

Criteria of Periodization in the History of European Art

I.

Meyer Schapiro

1. Apart from mathematical divisions (centuries, millennia) and the prehistoric tool and site names with their numbered stages, period names have been of three kinds: political-dynastic, cultural, and aesthetic. Examples of the first are Carolingian, Ottonian, Tudor; of the second, Mediaeval, Gothic, Renaissance; of the third, Romanesque, Classic, Mannerist, Baroque. Each type of name originally implied a theory about the art it designated. The aesthetic names are more common, but the others survive, often with changed sense. We no longer accept the original meanings of "Romanesque" and "Gothic," but we continue to use these period names as conventions with new historical boundaries.

2. If periodizing is conventional, it is not entirely arbitrary or useless. As historical classification, it is an instrument in ordering the historical objects as a continuous system in time and space, with groupings and divisions which bring out more clearly the significant similarities and differences, and which permit us to see a line of development; it also permits correlation with other historical objects and events similarly ordered in time and space, and thereby contributes to explanation.

3. The same objects can be classed in many different ways, all logical and consistent with our knowledge of the structure of the objects. Hence many different period classifications are possible. It is the problem and the theoretical viewpoint that determine the choice of a classification, with its order of generality and its particular historical boundaries.

4. Since development is gradual and uneven, periodizing must be vague in its boundaries. The types of art which seem distinct in the particular works cited in defining the types become less distinct when we try to specify the earliest and latest examples of the types. And in

some periods there are opposed styles with forms that resist classification as elements of a common art.

5. Independent of conflicting period concepts and common to all of them as a basic datum and axis of reference is the irreversible order of single works located in time and space. Whether Poussin is called Baroque or Classic, his work belongs to a definite time and place, and this position entails restrictions on all interpretations and explanations of his art.*

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

* Summary of a paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, 1954.

Criteria of Periodization in the History of European Art

II.

H. W. Janson

In a famous essay, "Norm and Form," Ernst Gombrich has recently pointed out that the "procession of styles and periods known to every beginner [in the history of art] . . . represents only a series of masks for two categories, the classical and the non-classical." The former category, in Gombrich's listing, is represented by Classic, Renaissance, and Neo-Classical, the latter by Romanesque, Gothic, Mannerist, Baroque, Rococo, Romantic, all of which were originally terms of abuse (and, we may add, Impressionist and Cubist). Present-day art historians no longer share the positive or negative values once implicit in these labels. "We believe we can now use them in a purely neutral, purely descriptive sense." But, the author points out, this confidence is justified only so long as we do not try to define the limits of these categories too closely. When we do, we soon realize the fundamental difference between our methods of classification and those of the zoologist: "In the discussion of works of art description can never be completely divorced from criticism." Hence our perplexities in the debate about styles and periods.

Gombrich is certainly right. The very fact that we still use these traditional terms, however much their meaning has shifted since they first gained currency, betokens a kind of intellectual imprisonment. After all, even if we succeed in eliminating every trace of their normative flavor, they freeze the current groupings and divisions within the history of art and thus discourage us from looking for possible alternatives. We are all in Gombrich's debt, then, for having made us aware of the extent to which we are playing with loaded dice. Nor can we, I think, hope to play the game without loaded dice of *some* sort (although we might well want to exchange some or all of our present set for others), notwithstanding Gombrich's faith in "objective criteria" for judging such matters as correctness of drawing, balanced

composition, lucid narrative, and the presentation of physical beauty as classical norms. Be that as it may, the insight his essay provides into the hidden normative weighting of so many of our key terms challenges us to reexamine the entire "procession of styles and periods" in Western art. (Prehistoric and non-Western art have problems of their own, some of which are dealt with in George Kubler's essay, but they are of another sort.)

The historian of literature — or, for that matter, of any subject other than the visual arts — is likely to wonder, as he looks over Gombrich's list of terms, why there are so many more of them than he is accustomed to in his own field. He will also want to know what exactly is the difference between "styles" and "periods." The two questions are not unrelated, although the link between them may not be obvious at first glance. They become even more pressing once we realize that Gombrich's "procession" is far from complete (for his purposes, it did not have to be): it omits Archaic ("non-yet-Classic"), Hellenistic ("no-longer-Classic"), and Mediaeval, three terms conspicuously normative in origin, as well as the non-weighted terms derived from political-dynastic or cultural entities such as Roman, Early Christian, Byzantine, Carolingian, Ottonian. This latter group refers to successive phases of Western art during the first thousand years of our era. There are no weighted labels within this very considerable time span, for the simple reason that it was thought unworthy of serious attention until the present century. Nor are there such labels for any of the phases of ancient art preceding the Archaic. Measured in purely chronological terms, then, Gombrich's normative categories cover only two limited areas: Greek art from about 600 B.C. to the Roman conquest, and Western European art from about 1000 to 1900. Both are centered on "peaks of perfection" — Classic Greek art of the century between Pericles and Alexander the Great, and the Italian High Renaissance around 1500. Gombrich concerns himself only with these 1500 years, out of a total of more than 5000 during which we can trace a continuous tradition for historic Western art, beginning with the Old Kingdom in Egypt. He does so because they embrace the traditional core areas of art historical study, and because to him the twin peaks of Classic Greek and Italian High Renaissance art remain objective realities. Whether or not we share the latter conviction (there are many today who resist it) we can well understand why he concentrates on the "weighted" phases of Western art; for the weighting itself, regardless of its validity, has been unquestioningly accepted for so long that it now is a historic fact of the first importance. We do not know who first proclaimed the doctrine that Greek art had reached perfection in what we are accustomed to calling

the Classic age, but it must have been widely accepted not later than the time of Augustus. As Gombrich has demonstrated, it was taken for granted by both Pliny and Vitruvius, the two Roman authors on whom Vasari modeled his account of the development of Renaissance art toward perfection in Michelangelo and Raphael. This normative view also affects our knowledge of the monuments themselves: works of art cherished as Classic stand a far better chance than others to be known to posterity. Even if the originals are destroyed, they tend to survive in multiple copies, like the *Doryphorus* of Polyclitus. The same attitude is reflected in two artistic phenomena that have been with us since Roman (and perhaps since Hellenistic) times — Classicism, the conscious imitation of the Classic, and Archaism, the imitation, for special purposes, of the not-yet-Classic or indeed of the downright Barbaric (Primitivism). Finally, the belief in Classic perfection has colored our view of the evolution of artistic traditions quite unrelated (or assumed to be unrelated) to the Greek heritage. Thus Gothic art is often regarded as having reached its peak in the High Gothic or Classic Gothic cathedrals of France between 1200 and 1250, after a fairly brief Early Gothic phase and before a very long late Gothic phase that lasted into the sixteenth century. Some modern scholars speak of Classic Mayan art or Classic Indian sculpture; and certain kinds of African Negro sculpture have been acclaimed as Classic examples of Primitive art. We even find perfection in negative achievement (e.g., a Classic *faux-pas*, a Classic boner), although here Classic has lost its evolutionary implications.

The idea that Greek art — or any other art that forms a coherent tradition — strives toward the perfect realization of its potential and then declines, is obviously patterned on the life cycle of the individual: a fairly rapid growth to maturity followed by a gradual but ever more perceptible lessening of creative power. The analogy may be thought naive, just because it is so close at hand. A more sophisticated model drawn from the realm of biology would seem desirable but remains to be found. Still, imputing a quasi-human life to artistic forms has one signal virtue: it postulates that their evolution is irreversible. This is more than can be said of the alternative method, descended from the aesthetics of Burke and Schiller, which regards the history of art as a series of pendulum swings between polar opposites such as Optic and Haptic, Additive and Divisive. Gombrich rightly points out the shortcomings of such schemata and pleads for an unabashed “perfectionism.” The life-cycle analogy, however, is peculiarly selective. We tend to apply it only to what we think of as periods of exceptionally high achievement; the rest of the history of art (which is to say most of it) has no clearly perceived peaks of

perfection. There is no Classic phase in the art of Ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia, nor in Roman art or the art of the earlier Middle Ages. At the same time, we exempt individuals of exceptionally high artistic rank from the standard life-cycle pattern — who would dare to claim that the late works of Rembrandt or Beethoven represent a decline from their peak achievements?

Gombrich does not help us to resolve these paradoxes. When he warns that normatively weighted terms such as those he lists are not readily convertible into value-neutral morphological ones, he does not want us to cease using these labels altogether; he argues, rather, against the belief that “all works of art created in these distinct periods of human history . . . must share some profound quality or essence which characterizes all manifestations of the Gothic or the Baroque.” Among art historians, this belief is clearly on the wane today. But on what grounds, we wonder, does Gombrich speak of Gothic or Baroque as “distinct periods of human history” if there is no such thing as Gothic Man or Baroque Man? Even if we assume that he meant “distinct periods of art history” (which need not correspond to periods in other fields of history) his answer is less than satisfactory. He advocates what he calls “a principle of exclusion” instead of a search for common morphological features, such as the desire to avoid being academic which he claims is shared by all present-day artists. While it is true that Gothic and Baroque originated as terms of exclusion (i.e., designating two different ways of being other-than-classic), I find it difficult to discern an equivalent “desire to avoid” which could be said to unite all Gothic or Baroque artists. How meaningful, for instance, would it be to state that Rubens and Vermeer both wanted to avoid being like Raphael? As a matter of fact, Rubens — but not Vermeer — did want to be like Raphael in some ways. Meyer Schapiro has pointed out that “in some periods there are opposed styles with forms that resist classification as elements of a common art.” This has been increasingly true ever since the fifteenth century, and is strikingly evident today. But the more diverse the styles within a given time span, the less helpful becomes Gombrich’s principle of exclusion. To say that all modern artists want to avoid being academic tells us nothing about their various ways of not being academic, and it is these, after all, that interest us. Art historians specializing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries analyze their subject not in terms of periods, styles, or schools but of movements (e.g., Impressionism, Cubism, Dada, Pop), none of them dominant or stable enough to be “period styles” at any time but identifiable nonetheless by their morphological and ideological continuity. It is not unhistorical, I think, to regard the Gothic as a movement — perhaps the earliest

clearly discernible one in the history of art; starting at the Abbey of St.-Denis shortly before 1150, it spread at varying rates of speed in every direction until, a century later, it had transformed the art of the entire Catholic West. From then on, the many regional variants of Gothic collectively formed the period style of the West for about two hundred years, a period style identifiable not by a common essence but by the morphological continuity of each regional variant with the original Gothic of the Ile de France. Moreover, the rest of Europe was quite aware of the origin of Gothic; it was known abroad as *opus francigenum* or *opus modernum* — the first style to be labeled “modern” by its own practitioners. Thus we hardly need a principle of exclusion (even if we are willing to assume that Abbot Suger of St.-Denis and his masons were motivated by such a negative aim) in order to define Gothic as a distinct period of art history.

Surprisingly enough, some awareness of *opus francigenum* as the earliest modern architecture seems to have survived the coining of the derogatory label of Gothic. The *Cyclopaedia* of Ephraim Chambers, first issued in 1727, informs us s.v. “Gothic architecture” that there are two kinds, ancient and modern; the former, brought from the North by the Goths in the fifth century, is exceedingly massive, heavy and coarse, while modern Gothic runs to the other extreme, being light, delicate, and rich to a fault. Under “Architecture,” we further read that modern Gothic was encouraged by the French kings, especially Hughes and Robert Capet. Finally, s.v. “Modern,” we learn that the term “modern architecture” is sometimes applied, though improperly, to both the “Italian manner of building, as being according to the rules of the antique,” and Gothic architecture; it ought to be used for architecture “which partakes partly of the antique . . . and partly of the Gothic.” Here apparently Chambers excerpted a different source. One wonders what examples of “partly antique, partly Gothic” buildings that author had in mind; certain seventeenth-century French châteaux and English country houses might satisfy his definition. As for “ancient Gothic,” it obviously refers to what a century later was dubbed Romanesque (corrupt Roman) to distinguish it more clearly from Capetian Gothic, which by then was very highly regarded.

As an art historical label, Romanesque has had a career very different from that of Gothic. Coined as a term of exclusion denoting medieval architecture before the Gothic, it covered a variety of styles over a span of some 700 years. The earlier of these styles have since been given separate, value-neutral terms (Anglo-Saxon, Carolingian, Ottonian), so that Romanesque today refers to the architecture associated with the revival of large-scale sculpture from the late tenth to

the twelfth century; it also refers to the sculpture and painting of this two-hundred-year span. But its lower boundaries remain vague, and its morphological features vary so much from place to place that the concept of a Romanesque "period style" is far less coherent than that of Gothic. As a consequence, there have been no claims that Romanesque art expresses the spiritual essence of Romanesque Man as distinct from Gothic Man; in fact, Wilhelm Worringer, writing on the *Geist der Gotik* shortly before the First World War (the English translation has the misleading title, *Form in Gothic*) discovered the "Gothic spirit" in all sorts of Romanesque and pre-Romanesque works.

If Gothic — and its conceptual descendant, Romanesque — are likely to remain meaningful as both styles and periods, this cannot be said of two other members of Gombrich's "procession," Mannerism and Baroque. Mannerism (derived from *maniera*, a pejorative label for the imitators of Michelangelo and Raphael in the writings of classicistic Italian critics of the seventeenth century) was launched by Max Dvorák in 1920 as a major period in literature and the visual arts intervening between High Renaissance and Baroque but akin to neither. Dvorák saw it as related both to the Middle Ages and the twentieth century in its return to spiritual absolutes and its aversion to sensuous nature. After more than forty years of controversy John Shearman, the most recent critic to attempt a definition of Mannerism as a major period in the history of art (as well as of literature and music), regards it as a direct outgrowth of the High Renaissance and terms it "the stylish style." This would seem to be an attempt to split the difference between the Dvorák faction and the reductionist critics (Gombrich, Craig Smyth) to whom Mannerism is only one of several styles during the interval between High Renaissance and Baroque. The latter view is likely to prevail. The status of Baroque as a major period in the history of art embracing the seventeenth and part of the eighteenth century varies from country to country. It is least fully accepted in England and France (where the original pejorative meaning of the word as a synonym for bizarre or extravagant still appears in current dictionaries); more so in America and Italy (under German influence); and without reservation in Germany as early as 1888, in *Renaissance und Barock*, Heinrich Wölfflin had argued for the Baroque as a period style with distinct values of its own rather than as a degenerate late version of Renaissance art). At present, art historians have three alternative ways of employing Baroque: as an art historical period of the same order of magnitude as Renaissance; as an art historical period within the Renaissance, i.e. the last major subdivision of the Renaissance conceived as a "megaperiod" (to use a term

proposed by Erwin Panofsky) separating the Middle Ages from the Modern era (in this frame of reference, its order of magnitude corresponds to that of Gothic); and as one of several trends of style between 1600 and 1750, exemplified by Rubens, Pietro da Cortona, and Bernini. The first alternative tends to postulate Baroque Man as distinct from Renaissance Man and Gothic Man (in a famous lecture of 1913, Wölfflin claimed that the Baroque "saw differently" from the Renaissance) whose spiritual essence is presumably expressed not only in art but in literature and music as well; to demonstrate this essence requires great ingenuity in manipulating abstract concepts as well as a very judicious choice of examples. The second, more modest alternative offers fewer difficulties: it accommodates a certain continuity of development from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century and is less in conflict with the periodization patterns of other branches of history; even here, however, there is an implicit assumption of morphological unity that cannot be readily demonstrated. Only the third alternative leaves us free to admit how difficult it is to bring, let us say, Georges de La Tour, Poussin, and Pietro da Cortona (all painters born within three years of each other) into a common focus; but it poses the problem of how to classify and label all those artistic phenomena that lie outside this restricted definition of Baroque. Ideally, such labels ought to convey something of the aesthetic qualities of the works of art to which they refer. Yet, to judge from past experience, labels of this kind are apt to be coined only in the heat of critical acclaim or disapproval, and are thus automatically "weighted." Value-neutral, purely morphological labels, it seems, can be coined — and made to stick — only in the realm of ornament (e.g., strapwork). The art historian looking for terms to apply to what he perceives as non-Baroque styles in the seventeenth century is thus likely to borrow them from political history (Queen Anne, Restoration, Louis XIV) and to endow them with as much morphological significance as they can accommodate. If their capacity is often all too limited, these political-dynastic labels at least have the virtue of resisting inflation into over-all period styles.

What, then, will be the future of our value-charged terminology? Of one thing we may be sure: there will be more such terms for art historians to cope with as new movements make their appearance on the artistic scene; they seem incapable of giving rise to any other kind of label. The normatively weighted classifications for the art of the past are likely to survive as well, but as styles with more clearly defined boundaries rather than as all-embracing periods, and with their residual normative implications ever more neutralized. Their relative importance will probably shrink as art historians turn increas-

ing attention to non-Western fields where such terms never existed. I venture to hope that this trend will also promote closer cooperation and interdependence between art historical scholarship and the other branches of historic study.

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Criteria of Periodization in the History of European Art

III: A Comment on H. W. Janson's Article

E. H. Gombrich

Thank you for sending me H. W. Janson's paper for comment. I am afraid time does not permit me at present to write something more substantial than a letter, but I should at least like to say how pleased I was to see that he found my observations useful.

Perhaps I may take as my starting point Professor Janson's concluding remarks about non-Western fields. Not only do I agree with him, I think that we might perhaps extract a little more from this comparison between Western and non-Western styles. Briefly (and I must be brief), it seems to me that the "weighted" terminology I have discussed in "Norm and Form" did not arise in the West by accident. Western art (or large stretches of Western art) differs from, say, tribal art, through its interest in technical progress — an interest it shares, of course, with the Civilization from which it springs. The histories of such progress in antiquity (Pliny, Quintilian), and in the Renaissance (Vasari) have introduced us to periodization by skill: before and after the discovery of foreshortening, of light and shade in painting, of perspective, oil painting or ferro-concrete. A periodization based on such inventions or discoveries is familiar in the history of warfare (gunpowder, nuclear weapons) or of science (Copernican Revolution, Mendel). What characterises the history of art — at least as we see it — is not so much the fact of progress (for which there are also examples outside the west), but what I would call the "polarizing" influence of technical progress.¹ To be sure, certain innovations can also be rejected for a variety of reasons, but to refuse to apply perspective is not the same in art as not to have heard of it. I quote a remark I made in my Spenser Trask Lectures at Princeton in

¹ See my article "Style" in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968).

which I discussed precisely the problem of deliberate "primitivism":

. . . the idea of expression is inextricably bound up with the appreciation of a choice. This goes for trivial examples no less than for heroic ones. You may find it characteristic and expressive of Sir Winston Churchill's character that he was always seen with a cigar, and of Field Montgomery that he is a non-smoker. But Julius Caesar was not a non-smoker, though he did not smoke. To treat him in his own right, we must know when tobacco was introduced.

What characterizes inventions, including the invention of skills, is that they increase the area of choice and with it, perhaps, certain temptations.

If I am right, Western art always exists in what one might call a field of force, every one of an artist's choices refers to other choices others may have made. It is no accident, therefore, that in describing the history of this field of force, we, too, use polarized terms of exclusion. To be sure, there always have been periods and artists even within the Western tradition who were comparatively isolated from this field of force, we call them "provincial" which need not necessarily be a derogatory term. That it can be, is by itself symptomatic of our instinctive demand that the artist should somehow be "in touch."

I see no reason to think that the same must apply to all artistic productions elsewhere. Even if it were, we would find it hard to assign a place in its own "field of force" to an Indian bronze or a Persian rug. We may admire its refinement or rugged strength, we may treasure its expressiveness of sheer decorative mastery, but we cannot see it quite in the way we see a Pontormo or a Seurat. I am not sure that this this is only due to our lack of knowledge of the implied references — there may be none.

If I am right it may indeed be possible to speak of "periods" in art. The history of Western art itself may exhibit such periods, when, for instance, the issue of progress was almost or wholly unquestioned. But even where it was not, you may have, what I have called in a paper (as yet unpublished) "critical issues"² which dominate the period and force artists to take sides. Wherever such an issue becomes dominant and forces its attention on all who take part in the game of art we may speak of a "period," a subsidiary field of force. Caravaggio's naturalism comes to mind, or Impressionism. You could reject it, you hardly could ignore it. Unlike other critics I believe that intention matters in art.

² "The Logic of Vanity Fair; Alternatives to Historicism in the Study of Fashion, Style and Taste," to be published in *The Philosophy of K. R. Popper* ("The Library of Living Philosophers," ed. P. A. Schilpp).

Needless to say such "fields of force" do not necessarily coincide with a chronological period, but it is in the nature of things that issues arise and die. We see this in fashions, as we see it in styles.

Live issues are often the rallying cry of "movements" and I have suggested elsewhere³ that movements seem to me the most promising subject of study for those who are interested in a unitary approach to artistic and intellectual history. Here, by the way, is a minor point of disagreement between H. W. Janson and myself. I do not think that Gothic architecture was really identified with a movement, it was perhaps a mixture of a technical innovation and a fashion. The Renaissance, by contradistinction, obviously was a movement which exalted a particular style in literature, oratory and art. Not that it was all-embracing but it carried over into many fields.

WARBURG INSTITUTE

³ "In Search of Cultural History," "The Philip Maurcie Denek Lecture," 1967 (Oxford, 1969).