Review: Heinrich Wölfflin’s Principles of Art History

With his 1915 book *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin created a work which has had a resounding effect on all subsequent art history. Art history before this book consisted largely of anecdotal narratives and lists of art works. Wölfflin had in mind a new method for examining the art of the past. He investigated the roots of style in isolation and sought laws which would be applicable throughout all the changes which the visual arts developed. He approached the visual arts from the standpoint of the neo-Kantian philosophical school of the late nineteenth century, in which he was trained at Basel and Berlin. This school attempted to explain the relationship of the viewer to the work of art in terms of psychological and physiological processes.¹

In this book, he outlined his system for the analysis of painting, sculpture, and architecture. He devised five categories of objective criteria to study differences between the visual forms of various nationalities and epochs. These are: linear vs. painterly, plane vs. recession, closed vs. open form (or tectonic vs. a-tectonic), multiplicity vs. unity, and clearness vs. uncleanness. Each occupies its own chapter, and analyses are given in each in the order of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Painting receives the fullest discussion in each chapter, with discussions involving general remarks, principal motives, subject matter, and historical and national characteristics. Wölfflin’s analyses of the art were highly descriptive case examples. Although he considered his technique to be nearly universally applicable, his choice of art works in this publication centered on German and Italian art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Wölfflin’s desire was to discover the roots of style, both the individual style and the period style (or *zeitgeist*). Throughout this book, he concentrated on the arts as progressing from a simpler, more static style to a complex, movement-filled style. The static style is characterized by linear, planar, tectonic, clear, plastic treatment; he dubbed this “classic”. The “baroque”, on the other hand, is painterly, recessional, open-formed, and less clear to the observer. Classic art was created in the Quattrocento and baroque in the Cinquecento. The Italians had more feeling for the classic style, while the Germans’ *forté* was the baroque.

Wölfflin believed strongly in the proposition that artistic style changed in a cyclical process. Most of the chapters include some remark, even parenthetical, about the art of periods following the baroque era returning to the classic style. He expanded his theory to include the art of such epochs as the Gothic, ancient, and nineteenth century periods. As each style passed from relevance, artists would reevaluate their needs and approaches, and a new objectivity would arise. In this respect, Wölfflin was following an older approach to history which is best titled biological. There is a birth, vigorous youth, golden middle age, decline, and death—followed perhaps by a later rebirth. As for the technical process of change itself, he remained ambiguous towards the problem of whether it was internal or external forces which created artistic change. To him, the eye was “conditioned and conditioning”—it could see only what it was trained to see, but could be trained to see things in new ways.² In this book, however, Wölfflin investigated art of the past in a manner which was divested of a majority of the art’s cultural matrix.

² *Principles of Art History*, pp. 17 and 237.
He replaced the matrix with a racial and chronological schema. The racial schema is most troubling. Repeatedly he made statements about the “Germanic” or “Nordic”, as opposed to the “Italian” or “Latin”, aesthetic.\textsuperscript{3} It is hazardous to make such strong distinctions about things that are so ephemeral when they cannot be fully supported. In the early days of social Darwinist thought, such opinions were copiously aired in philosophic and political thought. From the perspective of the late twentieth century, however, these ideas evoke entirely new meanings—most of them negative. Perhaps it would be more accurate to assign the dissimilarity between Italian and German aesthetics to “cultural” rather than “racial” origins. But even this view would be somewhat untenable, since artists in both cultures had numerous conceptions of art at their disposal. It should also be pointed out that Wölfflin’s descriptions tend to be positive towards the baroque/painterly/a-tectonic works, and rather noncommittal about the classic/linear/closed-form works.\textsuperscript{4} The objective approach he sought may not be wholly located in this apparatus.

Other questions occur to the mind of the reader perusing Wölfflin’s explorations of Renaissance and Baroque art and architecture. The body of his text covers the “whats, wheres, and whens” of these styles, but he only fully brought up the “why” in his conclusion—and then only unsatisfactorily. Some art historians approach the art of past civilizations from the perspective of the society which produced it, keeping in mind the music, politics, literature, economic systems, and general geistesgeschichte of that period and place; Wölfflin did not use this full background in this book. As to his theory that his dichotomy was applicable to numerous generations and places, there can be raised many

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 56, 67, 193-194, 235.
\textsuperscript{4} Note his repeated use of the term “primitives”.

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objections; artists have personal aims, aesthetics, techniques of problem-solving, bad ideas, etc. Does Wölfflin’s theory allow for these? No. What about the problem of society’s taste in art, which is especially prominent during the Protestant Reformation? There is little or no discussion of that here. He states in several places that later artists could not visualize or create works in older styles; why not? To what extent does the art of the past influence the art of the future? For Wölfflin, “everything old is new again”—ways of seeing and representing in the past will probably occur again. New styles are born when older styles no longer suffice—according to whom and why? Oftentimes new styles are developed in an era with different problems which call for new solutions.

These differences of opinion aside, Wölfflin provided a very necessary new way to examine and think about the visual arts. A more objective way of studying art, via the seven elements of form, was needed at that point in art history. His technique for close examination of the use of line, shape, edge, form, color, texture, and composition are very helpful for coming to a fuller understanding of a work of art. To this extent he was very successful with his proposal. Once the viewer makes a careful study of the artwork itself, one can then proceed to further explorations into the realm of the artist and his or her society. Such investigations allow us to gain a perspective on the people of the past, how they saw, and how they lived; this, in turn, enriches our world and gives us new worlds to see.