is suggested by David Summers's ambitious recent attempt to trace a grand scheme in *Real spaces : World art history and the rise of western modernism* (2003). Summers does not employ period concepts, nor for that matter much chronological structure.¹²

In addition to Kubler, whom Summers explicitly evokes, Gombrich offers other alternatives, however. Gombrich was one of the first to identify periodization's discontents, but his insights extended beyond that critique. While his own theories of perception, his belief in a canon, and his aesthetic views have all been criticized, his constructive suggestions for alternative approaches to cultural history have not received much attention, even though they may prove productive. Instead of periods, Gombrich suggested speaking of movements. He also proposed alternatives to Historicism in what he called the 'logic of vanity fair'.¹³ These include attention to the problem situation in history and art, to competition and inflation in cultural and taste, to polarizing issues in art, and to the relation of art to technical progress. Whether or not we follow any or all of his suggestions, Gombrich's basic insight into the existence of the "vanity fair" found throughout cultural history has certainly been corroborated by the

¹⁰ Alexander Nagel, Christopher S. Wood, 'Toward a new model of renaissance anachronism', *Art Bulletin*, 87:3, September 2005, 403-415.

¹¹ Voltaire, *Lettre à Pierre Robert Le Cornier de Cideville*, 1757, reprint in *Les œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 31, Theodore Besterman ed, Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1965, 47, no. 6456.

¹² David Summers, *Real spaces: World art history and the rise of western modernism*, London/New York: Phaidon, 2003.

¹³ Ernst Gombrich, 'Logic of Vanity Fair', in Paul A. Schlipp, *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, La Salle: Open Court, 1974, 927.

recent historiography of art history: fashions exist in scholarship as in other aspects of human life and culture, and they may also be revived.

In the end, this volume demonstrates that in the end, problems of periodization are far from *passé*.

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