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Style: Its Role in the Archaeology of Art

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Introduction

The Relevance of the Concept of Style in the Archaeology of Art

Style has been and still is a core concept in the field of the archaeology of art for several reasons, including the fact that it is a twofold term: on the one hand, it refers to a quality of past human actions which is perceptible in material culture, and on the other hand, it is also an analytical tool that allows archaeologists to find continuities and discontinuities in the archaeological record which are relevant to answering questions about the spatial and temporal distribution and qualities of cultural practices.

The concept of style is particularly relevant to the archaeology of art because, among other material culture products, the creation of artworks (be them artifacts or structures) entails the manipulation of form, color, size, texture, volume, etc. in the creation process, which often show recurrent patterns that evidence the underlying operation of stylistic rules and habits. Thus, style studies tackle numerous aspects of image making and display, including the trends underneath the design of visual motifs, their combinations and layout, the techniques used in their production, as well as the types of objects and contexts in which such images were created and displayed, the functions that they had for their creators, and the effects they generated over their users-viewers (Conkey & Hastorf 1990).

Yet, style has also been an analytical tool used by archaeologists to pinpoint visual similarities between artworks, in order to map their spatial distribution and/or to create stylistic sequences. In turn, these have often been interpreted as evidence of underlying archaeological cultures, which produced such similar traits, although such

interpretations have also been challenged and much debated in the last 30 years (Conkey & Hastorf 1990). Such theoretical approaches and debates are reviewed in this entry.

Definition

What Is Style in the Archaeology of Art

Many archaeological research projects on art materials (rock art, portable art, pottery decoration, sculptures, friezes, etc.) have relied heavily on the concept of style, as a tool to classify artistic assemblages, create evolutionary sequences, and explore the distribution of specific artistic traditions in order to discern past identities. Although commonly understood as a way of doing, particular to a specific time and place, this concept has been defined from different and sometimes conflicting theoretical frameworks (Conkey & Hastorf 1990). Some key elements are explicitly or implicitly common to most definitions of the term *style*, which is recognizable when *comparing* a sample of *archaeological images* which show *shared features*, including (a) a common *repertoire of motifs*, e.g., their form, color, and size; (b) a common way of *displaying such motifs* on the media on which they are laid out (ceramic vessel, bedrock, bone artifact, etc.), e.g., their position, orientation, symmetric arrangement, and use of media features (its concavity/convexity/flatness, volume, topography); and (c) a common set of *image-making techniques* (including raw materials, tools, and technical operations to use them). Other features, such as the contexts in which these artifacts or structures were produced and used, as well as the functions and effects they had on their creators and viewers, do not appear in every definition of “style” and are more dependent on each theoretical approach to this concept (see below).

Historical Background

Style from a Normative Culture-History Framework

The first formal use of the concept of style in archaeology and thus in the archaeology of art

was developed by the culture-history framework: it conceived style as a set of mental rules that operated within a broader set of cultural norms and which were projected into the creation of images with certain recurrent features that were recognizable in the archaeological record: types of decorative motifs, color choices, artifact shapes, depicted themes, decorative techniques, etc. (e.g., Breuil 1952; Leroi-Gourhan 1968). Hence, style became a diagnostic trait by which archaeologists identified/created “archaeological cultures.” Thus, styles’ spatial distribution became key indicators of the diffusion of cultural norms from one site or region to another, while stylistic sequences formed by the diachronic succession of styles became the backbone of archaeological periodifications. In turn, styles became chronological indicators for relative dating, motif types, and forms being used in some cases as “fossil guides” to date artworks.

The shortcomings of such theoretical framework are many and have been clearly pinpointed by several authors (see their contributions below). Firstly, these normative approaches to style clearly saw it as a reflection of a mental set of shared rules and, as such, as a passive factor in human life: persons were seen more as the passive “bearers” of style rather than as its producers and manipulators. Secondly, style was mainly separated from function insofar as it was regarded more as the result of repeated norms than as the result of a social practice with certain practical purposes. Thirdly, this perspective was clearly homeostatic since its emphasis on the *shared* rules disregarded the possibility of manipulations, impositions, negotiations, and/or contradictions within the people who produced, circulated, and consumed specific style-bearing artifacts and structures. These issues were to be tackled by the following theoretical approaches.

Style from a Processual Framework

The deep breakthrough generated by the processual framework in archaeology through its explicit and thorough criticism towards culture-history did have a clear effect on the way style was conceived in art analyses. The pioneer work by Binford (1965) led to two key new ideas

about culture, which was now conceived: (1) as “a system composed of subsystems” (Binford 1965: 203) in which “different classes of archaeological remains reflect different subsystems” (Binford 1965: 203) and (2) as “man’s extrasomatic means of adaptation (White 1959: 8)” to the environment (Binford 1965: 205). This meant that “people, things, and places are components in a field that consists of environmental and sociocultural subsystems, and the locus of cultural process is in the dynamic articulations of these subsystems” (Binford 1965: 205). Thus, culture “is not necessarily shared; it is participated in by men” (Binford 1965: 205). Such ideas had a deep impact on the way style was conceived by processual archaeologists: culture – and style within it – was not just in people’s minds, was not necessarily shared, and was not detached from the environment: culture involved practice and had adaptive functions to the environment. Did style have functions too? The answers to this question had a broad variety of replies within the processual framework.

Binford himself proposed that stylistic variability could be defined as the continuity of “formal attributes, which vary with the social context of manufacture exclusive of the variability of the use of the item” (Binford 1965: 208); that is, style and use (or function) of an item were seen as separate but interrelated realms. To pursue their study, he devised a complex set of interrelated variables to be approached through a multivariate perspective:

- (a) *Formal variation* was seen as integrated by morphological variation and decorative variation, which in turn were intersected by the technical dimension and the design dimension (Binford 1965: 205).
- (b) *Cultural variation* was conceived as integrated by four variables: techno-morphological, morphological design, decorative techniques, and decorative designs, which, in turn, were intersected by the primary functional variation (directly related to the specific use of an artifact) and the secondary functional variation (a by-product of the social context of production and use of the artifact) (Binford 1965: 206). This

multivariate approach was foundational in the analytical separation between style and function, which was later reelaborated by other authors.

Sackett (1977) also made a clear distinction between the style and function operating in three scales: entire archaeological assemblages, artifacts, and attributes that characterize them (1977: 371-372). Yet he did remark that both were contrasting and complementary features. Function was conceived as a feature perceived in the actions, ends, and roles that an artifact performed within its context, while style was conceived as the choices made by a society within a broad range of equally valid alternate means of achieving the same end (i.e., the same artifact) (1977: 371-372). Such choices were socially transmitted and thus had diagnostic value in the archaeological identification of cultural traditions and of the degree of intensity of social interaction between two historically related loci (1977: 371-372).

Breaking away from the processual framework and proposing a neoevolutionist approach, Dunnell (1978) focused on the concept of natural selection as a key to addressing evolutionary processes underlying cultural change. In doing so, and contradicting the processual approach, he noted that “a substantial segment of the archaeological record is not best understood in terms of adaptation” (Dunnell 1978: 192), because stylistic features of material culture were not adaptive. Thus, he proposed that there existed a fundamental dichotomy between function – accountable in terms of evolutionary processes – and style, accountable in terms of stochastic processes, that is, not subject to the bias of natural selection (Dunnell 1978: 192). These concepts have been challenged as well as revisited and refined (e.g., Hurt & Rakita 2001; Shennan & Wilkinson 2001).

Following Dunnell, Meltzer restricts the term style to refer to “those forms in a cultural system that do not have detectable value: those forms are adaptively ‘neutral’” (Meltzer 1981: 314). Style, as a residual attribute, is interpreted as added for purely social purposes. On the contrary, functional features do not depend directly on

transmission factors or interaction between groups but may result from adaptations or the development of similar activities in similar environments.

Contrary to these views, a number of researchers have suggested the coexistence of different styles with different functions within the same culture, with differences between religious and secular art, or between civil and domestic art (Schapiro 1952: 294). Similarly, Smith observes the use of two different styles among the Aboriginal people from Barunga (Arnhem Land, Australia) with different functions: a figurative style for non-ceremonial contexts and a geometric style for ceremonial contexts (Smith 1994: 241).

A different approach to style was developed by Wobst, who defined it as “that part of the formal variability in material culture that can be related to the participation of artifacts in processes of information exchange” (Wobst 1977: 321). The author broke the style/function opposition and proposed instead that “stylistic behaviour does have functions” (Wobst 1977: 321). Following core concepts of communication theory, Wobst viewed artifact styles as media through which messages could be encoded by emitters even in the absence of receivers, while, in turn, messages could later be decoded in the absence of emitters. The longevity of artifacts (though clearly some are highly perishable) and the control of the emission of messages via the use of rare materials or high-cost energy investment in the signals were conceived as particular features of this mode of information communication. He also pointed out that the archaeological expectations of stylistic behavior include:

- (a) Artifacts with high visibility.
- (b) Artifacts which are “potentially encountered by more individuals” and most accessible to them.
- (c) “social-group-specific stylistic form[s] should occur only among those messages that are most widely broadcast, that broadcast group affiliation, and that enter into processes of boundary maintenance” (Wobst 1977: 330).

Yet social interaction interpretations done by other authors were severely challenged by Plog (1978), who pinpointed numerous false assumptions underlying several stylistic ceramic studies (e.g., that “all households made the pottery they used” and that “manufacture of ceramics was a female activity”) and thus proposed that “one should not simply calculate a similarity coefficient between design frequencies at two sites and assume that it measures interaction and nothing else” (Plog 1978: 368). Following the work of Wobst (1977), Plog (1978), and others, in the 1980s several authors addressed style as a process of social interaction and exchange, both in the analysis of portable art (e.g., Gamble 1982) and rock art (e.g., Jochim 1983; Schaafsma 1985; Smith 1992a, b, 1994).

Style from Post-processual and Social Frameworks

The post-processual and social frameworks challenged several of the ideas about style mentioned above: they share in common the fact that they see style as an active factor in the production and manipulation of material culture, a factor that stems from human agency, can be used as a source of power to do things and over people and resources, and thus, having crucial effects on the social lives of those involved in the creation, circulation, and display of artifacts and structures fashioned with a particular style, operating within a particular context. However, as will be noted below, these approaches do strongly differ in their epistemology: those labeled here as “social” being more prone to neopositivist and dialectical epistemologies combining induction and deduction, while the post-processual ones being more prone to hermeneutic and interpretive epistemologies.

As a pioneer of post-processual archaeology, Hodder contested the adaptationist and functionalist notions of culture and style and proposed that material culture was better conceived as “the environment within which individuals find their places and learn the places of others, their goals and expectations. Yet it also produces new situations and is . . . the medium through which individuals achieve their ends” (Hodder 1985: 5).

Thus, as part of any material culture item, style involved social action, including simultaneously “meaning and experience, subject and object, interpretation and observation” (Hodder 1985: 4). Moreover, the political dimension of style was stressed by pointing out that pottery decoration, for example, could be interpreted as “part of the negotiation of power, defining boundaries, and producing social differences” (Hodder 1985: 4). Many of these ideas are still in use.

From a more social and ethnographic point of view, Wiessner (1983, 1989) defined two key concepts related to the links between style and identity that have generated an important debate in archaeology: emblematic style was defined as the formal variation that consciously transmits information about affiliation to a group, while assertive style was defined as the formal variation that carries information about individual identity. While this distinction is extremely meaningful in terms of the multiple social implications of style as an identity marker, it also has some shortcomings when applied to certain prehistoric archaeological contexts in which the distinction between assertive or emblematic becomes untestable.

A similar set of concepts was devised by Macdonald (1990), who stated that protocol referred to the set of steps undergone in the production of an item within a stylistic framework, while panache referred to the ability of an individual to negotiate and push the boundaries of such protocol for his/her own aims.

In turn, Sackett (1990) elaborated his previous ideas about style and function and proposed a set of concepts: *isochrestic variation* was related to the choices made between variants that are functionally equivalent and transmitted neither intentionally nor consciously through enculturation within social groups, but rather passively and inadvertently (hence, challenging Wiessner’s notion of an emblematic style consciously informing about identity); *iconological variation* was related to the active and intentional communication of contents through the creation and selection of specific images and/or designs. Thus, Sackett had proposed a more complex dichotomy:

- (i) passive style = isochrestic variation = function
versus
- (ii) active style = iconological variation = communication

To this, Wiessner (1989) replied that both aspects of style – functional and communicative – could be passive and/or active, hence breaking such strict dichotomy.

Finally, from a more openly social and materialist theoretical point of view, Earle has analyzed the manipulative uses of style as a justification of social inequality (Earle 1990). The author has pointed out that, among other factors, artifacts and structures created using elaborated art styles, luxury items, and durable materials generate aesthetic, and affective reactions can be very effective means of conferring individual’s roles, status, and power due to the fact that they look not just visually appealing but also solid, permanent, and thus unquestionable (Earle 1990).

Key Issues/Current Debates

Current Uses of the Concepts of Style: Key Elements in Style Analysis

In the twenty-first century, style still plays a significant role as a tool to discern social identities and to establish relative chronologies when analyzing art materials and more particularly rock art. While portable forms of art can be dated through the archaeological context where they are found, direct rock art dating is still problematic, and when possible, it generally dates a particular motif or artwork. But an absolute date would only be meaningful to the archaeological study of art if the motif or the artwork can be assigned to a specific stylistic assemblage or unit defined by the reproduction of a certain set of common principles. Only then will we be able to identify artistic traditions, assign them to specific time periods, and explore their geographic distribution, to study the duration and intensity of specific occupations, the boundaries and interactions of specific human groups, and other aspects related with human geography and exchange

networks and their evolution over time (Domingo 2005, 2012).

In order to obtain information about the past through the analysis of artworks, we need to systematically describe and quantify their main characteristics and compare them, looking for similarities and differences to classify them in meaningful units.

But what are the key elements in style analysis?

Style, or the particular way of doing of a specific individual or group, can be found in any step of the process of production (Leroi-Gourhan's 1964 notion of *Chaîne Operatoire*), of an artwork, whether technological, formal, or functional. When producing an artwork, there is a range of choices from which the artist can select, either intentionally or simply by following a set of instructions learned in a specific context. The artists' choices can be unique to them or their group, and thus they become stylistic.

To find traces of identity through the analysis of artworks, it is necessary to systematically decompose their process of production, since stylistic behavior can be identified in different steps of this process:

1. Style can be identified in the formal features of an artwork (form and decoration). The study of the formal features is usually approached through visual analysis, including systematic description of different descriptive categories (always adapted to the type of artwork under analysis, whether rock art, portable art, body art, and so forth) and quantification of their frequency to observe if they change over time and/or space. Some of these categories include:
 - (a) Motif types (abstract, geometric, or figurative and their subcategories, such as humans, animals, plants, and objects).
 - (b) Shape (proportions, modelling, animation, perspective, and so forth).
 - (c) Size.
 - (d) Formal relations in space (patterns of composition and scenes). Once motifs have been analyzed, it is important to look for regularities in the way they are distributed through the panel or artifact, in

order to discover if different rules of composition and arrangement exist. Similarly, compositions and scenes have to be carefully analyzed looking for changes in subject matter.

- (e) Patterns of addition and superimposition. The way the motifs are added to the panels or artifacts can also be specific to a particular individual or group. Do they use specific areas of the panel or artifact? Do they use new sites or surfaces, or do they reuse previously used ones? Do they respect previous motifs or overlap them? How is the morphology of the decorated surface integrated in the composition or scene? Superimpositions of motifs that are stylistically similar may simply be an artistic license to show group perspective. But those including different styles are quite significant for stylistic analysis since they offer a sequence of events, and thus, they are useful to establish relative sequences.
- (f) Analysis of the spatial distribution in the natural and cultural context. The distribution of portable art may provide information on the geography of specific traditions but also on exchange networks. But rock art is fixed to place, and thus it is a relevant source of data to understand the way space was defined and used by a specific group, the duration and intensity of the occupation, and how the perception of a specific place changed over time in the construction of social identities (Lenssen-Erz, 2008; Domingo et al. 2008). When talking about rock art, this is usually explored through landscape analysis.
2. Technological features (medium and production techniques). The way the artworks are made can also be stylistic. From raw materials and resources to produce binders, paintings, and tools, to the selection and preparation of the decorative surface (rock or portable art), the selection of the techniques (paintings, engravings, or carvings), and so forth may all be constraint by cultural practices. While some aspects of the technological process of

production can be explored through visual analysis (selection of canvas, preliminary preparation of the working surface, decoration techniques), others need to be explored through archaeometry (like pigment analysis) or experimentation (like analysis of gestures, potential tools, and so on). Interestingly, as suggested by Gosselain (1992: 90), while the visual aspects of an artwork can be easily replicated by different cultures, non-visual aspects, such as pigment recipes, are more difficult to reproduce and thus provide the opportunity to explore the more stable aspects of social identities. As an example, Groenen suggests that the identification of different painting recipes and different application techniques in the analysis of the hand stencils from Gargas results from different artistic events, in contrast to the single intervention deduced by Leroi-Gourhan through formal analysis (Groenen 2000: 60).

3. **Function.** When talking about function, we refer to both the utilitarian function (related to the material use of an object) and the non-utilitarian function (related to social, ideological, or spiritual spheres) (Sackett 1977: 370). The same human group can potentially use different styles for different functions, and thus, two different styles do not necessarily refer to two different periods or cultures. Here, the analysis of the context would be central.

To summarize, any integral stylistic study should combine formal, functional, and technological analysis, in order to achieve a more objective approach to style, trying to define different social units and to determine their limits in space and time (Domingo 2012).

Future Directions

The Archaeology of Style in Art Materials

A review of the concept of style and its use in the archaeological study of art confirms its value as a tool to explore past social identities and to construct relative chronologies of different sorts of artworks. Together with the systematic

description, quantification, and classification of the artworks, future stylistic studies would certainly need to be complemented with more accurate absolute dates (especially in rock art) to provide a more precise chronological control of the art traditions; more accurate recording methods, in terms of the images, their spatial setting (landscape, topography, bedrock in rock art, or other materials in portable art), and production techniques; and, finally, controlled uses of ethnographic and historical resources as sources of hypotheses or as analytical tools to search for stylistic trends.

Cross-References

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Submerged Indigenous Sites

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Introduction

Land-based archaeological sites may be inundated through a variety of processes, resulting in submerged and potentially buried evidence of past human behavior. Submerged environments create unique conditions of archaeological preservation, especially for fragile materials such as textiles. In some cases, submerged sites on continental shelves or lake shores that were formerly exposed as dry land may represent evidence that predates the terrestrial archaeological record for that same area. Submerged indigenous sites are particularly informative in studies of human migration and patterns of early colonization and occupation but can be challenging to locate.

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