

# Connoisseurship and the Stakes of Style

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There is no doubt that this marvel, whose strangeness the word *human* should not hide from us, is a very great one. But we can at least recognize that this miracle is natural to us, that it begins with our incarnate life, and that there is no reason to look for its explanation in some World Spirit which allegedly operates within us without our knowledge and perceives in our place, beyond the perceived world, on a microscopic scale. Here, the spirit of the world is ourselves, as soon as we know how to *move* and *look*.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”<sup>1</sup>

A distinctive feature of both art history and archaeology is a commitment to the evidence of style: that is, to connoisseurship, defined as the attribution of artifacts to particular hands, or times, or places.<sup>2</sup> Critics of both disciplines often dismiss this practice out of hand, labeling it a mere discursive conceit or, worse, a reactionary fetishization of origins.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it

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1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. Michael B. Smith, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston, Ill., 1993), p. 103.

2. See *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (1979; Ithaca, N.Y., 1987), which remains the best treatment; see also *The Uses of Style in Archaeology*, ed. Margaret Conkey and Christine Hastorf (Cambridge, 1990), and *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. Caroline van Eck, James McAllister, and Renée van de Vall (Cambridge, 1995). The classic treatment of the subject in art history is Meyer Schapiro, “Style,” *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York, 1994), pp. 51–102. On the term *style*, see Willibald Saurländer, “From Stilus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion,” *Art History* 6 (Sept. 1983): 253–70. See Jonathan Gilmore, *The Life of a Style: Beginnings and Endings in the Narrative History of Art* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000), and “Problems in Connoisseurship,” a special issue of *Source* 24, no. 2 (2005) for recent treatments that, it is hoped, signal renewed interest in the subject.

3. This last view (connoisseurship as fetishism) is sometimes attributed to Derrida’s essay, “Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing”—the single best discussion of connoisseurship in recent memory. It is true that Derrida does associate attribution with the fetishist’s desire for plenitude, hence gratification. But that association is only half his argument. More important for present

is difficult to overstate the ill repute in which connoisseurship now stands among all but the most hidebound archaeologists and art historians; it has been the defining scapegoat of both disciplines for the last twenty years and more. Old-guard connoisseurs usually respond with more indignation than argument, and the grating mandarinism of their pronouncements does not help matters. In this debate (such as it is) the one side declares connoisseurship to be the idol of reaction, and the other enthusiastically (appallingly) agrees.

One result of this situation has been a relative neglect of stylistics in recent historiographic work. Disciplinary heroes like Erwin Panofsky, Alois Riegl, and Aby Warburg are far better known today than the nineteenth-century connoisseur Giovanni Morelli; yet the latter has had arguably the greater influence on the day-to-day practice of scholarship. More importantly, however, the combination of polemic and neglect has obscured the considerable theoretical interest of connoisseurship. The commitment to style is in fact exemplary of what might be called a worldly formalism—one that takes seriously what Paul de Man termed “the prosaic materiality of the letter.”<sup>4</sup> To be sure, this commitment is routinely disavowed, a fact that, as will become clear, is both inevitable and symptomatic. But it is time to look again at this linchpin of art-historical and archaeological method. What is involved (what is at stake?) in the attribution of an artifact to a particular hand, or place, or time? The present essay is designed to defend the study of style in general, and of connoisseurship in particular, from its friends as well as its enemies. At issue are not the criteria invoked to justify any particular attribution, but the criteria invoked to justify the application of any standards of evidence whatsoever to an attribution. It is about attribution as such.<sup>5</sup>

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purposes is the association of connoisseurship's dismissal with historical crime and the conclusion of the discussion with a simple *es gibt / il y'a*. See Jacques Derrida, “Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing,” *Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, 1987), pp. 329–30, 371.

4. Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis, 1996), p. 90. See Richard Neer, *Style and Politics in Athenian Vase-Painting: The Craft of Democracy, ca. 530–460 B.C.E.* (Cambridge, 2002).

5. On criteria in this Wittgensteinian sense, see Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 3–48; hereafter abbreviated CR. He describes “criteria as necessary *before* the identification or knowledge of an object, and as prelude to that knowledge” (CR, p. 17).

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### Bog-Walkers; or, The Priority of Style

The first thing to note about connoisseurship is that it is not, fundamentally, a search for individual authors. The cult of genius is certainly endemic in connoisseurial circles, and the monographic exhibition is its most characteristic expression. Broadly understood, however, connoisseurship is a form of *etiology*: the inference of an artifact's spatial and temporal point of origin on the basis of morphological ("stylistic") criteria. That point of origin can be as specific as a person or as general as a place; it is all the same as far as theory and practice are concerned. That is, the connoisseur who attributes a painting to Rembrandt is performing the same actions, and for the same reasons, as the field archaeologist who sorts her finds at the end of a day's work. When the archaeologist classifies a newly excavated potsherd as Naxian Geometric or al-Ubaid ware, she is using connoisseurial method: determining origin on the basis of style. Connoisseurship differs from ordinary pottery sorting only in degree, not in kind.

Field archaeologists may object, however, that their stylistic judgments derive from a painstaking correlation of "hard" excavation data and therefore have an objectivity lacking in a connoisseur's attributions. But this objection is hollow. The very act of correlating data prejudices the issue, for the objects of the comparison will of necessity be products of stylistic analysis. Imagine the following sequence:

- 1) Working in trench A, an excavator notices that finds of a given type cluster in a certain stratum.
- 2) Working in trench B, she again discovers that finds of a given type cluster in a certain stratum.
- 3) She compares the distinctive finds from trenches A and B and determines that they are stylistically similar.
- 4) She correlates the positions of these stylistically similar finds within the stratigraphies of trenches A and B to arrive at the beginning of a relative sequence. The similar finds may, for example, be said to be "contemporary"; the finds from lower strata in either trench will then be relatively "earlier," and finds from higher strata will be relatively "later." She may then repeat the whole process, comparing the "earlier" artifacts from trench A with those from the corresponding level in trench B to determine if they, too, are similar. And so on.

Connoisseurship precedes this entire process. In steps 1 and 2, the archaeologist seems to draw upon objective evidence: instead of associating artifacts by subjective, stylistic criteria, she merely associates them by physical proximity, by find-spot. But the problem lies in defining proximity; after all, everything is proximate to everything else in some extended sense. How

does one define an assemblage, a stratum, a find-spot in the first place? How does one determine that finds are of a given type? Answer: through the application of stylistic criteria. Style is the feature that identifies an assemblage, stratum, or find-spot *as such*.<sup>6</sup>

In the art world, style is not always the only criterion for such attributions. Museum connoisseurs, for example, use all kinds of external evidence to determine the origins of artworks: provenance histories, documents, and so on.<sup>7</sup> But such evidence is itself subject to authentication by connoisseurship: how do we know that a provenance history is not faked? For Carlo Ginzburg, those who ask such questions “place themselves beyond the pale of scholarship—unless, as would of course be theoretically possible, they proved that the date was falsified or the records inaccurate.”<sup>8</sup> But that possibility, while theoretical, is not trivially so: it is the stuff of day-to-day historical research. A dramatic example is the case of an archaic Greek youth, or *kouros*, in the J. Paul Getty Museum (fig. 1). A letter dated 1952 from the great archaeologist and connoisseur Ernst Langlotz, praising the piece and seeming to confirm its provenance history, was revealed to be a forgery. This letter was a linchpin of the case for the statue’s authenticity; most scholars now consider it a fake.<sup>9</sup> But the debates have been inconclusive, prompting one commentator to suggest that the *kouros* case represents “a crisis of criteria” in the study of ancient art: the inability to determine the sculpture’s authenticity “highlights the limits of our knowledge and comprehension of Greek sculpture.”<sup>10</sup> Which seems reasonable enough. But perhaps the case does not highlight the limits of our knowledge so much as clarify what sort of knowledge it is.

In archaeological fieldwork, by contrast, there are no such distractions. Provenance and paper trails are not an issue: the dirt archaeologist is the most refined of connoisseurs, engaged in a one-on-one confrontation with the artifacts. It is this degree-zero connoisseurship that is at issue: if it falls,

6. A point recently emphasized by Irene Winter, “Establishing Group Boundaries: Toward Methodological Refinement in the Determination of Sets as a Prior Condition to the Analysis of Cultural Contact and/or Innovation in First Millennium B.C.E. Ivory Carving,” in *Crafts and Images in Contact: Studies on Eastern Mediterranean Art of the First Millennium B.C.E.*, ed. C. E. Suter and C. Uehlinger (Freiburg, 2005), pp. 23–42.

7. Well treated in David Phillips, *Exhibiting Authenticity* (New York, 1997).

8. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Enigma of Piero*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (London, 2000), p. xxiv.

9. On the history of the Getty *kouros*, see Marion True, “The Getty Kouros: Background of the Problem,” in *The Getty Kouros Colloquium* (Athens, 1993), pp. 11–15. On the problem of forged documentation in historical inquiry, see Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton, N.J., 1990). More recently, see the treatment of similar cases in Elizabeth Simpson, “Tall Tales: Celts, Connoisseurs, and the Fabrication of Archaeological Context,” *Source* 24, no. 2 (2005): 28–41.

10. Kenneth D. S. Lapatin, “Proof? The Case of the Getty Kouros,” *Source* 20 (Fall 2000): 51.



FIGURE 1. The Getty kouros. Greek statue of the sixth century B.C.E., or modern forgery. J. Paul Getty Museum.

the rest of the edifice falls with it—the edifice being nothing less than the history of the ancient world. That history is built up out of countless potsherds, papyri, inscriptions, marble blocks, and so on. All such evidence—everything that counts as evidence for human activity in the distant past—derives from some form of connoisseurship in that *it is connoisseurs who identify the evidence as such*. (Even the academic distinction between archaeological and textual evidence is purely heuristic; for texts are artifacts as well. The Sumerian King List or the extant manuscripts of Thucydides are artifacts no different in kind from potsherds. That is why we have paleographers and philologists, connoisseurs of the written word.)<sup>11</sup> Many of the attributions involved in this degree-zero connoisseurship are so basic as to remain tacit. For example, the seemingly obvious distinction between man-made artifacts and natural things involves a tacit attribution. When an excavator throws away what she perceives to be pebbles and saves what she perceives to be artifacts, she is making a connoisseurial judgment: in the broadest possible sense, the artifacts are those things she sees as being in the style of humans. Another way of putting the matter would be to say that an artifact is that which has a style in the first place, and a natural thing is that which is

style-less.<sup>12</sup> Possession of style on the one hand, and the status of being an artifact on the other, are synonymous.

Such attributions may appear so obvious as to be irrelevant. In many cases, the Second Law of Thermodynamics is all that need be invoked in the

11. See the excellent discussion in Ginzburg, “Lorenzo Valla on the ‘Donation of Constantine,’” *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Hanover, N.H., 1999), pp. 54–70.

12. See Kendall L. Walton, “Style and the Products and Processes of Art,” in *The Concept of Style*, p. 73. See also Arthur Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 80–81, 89 on the determination of evidence.

inferential identification of artifact as such.<sup>13</sup> But the application of laws requires judgment, aesthetic or otherwise. Controversies over borderline cases reveal that the identification of an artifact as such is an important act of critical judgment. Kant makes just this point in the third *Critique*:

If, as sometimes happens, in searching through a bog we come upon a bit of shaped wood, we do not say: this is a product of Nature, but, of Art. Its producing cause has conceived a purpose to which the plank owes its form. Elsewhere too we should see art in everything which is made so that a representation of it in its cause must have preceded its actual existence.<sup>14</sup>

Kant suggests that in recognizing something (“a bit of shaped wood”) as an artifact (not “a product of Nature, but, of Art”), one infers that that the object in question is the artifact of an intentionality (“a representation of it in its cause must have preceded its actual existence”). Similar issues do confront archaeologists in the field. For instance, a find from the site of Berekhat Ram in the Golan Heights has occasioned tremendous controversy precisely because its status as artifact is unclear: the object in question is either the earliest known example of human representational activity or a funny looking rock.<sup>15</sup> The usual battery of scientific tests, electron microscopy and the like, have not provided a conclusive answer. Similar problems arise in the study of early hominid sites: what, exactly, counts as a tool? Such cases push connoisseurship to its limits, but they are only extreme versions of standard archaeological dilemmas. More specific analyses identify period, regional, and even personal styles, as in the case of this object in the J. Paul Getty Museum: it is ancient Mediterranean; it is archaic Greek; it is Athenian red-figure; it is from the hand of the painter Euthymides, son of Polion (fig. 2).<sup>16</sup>

13. Compare Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), pp. 31–32, 42, 48, on the possibility of a random spattering of paint producing a simulacrum of the *Polish Rider* in the Frick Collection.

14. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (London, 1892), §43, p. 183.

15. The interest of the Berekhat Ram figurine has been discussed most thoroughly in Whitney Davis, *Replications: Archaeology, Art History, Psychoanalysis* (University Park, Pa., 1996), pp. 157–60. For a related discussion, see James Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing* (New York, 2000), pp. 62–102. See a more recent account of a similar case in Nicholas Conard, “Paleolithic Ivory Sculptures from Southwestern Germany and the Origins of Figurative Art,” *Nature*, 18 Dec. 2003, pp. 830–32, a reference I owe to Jim Porter.

16. Even the hardheaded and objective techniques of scientific archaeology do not escape from the tyranny of style. Such techniques typically tell us about dates, not about authorship. Dates can be hugely informative and can certainly rule out or falsify certain attributions (when you can securely date an object to circa 1000 c.e., you can be sure that it was not made by ancient Egyptians). But chronology is not etiology. When it comes to dating artifacts, only objects already presumed to be artifacts, or potential artifacts, are ordinarily subject to testing (one doesn’t send random shovelfuls of dirt to the lab). Science refines a connoisseur’s rough-and-ready attribution.



FIGURE 2. Euthymides, Athenian red-figure neck amphora (circa 500 B.C.E.). Terracotta. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California.

Not only do archaeologists and art historians perform similar actions, they perform them for a similar reason. They are each committed in advance to the idea that style is meaningful, that it works. Connoisseurs are committed to this idea because they use personal style to connect artifacts to their makers. Archaeologists are committed because they use period or regional style to connect artifacts to their times or places of manufacture. To see the importance of such commitments, one need only imagine a world in which we could not or would not say that a potsherd is ancient, not mod-



ern; that it is Greek, not Mayan; that it is even a potsherd in the first place and not an oddly colored pebble. In such a world, it would be impossible to recognize an artifact as such. And without artifacts, without a “material record,” archaeologists and art historians would have nothing to talk about.<sup>17</sup> The commitment to meaningful style, and the practice of stylistic etiology it entails, precedes any and all archaeological work because it is what provides archaeologists and art historians with artifacts and expli-canda. There is, in short, nothing before or outside style. Archaeologists presuppose the validity of stylistic analysis because it provides them with all their evidence for past actions and events; it reassures them that they are, in fact, archaeologists and not just misguided geologists.

The suggestion that the sorting of pebbles from potsherds is a form of connoisseurship may seem to expand the notion unacceptably. Kant’s elementary distinction between products of “Nature” and of “Art” seems remote from the refined discriminations of collectors, dealers, curators, and classicists. What would it mean to be a *connoisseur* of the “style of humans”?<sup>18</sup> Yet Kant’s example seems calculated to suggest that this seemingly ordinary act of classification is, in fact, extremely unusual. The scenario itself is slightly absurd: searching through bogs is not an everyday activity, at any rate not for eighteenth-century idealist philosophers. Just so, we do not ordinarily have occasion to attend to the origins of bits of wood; we do not spend our lives as connoisseurs, self-consciously “attributing” sticks to Nature and figurines to Art. Most of the time, a bit of shaped wood is just . . . a bit of shaped wood, and the question as to whether it is “a product of Nature” or “of Art” is not one that it makes sense to ask. That Kant’s bog-walker does ask this question suggests that he is in a special situation, with special problems. This abnormality is significant, for it suggests that so far from expanding the notion of style to cover even the most elementary daily acts, the assertion that archaeologists are effectively “connoisseurs of the human” actually restricts it. Only people digging up graves in Greece, or sifting through temple debris in Egypt, or searching through bogs in East Prussia ever need to *think* about such distinctions. The etiology of things only presents itself as an issue in certain well-defined contexts. The trouble is that most of what we know about the everyday in the remote—and not so remote—past derives from just these extraordinary confrontations. The bog or *Moorbruch*, at once grounded and groundless, is not “beyond the pale of scholarship,” but the everyday of archaeologists and art historians.

17. See George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, Conn., 1962).

18. A question I owe to Joel Snyder.



The bog figures this distinctive combination of the extraordinary and the prosaic. C. S. Peirce brings out this point in a passage that alludes explicitly to Kant. Wondering how we derive the existence of Napoleon from the “numberless monuments and relics” of his reign, or how we come to accept the decipherment of cuneiform inscriptions, he insists that such “reductive inference” does not satisfy the evidentiary criteria of science. At such moments, science “is driven in desperation to call upon its inward sympathy with nature, its instinct for aid, just as we find Galileo at the dawn of modern science making his appeal to *il lume naturale*.”

But in so far as it does this, the solid ground of fact fails it. It feels from that moment that its position is only provisional. It must then find confirmations or else shift its footing. Even if it does find confirmations, they are only partial. It is still not standing upon the bedrock of fact. It is walking upon a bog, and can only say, this ground seems to hold for the moment.<sup>19</sup>

Neither quite ordinary nor quite exceptional, connoisseurship is a boggy and swampy sort of enterprise, exemplary precisely in its shiftiness and uncertainty—a marvel, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, that is natural to us all the same. Whether it is therefore *pejoratively* unscientific remains for now an open question.

It is on just this boggy ground that antipositivist skeptics enter the fray. Since the 1950s at least, some archaeologists have taken the absolute priority of style to show that connoisseurs actually produce the artifacts they think they recognize and that what we call “the ancient world” is in fact no more than a discursive conceit.<sup>20</sup> This claim has in recent years become a staple of post-, neo-, or sub-Foucauldian critiques of archaeology. Stylistic categories, on this view, have nothing to do with the actuality of the past; as

19. Charles Saunders Peirce, *Pragmatism and Pragmaticism*, vol. 5 of *Collected Papers of Charles Saunders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 2 vols. in 1 (1934; Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 411, 412, §589. A similar metaphoric of ground, groundedness, and the groundless underwrites the famous Heidegger-Schapiro-Derrida exchange on attribution and restitution; see, for instance, Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, pp. 287–92. Heidegger’s insistence, echoed by Derrida, that the discourse of attribution is not simply grounded or groundless—not simply the subjectivation of the world, a transformation of *hypokeimenon* into *subjectum*—is located at just this topos.

20. I refer here to the so-called Typology Debate between James Ford and Albert Spaulding, “the first substantial manifestation of the concern of American archaeologists to articulate and make explicit the analytical basis of their discipline” (Bruce Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* [Cambridge, 1989], p. 203). Relevant papers are collected in James Deetz, *Man’s Imprint from the Past: Readings in the Methods of Archaeology* (Boston, 1971). The cardinal fact about this debate is that it retained a rigid distinction between *emic* (internal) and *etic* (external) constructions of typology. Unsurprisingly, the victor was a quasi-Platonic theory of *emic*, “natural types.” I take the distinction itself to be incoherent.

Michael Shanks, a prominent archaeological theorist, has recently claimed, “Stylistic attribution has little bearing on anything other than the discourse of style to which it belongs.”<sup>21</sup> Adherents of this position ought in principle to refrain from making truth-claims about the ancient world. Normally, however, they do not; Shanks himself uses what he calls the “style and the design” of a “Proto-Korinthian” vessel to discern what he takes to be basic conceptual categories of “early Greek” society.<sup>22</sup> The result can most charitably be called a naïve idealism. If we reject outright the very possibility of making attributions, if we maintain that stylistic analyses refer only to “the discourse of style,” then we must also reject theories about the past derived from those same stylistic analyses.<sup>23</sup> And that means refusing even to talk about the ancient world as anything other than a fictional place. Connoisseurship is the place where antifoundationalism, laudable in itself, runs up against the brute materiality of historical practice.

Existence of some past, any past, famously defies skeptical doubt; but knowledge of specific events in that past—knowledge of history—requires something that may count as evidence.<sup>24</sup> We infer what happened in the past from the traces or artifacts that are understood to remain of that past; and connoisseurship is the *recognition* of those artifacts as such. There are stakes involved here. E. H. Gombrich has persuasively connected theories of style with racist or nationalist ideologies, to the point that many now take the link for granted.<sup>25</sup> But the opposite view is just as horrific. Can we deny the genocide of the Middle Passage, for example? (But how do we know it

21. Michael Shanks, *Classical Archaeology of Greece: Experiences of the Discipline* (London, 1996), p. 36. Compare Fred Orton, “Northumbrian Sculpture (the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments): Questions of Difference,” in *Northumbria’s Golden Age*, ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (New York, 1999), pp. 216–26 and “Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments: Some Strictures on Similarity; Some Questions of History,” in *Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, ed. Catherine Karkov and Orton (Morgantown, W.Va., 2003), pp. 65–92 for a more moderate version of this position. Like the old Ford-Spaulding debate, these avowedly postmodern critiques retain, willy-nilly, the basic distinction between emic and etic categories. The gist of the critique is invariably that archaeology naturalizes its own etic categories as real, historical, emic ones. It is difficult to understand what other sorts of category archaeologists are supposed to use; what might be called the emic category *an sich* proves to be elusive.

22. Shanks, “Style and the Design of a Perfume Jar from an Archaic Greek City State,” *Journal of European Archaeology* 1 (Spring 1993): 77; see Shanks, *Art and the Greek City State* (Cambridge, 1999).

23. By contrast, if we accept the possibility of an attribution in principle, there is endless room for debate about particulars (Acheulean figurine or pebble? Rembrandt or school piece?).

24. On pastness and skepticism, see the discussion in Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, chaps. 5 and 6.

25. See Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 2d. ed. (Princeton, N.J., 1961), pp. 19–20 and *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford, 1969); and Ginzburg, “Style as Inclusion, Style as Exclusion,” *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (New York, 1998), pp. 28–54.

occurred? We know because it is documented. But how do we know the documents are real? How have they been authenticated, ultimately, if not by connoisseurship?) Theories of style must walk a fine line between a naïve embrace of *Volksgeister* and an equally naïve acquiescence to *les assassins de mémoire*.<sup>26</sup> Insofar as people wish to make truth-claims about the past on the basis of documentary or artifactual evidence, they are committed to some form of stylistic analysis and connoisseurship: because, to repeat, it is style and connoisseurship that provide them with documents and artifacts.

The late Richard Wollheim made an exemplary attempt to walk this line. In a well-known essay, he elaborated a distinction, traditional since Wölfflin, between *individual* and *general* styles.<sup>27</sup> An example of the former would be the style of Rembrandt, when that phrase is taken to mean “the way something looks when Rembrandt has made it himself.” Individual style is, Wollheim says, *generative*: as part of Rembrandt’s technical repertoire, it stands causally to his output. An example of the latter would be the baroque style or the manner of Rembrandt. General style is merely, or trivially, *taxonomic*: it is no more than a way of classing objects. There are no stakes to the use of style in this sense just because this kind of style is not employed to infer origins. An ascription of individual style, by contrast, does have stakes: to say that a painting is in Rembrandt’s very own personal style is to attribute that painting to Rembrandt. Connoisseurship, by definition, treats style as evidence for an inferred cause.<sup>28</sup>

That said, there are cases in which styles that seem merely taxonomic must in fact be understood to have the reality of individual ones. Such cases are ones in which a general style is used to make historical claims: for in-

26. See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York, 1992).

27. See Richard Wollheim, “Pictorial Style: Two Views,” in *The Concept of Style*, pp. 183–202 and “Style in Painting,” in *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts*, pp. 37–49. The distinction itself goes back to Wölfflin, who provides an innovative and unusually cogent analysis. See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (London, 1932).

28. Here it is important to specify that not everything that is stylistic is also etiological. Saying that something is baroque suggests nothing about its origins. A Pergamene relief or a painting by David Reed can each be baroque, and a fake Tiepolo is, potentially, just as baroque as a real one. Likewise, not everything about a painting that has etiological significance is also stylistic. The collector’s stamp that appears on a Rembrandt drawing may be an important clue as to provenance and thus as to the authenticity of the work; but it is not a stylistic trait for all that. On Reed, see *Going for Baroque: Eighteen Contemporary Artists Fascinated with the Baroque*, ed. Lisa Corrin and Joaneath Spicer (Baltimore, 1995). On the contemporary neobaroque, see *Résurgences baroques: Les Trajectoires d’un processus transculturel*, ed. Walter Moser and Nicolas Goyer (Brussels, 2001), and Gregg Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (New York, 2004). On collector’s stamps and the apparatus of attribution, see Philips, *Exhibiting Authenticity*.

stance, when an archaeologist dates a stratum on the basis of the style of potsherds it contains, or when the Berekhat Ram “figurine” is said to possess or to lack the “style of humans.” A great many archaeological, art-historical, paleographical, and philological attributions serve just this purpose. It is through such attributions, for instance, that the stratigraphy of one site is related to stratigraphy of another. Just so, many of the works labeled anonymous in art museums have been attributed in this way: the curators may not know who painted a given easel painting, but they may attribute it to a particular time and place on the basis of its style. These cases make it clear that Wollheim’s “individual style” must be that of an analytic individual, which is not necessarily the same as a particular human subject.<sup>29</sup> An individual style stands in a causal relation to the originary manufacture of the object(s) in which that style is recognized; but there is no reason a single individual human must have performed that manufacture. The distinction between taxonomic and individual/generative styles breaks down when a style is understood to be a taxis *precisely because it is generative*.<sup>30</sup> Which is most of the time.

This point tends, in turn, to vitiate the claims of archaeologists and visual-culture advocates to have written what the historian Robin Osborne calls a “history of art without artists.”<sup>31</sup> Although such histories do indeed dispense with individual artists, they replace them explicitly or implicitly with other analytic individuals. The author remains firmly in place, transformed into a “period,” a “nation,” or a “culture.” Herder would have called it a “race.” The idea that one can escape from connoisseurship merely by omitting talk of individual artists is no more than quaint; it was, after all, Wölfflin who first advocated a “history of art without proper names,” and he did not do so in the interests of a robust contextualism. Just so, the idea that a *Zeitgeist*, whether racialized or no, is politically more useful a concept than vulgar individualism is by no means clear. In any event, archaeology is just as committed to generative style as the history of art.

Both art history and archaeology define their objects procedurally: they study those things to which a generative conception of style is seen to be appropriate. The difference is only the relative prominence of that facet of the method. Theories of expressive style will take you a long way in the case of a Rembrandt, rather less far in the case of a matte-glazed potsherd; it is

29. A point I owe to Whitney Davis.

30. For a recent, compelling argument to the effect that supra-individual styles may be identified in cases where the posited stylistic connection explains why individual artists “have the same brief,” see Gilmore, *The Life of a Style*, p. 55.

31. The term comes from Robin Osborne, *Archaic and Classical Greek Art* (New York, 1998), chap. 1.

easy to suggest that the painting gives a complex view of, say, seventeenth-century Dutch practices of gender, rather harder to make the equivalent claim for the little lump of clay. But the root affinity of the two disciplines implies that such distinctions are never given in advance but are always and of necessity up for debate. Much art-historical scholarship amounts to a staging of this debate—an interrogation of the claims of generative style.

Seen in these terms, the most effective critique of connoisseurship might be one that challenged the distinctions among archaeology, art history, and geology. Instead of rejecting natural history, one might look to embrace it. The work of the artist Robert Smithson is emblematic of such a strategy.<sup>32</sup> Smithson claimed that aesthetic formalization—understood in a more or less Kantian manner—was a material event contiguous with, indeed part of, vastly slower processes of geological transformation. A subject's "faculties occur in [a] geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way."<sup>33</sup> The metamorphosis of things-in-themselves into formalized objects of consciousness is but a brief series of episodes within a *longue durée* of deep or geological time. Hence the goal of an artist is "to know the corroded moments, the carboniferous states of thought, the shrinkage of mental mud, in the geologic chaos—in the strata of esthetic consciousness."<sup>34</sup> In works like *Spiral Jetty*—an immense, helical rampart of earth extending into the Great Salt Lake, on which salt crystals form and dissolve as water levels fall and rise—Smithson sought to exemplify this underlying continuity between "earth" and "art" (fig. 3). Quintessentially "boggy" in the Kantian or Peircean sense, Smithson's work may be seen to offer a radical challenge to the distinction between artifacts and mere real things—and, by extension, to any discipline that takes that distinction as a postulate. There is no justification, on this view, for reading the signs of humanity in the objects that an archaeologist unearths or in those that an art historian studies; for the production of artworks, like the production of rocks, is a natural process. Medieval scholastics anthropomorphized such processes by seeing in them the hand of an authorial deity; Francis Bacon declared that "the history of the arts shall be an adornment of natural history," the better to define *naturalia* against *artificialia*. But Smithson takes the opposite route; he nat-

32. For those unfamiliar with Smithson's art, one way to think of it is as the literalization of the *Naturgeschichte* of Adorno and Benjamin. On which, see Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley, 1998).

33. Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, 1996), p. 100.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 107. In this emphasis on the materiality of "esthetic consciousness," Smithson anticipates by more than a decade the late work of Paul de Man. See de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, pp. 70–90, 119–28.



FIGURE 3. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (1970).

uralizes human activity by assimilating it to utterly inhuman forces.<sup>35</sup> It may be possible to categorize rocks and artworks alike—to divide them into feldspars and granites, Rembrandts and Vermeers—but such categorization will not deliver the goods that art historians and archaeologists desire.

Smithson's challenge is to justify attribution without idealizing the aesthetic, without recourse to ideologies of *Geist* or genius that dematerialize "the strata of esthetic consciousness." One way to do so might be to adopt a descriptive stance: to record what happens when we use style and how such use fits into a broader "grammar," in a way not wholly unrelated to the way a geologist might describe the process of sedimentation. What does it mean to see, to *recognize*, a style? To what, exactly, are art historians and

35. On Bacon, art, and natural history, see Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunstammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art, and Technology*, trans. Allison Brown (Princeton, N.J., 1995), pp. 63–80.



archaeologists committed when they do so? And: can doubt about individual attributions generalize and become doubt about attribution as such?

### Seeing Style

Nelson Goodman's classic essay "Art and Authenticity" provides an ideal opening to a descriptive account of attribution. Here Goodman addresses the problem of indiscernibles, as framed by Arthur Danto: if two pictures look exactly alike, if there is no discernible difference between them, what does it matter if one canvas were marked by Rembrandt and the other by some modern faker? "Is there any aesthetic difference between the two pictures for  $x$  at  $t$ , where  $t$  is a suitable period of time, if  $x$  cannot tell them apart by merely looking at them at  $t$ ?"<sup>36</sup> Goodman observes that the problem may simply be one of habituation: just because  $x$  cannot discern any difference between the two paintings at  $t$  does not mean that  $x$  will not, with "practice and training," be able to discern any difference at some later point (*LA*, p. 103). The phrase "practice and training" seems deliberately capacious, accommodating all of what Danto calls an "art world" or what Wollheim termed "cognitive stock" and "perceptual cash."<sup>37</sup> The beholder of a picture must have a certain amount of acculturation if she is to make any sense of what she sees. At the beginning of the thought experiment, Goodman's postulated beholder stands outside this art world looking in; she has neither cash nor stock but is in a sense impoverished. Until she is informed that one picture is by Rembrandt and one by a faker, this viewer is presumably unaware that she is outside an art world at all, unaware that she lacks some sort of cognitive stock, *unaware* that there are stakes involved in perceiving—or failing to perceive—a difference between the two pictures. Once she learns, however, that there really is a difference between the two works, then her status as an outsider, her poverty, becomes apparent *to her*. The new awareness changes how she sees. Knowledge of the (as yet unperceived) difference, Goodman suggests, "(1) stands as evidence that there may be a difference between them that I can learn to perceive, (2) assigns the present looking a role as training toward such a perceptual discrimination, and (3) makes consequent demands that modify and differentiate my present experience in looking at the two pictures" (*LA*, p. 105). In short, "the aesthetic properties of a picture include not only those found by looking at it but also those that determine how it is to be looked at" (*LA*, pp. 111–12).

36. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, 1976), p. 102; hereafter abbreviated *LA*. On indiscernibles, see also the classic account in Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, chap. 1.

37. See Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, and Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, N.J., 1987), pp. 89–96.



For present purposes, the upshot of Goodman's argument is of less relevance than the change in perception that he describes.

My knowledge of the difference between the two pictures, just because it affects the relationship of the present to future lookings, informs the very character of my present looking. This knowledge instructs me to look at the two pictures differently now, even if what I see is the same.  
[LA, p. 104]<sup>38</sup>

These sentences require some unpacking. The "difference between the two pictures" remains somewhat obscure. Goodman has accounted for its importance; but what kind of difference is it? Likewise, what does it mean "to look at the two pictures differently now"? How has the looking changed?

The first question is the more easily answered. The (potential) difference between the two pictures is (or would be) a *stylistic* one. It is, moreover, a question of *individual* style, on Wollheim's definition thereof: a style alleged to have etiological significance. The second question is more difficult, for Goodman is clearly describing a psychological event. The description, however, is remarkably close to what Wittgenstein calls the "dawning" or "flashing" of an aspect, "Aufleuchtend eines Aspekts." In part 2 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he writes, "I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience, 'noticing an aspect'" (*PI*, p. 193).<sup>39</sup> Wittgenstein's most famous example of aspect-dawning or -shifting is the duck-rabbit cartoon (see *PI*, p. 194) (fig. 4). In that drawing one may see a picture of a duck or one may see a picture of a rabbit—two aspects of a single set of marks. The movement from one to the other is an aspect-shift, which Wittgenstein distinguishes from the "continuous seeing" of any one aspect (*PI*, p. 194).<sup>40</sup> Another example: "Look at W once as a capital double-U, and another time as an M upside down."<sup>41</sup> This quality of "seeing-as" is basic to aspect-perception. One does not, by contrast, see a fork or spoon *as* a fork or spoon: for Wittgenstein, one just sees forks and spoons (though one can see a fork or a spoon *as* something else; say, as a little person in a game of make-believe). "One doesn't 'take' what one knows as the cutlery at a

38. Compare Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1958), p. 199, for the same basic argument in very compact form; hereafter abbreviated *PI*.

39. On aspects, see, among others, Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London, 1990). Contra Goodman, see, for example, Louise Morton and Thomas Foster, "Goodman, Forgery, and the Aesthetic," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49 (Spring 1991): 155–59.

40. See Mulhall, *On Being in the World*, pp. 15–28, on continuous aspect-perception and "regarding-as."

41. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and the Brown Books* (New York, 1958), pp. 164–65.

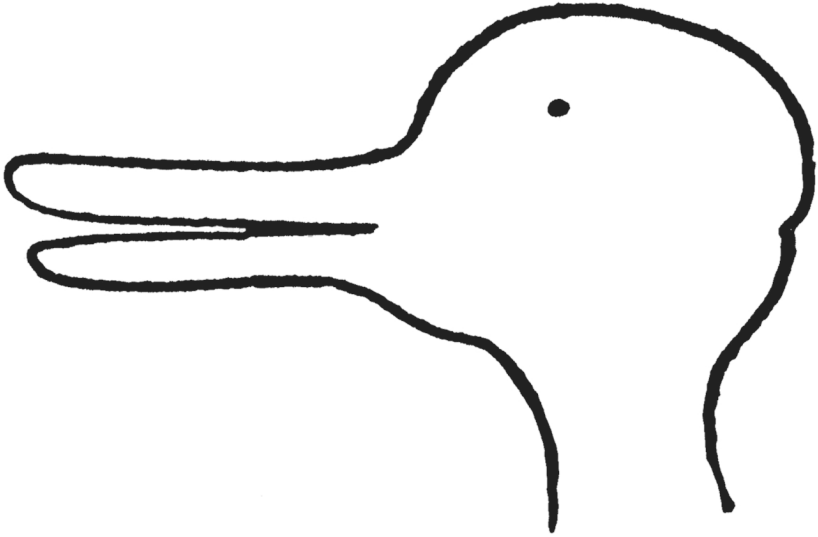


FIGURE 4. The Duck-Rabbit. Drawing after Wittgenstein (1958).

meal *for* cutlery; any more than one ordinarily tries to move one's mouth as one eats, or aims at moving it" (*PI*, p. 195). Not everything is so easy: Wittgenstein emphasizes what he calls aspect-blindness, the failure or inability to make such shifts (more on this below).

At issue here, for Wittgenstein at any rate, is the mutual implication of seeing and interpreting. The shift from duck-aspect to rabbit-aspect is not merely a matter of seeing the same thing and then going on to interpret it differently. Rather, it is a matter of seeing differently. "The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged" (*PI*, p. 196). Attention to aspect-perception reveals that seeing is *saturated* with interpretation. Goodman points to this idea when he describes a change "in the very character of my present looking."<sup>42</sup> For present purposes, however, the similarity between Goodman's account of looking at pictures and Wittgenstein's account of aspect-perception is telling. It suggests that the recognition of a style is indistinguishable from the dawning of an aspect. More forcefully: it suggests that pictorial style *is* an aspect, like the duck- or rabbit-aspect of Wittgenstein's example. The recognition of a style involves a shift in what one does when one sees, in a way that is identical to that of the shift from duck to rabbit. For connoisseurs and archaeologists alike, style is an aspect.

42. Incidentally, reading Goodman in these Wittgensteinian terms tends to vitiate the critiques leveled against him in Morton and Foster, "Goodman, Forgery, and the Aesthetic."

One immediate benefit of this view is that it demarcates the recognition of artifacts from everyday seeing. Kant's parable of the bog-walker may seem to have overextended the notion of connoisseurship: if it includes every discrimination between the products of "Nature" and those of "Art" then what does it *not* include? It seems absurd to suggest that we are all connoisseurs most of our lives. Wittgenstein, however, stresses that aspect-shifts occur against a background of the taken-for-granted. As noted earlier, it would make no sense, in ordinary experience, to see cutlery *as* cutlery, any more than it would make sense, outside of a bog, to see a bit of shaped wood *as* a product of Art: "This expression would not be understood" (*PI*, p. 195). Field archaeologists, however, do exactly that: telling the difference between a Neolithic stone tool and a bit of chipped rock is their stock-in-trade. Similar problems vex art historians. Connoisseurship is a form of seeing that attends to the origins of an object, its "producing cause," which is as odd a thing to do as to *try* to move one's mouth as one eats. Such practices require special training: "It is only if someone *can do*, has learnt, is master of, such-and-such, that it makes sense to say he has had *this* experience" (*PI*, p. 209). It does not follow that connoisseurship is the sole prerogative of refined museum-goers: part of Kant's point is that it is as unrefined and prosaic as slogging through a swamp.

Yet the boundary between connoisseurship and the everyday, once established, is difficult to maintain. Part of the special interest of connoisseurship lies in the fact that its dilemmas and uncertainties exist in a reciprocal relationship with ordinary perception, as of cutlery. Its pervasive uncertainty threatens constantly to infect the background of continuous aspect perception—the taken-for-granted—on which Wittgenstein sets such store. We are as certain of Rembrandt as we are of cutlery, and conversely, no more and no less. The one stands and falls with the other.

### Attribution as Recognition

What if anything justifies this certainty? By way of answering, let us go back to Goodman's dilemma of the real versus the duplicate Rembrandt. The possibility that two works may be indistinguishable and yet one of them be fake is often thought to undercut the validity of stylistic judgments *per se*. If all the criteria for the attribution of a work to a given painter (for example, Rembrandt) are present, and yet the work is not in fact by that painter, then the concept of style may seem to be of little use. Yet Goodman is quick to note that the dilemma of indiscernibles presupposes the existence of criteria by which to judge morphological similarities and differences between pictures. To say that two canvases are indistinguishable is to assume that there exist criteria by which we are able to distinguish canvases from

one another, most of the time: we can distinguish paintings, just not these two. Absent such criteria, the claim that the two canvases are indistinguishable would have no sense. We should call such criteria, and such judgments, *stylistic*. Goodman's dilemma, in short, rests on the possibility of using stylistic criteria to distinguish canvases, even if it does so by showing what happens when the application of those criteria fails to deliver the desired goods. Such failures are bound to occur. That stylistic criteria exist does not imply that they should provide immunity from skeptical doubt. As Stanley Cavell puts it, "Criteria do not determine the certainty of statements [for example, that a given painting is or is not by Rembrandt], but the application of the concepts employed in statements [for example, concepts of style]" (*CR*, p. 45). Goodman's scenario dramatizes a possibility that is real and ever-present; but the incorrigible uncertainty of stylistic attribution does not undercut the possibility of a real or meaningful style. Rather, it undercuts a certain kind of fanaticism.

So the questions now become: What are stylistic criteria? And why should we think they tell us anything about origins?

If style is indeed an aspect, then the first question is easy to answer: stylistic criteria are whatever criteria must be met for the requisite aspect-shift to occur. Beyond that there is little to say. To quote Wittgenstein again: "Could I say what a picture must be like to produce this effect? No" (*PI*, p. 201).<sup>43</sup> That there are, in fact, criteria (*stylistic* criteria) is not in doubt, thanks to Goodman. But just what those criteria might turn out to be is not preordained. It is central to Wittgenstein's account that a rule is essentially descriptive, not prescriptive; it describes what people do (have done), not what they must do in the future.<sup>44</sup> One can describe in detail the particular criteria people have used in order to account for the particular aspect-shifts they have experienced. The founder of modern connoisseurship, Giovanni Morelli, made a conscientious effort to provide such criteria in his lists of *Grundformen*, or units of style: distinctive renderings of ears, ankles, wrists, and so forth, on which the connoisseur claimed to have based his attributions.<sup>45</sup> Meyer Schapiro provided a more comprehensive set of criteria in

43. The passage continues: "There are, for example, styles of painting which do not convey anything to me in this immediate way, but do to other people. I think custom and upbringing have a hand in this" (*PI*, p. 201). Compare the Derridean *es gibt* cited above in footnote 3.

44. See Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, 1990), pp. 64–100, and Sauren Tegrarian, "Wittgenstein, Kripke, and the 'Paradox' of Meaning," in *Wittgenstein and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Tegrarian (Bristol, 1994); both contra Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

45. For example, see Giovanni Morelli, *Die Galerien Borghese und Dora Panfili in Rom*, vol. 1 of *Kunstkritische Studien über italienische Malerei* (Leipzig, 1890). Morelli may, in fact, have been too

his classic account of style in art history.<sup>46</sup> But the particular criteria themselves are of less significance for present purposes than the existence (or lack) of a functioning, “grammatical” relationship governing their deployment—a pattern of agreement and use. All of which is simply to say that connoisseurship is a form of criticism; the distinctive thing about criticism is that it is forever trying to justify or account for its criteria.

J. D. Beazley’s work on Athenian pottery is exemplary in this regard. A legendary connoisseur, Beazley was arguably the twentieth century’s most influential historian of ancient art. He claimed to be able to tell not just where a potsherd was made, not just when, but *by whom*. The result was a series of monumental publications in which he described, in mind-numbing detail, a series of interrelated workshops at work in Athens from the late seventh to the mid-fourth centuries B.C.E.<sup>47</sup> Beazley’s connoisseurship was pure, in the sense that it was unencumbered by independent or external data. In the study of Athenian pottery, there is no documentary evidence whatsoever: each and every vase-painter exists only insofar as he has been recognized by modern scholars. There are, nonetheless, patterns of agreement and disagreement in classical archaeology. Beazley was only the most successful of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century connoisseurs of Athenian pottery. All drew on essentially the same evidence, but only Beazley was able consistently to convince others to see what he saw. In the degree-zero connoisseurship of Athenian pottery, such sharing of aspect-perception constituted a successful argument. Similar patterns of sharing provide scholars of seventeenth-century Dutch art with the oeuvre of Rembrandt, along with documentary evidence that confirms the historical existence of one Rembrandt van Rijn.<sup>48</sup> Like archaeologists, they build a pattern of accepted attributions, accepted pieces of evidence, in order to understand the past. The difference lies in the extent of the pattern. Such systems of agreement and disagreement, sharing and rejection, are not necessarily irrational, nor is it quite correct to label them *rhetorical* and move on. On the contrary, they constitute what Wittgenstein would call “a form of life.”

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conscientious; Hayden Macginnis, “The Role of Perceptual Learning in Connoisseurship: Morelli, Berenson, and Beyond,” *Art History* 13 (Mar. 1990): 104–17, argues that he wound up misrepresenting his actual practice. On Morelli, see *Giovanni Morelli e la cultura dei conoscitori*, ed. G. Agosti et al., 3 vols. (Bergamo, 1993).

46. See Schapiro, “Style,” pp. 53–56.

47. For example, see John Davidson Beazley, *Attic Red-Figure Vase Painters* (Oxford, 1963). On Beazley, see most recently Phillippe Rouet, *Approaches to the Study of Attic Vases: Beazley and Pottier* (Oxford, 2001).

48. On the connoisseurship of Rembrandt, see Hubertus von Sonnenburg et al., *Rembrandt / Not Rembrandt in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Aspects of Connoisseurship* (New York, 1995).

If historians find themselves committed to a grammar or pattern of shared aspect-perception, then the specific criteria underlying any particular sharing are less interesting than the rationale underlying that commitment. It seems like a classic hermeneutic circle. What justifies this form of life? Why should anyone live it? Whence the second of the questions posed earlier, which addresses the way that stylistic analysis takes certain perceived aspects to have etiological significance.

Wittgenstein seems frankly to discourage the claim that style indicates origins. He says quite clearly that seeing an aspect does not teach us something “about the external world.”<sup>49</sup> An aspect is not, after all, a property of an object on the lines of color or shape: the salient point about aspect-shifts is that no property of the object changes, and yet it is seen differently nonetheless.<sup>50</sup> Aspect-shifts in general, and style in particular, may thus come to seem mere contingencies—subjective, even private experiences. Worse, the ascription of properties to objects on the basis of such judgments is the quintessential gambit of Kantian aesthetics. What Kant says of the beautiful could well apply to connoisseurship (and, indeed, the judgment of quality was originally one of the key components of attribution).<sup>51</sup>

He will therefore speak of the beautiful, as if beauty were a property of the object [*Beschaffenheit des Gegenstandes*] and the judgment logical . . . although it is merely aesthetic and involves merely a reference to the representation of the object to the subject.<sup>52</sup>

That such “merely aesthetic” judgments should form the basis for historical claims seems unwelcome; this concern underlies much of the skepticism that attends connoisseurship. One conclusion would be that “stylistic attribution has little bearing on anything other than the discourse of style to which it belongs.” Another, popular among empiricists, would be to dismiss attribution as unverifiable. Insofar as these conclusions are supposed to be scandalous, or scandalized, they miss the point.

There is a “fact of the matter” in aspect-perception, but it is a fact not about “the external world” but about what people do with things. “What I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects” (*PI*, p. 212). This formulation describes concisely the connoisseur’s experience: to see a painting as being

49. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, trans. Anscombe, ed. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1980), 2:13, §63.

50. On aspects versus properties, see Mulhall, *On Being in the World*, pp. 28–34.

51. On the role of quality in attribution, see Neer, “Beazley and the Language of Connoisseurship,” *Hephaistos* 15 (1997): 7–30.

52. Kant, *Kritik of Judgment*, §6, p. 56; trans. mod.

in the style of Rembrandt is to perceive an internal relation between it and other paintings. The question, then, is whether this “internal relation” provides sufficient foundation for claims about the past.

Or is it? The problem lies not with perception, nor with aspects, nor with the alleged unavailability of the external world, but with the demand for justification itself. Here is Wittgenstein:

Here we are in enormous danger of wanting to make fine distinctions.— It is the same when one tries to define the concept of a material object in terms of “what is really seen.”—What we have rather to do is to *accept* the everyday language-game, and to note *false* accounts of the matter *as false*. The primitive language-game which children are taught needs no justification; attempts at justification need to be rejected. [*PI*, p. 200]

The idea that the distinction between aspect-perception and the external world should license skepticism (or fanaticism) about perception rests on a metaphysical illusion, one that effectively denies the enabling condition of knowledge as such. As Cavell puts it, “It is as if someone got it into his head that really pointing to an object would require actually touching it, and then, realizing that this would make life very inconvenient, reconciled himself to common sense by saying: Of course we *can* point to objects, but we must realize what we are doing, and that most of the time this is only approximately pointing to them.”<sup>53</sup> Precisely this confusion motivates skepticism about aspect-perception. To the positivist and the discourse-theorist alike, the only response is, What other, better sort of seeing might there be? Our eyes are not blinders.

Here it is useful to recall the “close kinship” (that is, the specially proximate “family resemblance”) that Wittgenstein saw between aspect-perception and “experiencing the meaning of a word” (*PI*, p. 210). For one of the chief claims of the *Philosophical Investigations* is that the meaning of a word is its use within a broader “grammar” of language-games, a pattern of usage that comprises a “form of life.” There is nothing else for a word to mean, no other, higher standard of meaningfulness against which to measure it. At some point, such facts of use outrun apologetics. As Wittgenstein says, in a famous, archaeological turn of phrase: “If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do’” (*PI*, §217, p. 85).<sup>54</sup> This account bypasses the idea that language should body forth the world, and the sur-

53. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 77.

54. Compare *ibid.*, p. 93.



prise and outrage that ensues when such hopes go unfulfilled. “So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and false?”—It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.”<sup>55</sup> All we can talk about cogently, on this view, is the internal consistency of our grammar: its purchase on whatever is “out there” is a question that cannot cogently be asked. But, then again, what other, better sort of purchase could there be? The grounding for language is not some Cratylan fit with the world, but rather a consistent pattern of use that makes up a “form of life.”

Languages, and thus aspect-perceptions, are essentially public. If there is no private language, there is no private style.<sup>56</sup> Aspect-shifts may not tell us about properties of the object, but they are not trivially subjective (private) for all that. They are as public as can be: they are the stuff of public life. It is, in part, through such shared perception, such mutual attunement, that communities operate in practice and that individuals recognize forms of life that are not their own—that are Other. So far from being a relic of elitism, subjectivism, and radical individualism, style and its recognition are nothing if not communal, that is, shareable. It follows that stylistic judgment is not a function of Olympian disinterest, nor the free act of a transcendental subject. It is, on the contrary, partially constitutive of interested engagement with others. This practice entails no appeal to metaphysical constructions of race or nation. Style need not, and should not, be understood as the *Darstellung* of a *Volksgeist*. On the contrary, patterns of agreement in aspect-perception are no more dependent upon idealist aesthetics than the geologic metamorphoses that Smithson describes. They are as natural and material as the transformation of shellfish into limestone.<sup>57</sup>

Aspect-perceptions, like languages, do not teach us about a reified and illusory “external world” or even about phenomena, but about “the ‘possibilities’ of phenomena” (*PI*, §90, p. 42). Can we foreclose them? On what

55. “It would be an illusion not only that we do know things-in-themselves, but equally an illusion that we do not (crudely, because the concept of ‘knowing something as it really is’ is being used without a clear sense, apart from its ordinary language game)” (*ibid.*, p. 65).

56. The private language argument is generally taken to appear at *PI*, §§243–315, pp. 88–89. But see Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. For the public nature of aspect-perceptions—the fact that they demand some form of expression, a “cry of recognition”—see *PI*, p. 198.

57. Compare *PI*, p. 183: “Thus the atmosphere that is inseparable from its object—is not an atmosphere,” that is, is not an ethereal, *geistig* ideality; there is an intersection here between Wittgenstein and Benjamin’s account of the *aura*, literally the “breeze.” See also Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” p. 104: “The presence of style . . . is one with the fact of our corporeality and does not call for any occult explanation.” Within the domain of art history (or, more precisely, at its margins) the most extensive employment of the Smithsonian theme is Adrian Stokes’s *Stones of Rimini*.

basis? “Compare a concept with a style of painting. For is even our style of painting arbitrary? Can we choose one at pleasure? (The Egyptian, for instance.) Is it a mere question of pleasing and ugly?” (*PI*, p. 230). My claim is that it is not really possible to argue for or against the idea that we can attribute some things to “the style of (particular) humans” and other things to the natural world. For we invoke this capacity whenever we talk about artifacts at all, and such talk is not something we can just leave off at will. We cannot distinguish between archaeology and geology without this language-game; it is the precondition of historical thinking because it is the precondition of evidence. When it comes to attribution, to knowledge of the distant past, style is all there is. *And that is what counts as certainty in this language-game.*<sup>58</sup> It can indeed be hard to distinguish a Rembrandt from a copy; but who is Rembrandt, if not somebody we distinguish in this way? (What is a person, as Cavell might ask, if not something we *recognize*?).<sup>59</sup> It should be obvious that there are stakes involved. Recognition has its own cunning, as Elizabeth Povinelli has recently shown to brilliant effect.<sup>60</sup> Connoisseurship as a foreclosure of possibility or doubt—connoisseurship taken as perfected—amounts to a debasement of its own best intuitions. But archaeology is, after all, a form of grave-robbing, with its own complications and forms of violence; and yet it is also a way of digging until “the spade turns.” It is perhaps for this reason that Gombrich and others are eager to see such high stakes in the question of style: fanaticism about style, and skepticism about style, are fanaticisms and skepticisms about the mutual implication of selves and others. It is the irreducible insight of Merleau-Ponty to have insisted, in the passage that serves as the epigraph to this essay, that the phenomenon of style is the very opposite of the *geistig*, even as it is practically constitutive of the notion of the human.

There are *no* criteria to determine when we may or may not recognize styles as such (although there ought to be criteria for what will count as successful attribution in a particular time and place). “The difference between natural objects and artifacts is not one for which there are criteria” (*CR*, p. 63), which is to say, the deployment of stylistic criteria is itself *non-criterial*.<sup>61</sup> Wittgenstein calls it “imponderable” (*PI*, p. 228). But that fact

58. “The kind of certainty is the kind of language-game” (*PI*, p. 224).

59. One might say, in this context, that attribution is precisely analogous to what Cavell calls “speaking for others.” We speak, peremptorily but out of an ethical commitment, for the analytic individuals we take to be the authors of artifacts.

60. See Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham, N.C., 2002). For recent accounts of recognition in Hegel, see Robert Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley, 1997).

61. See Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), p. 94. See also *CR*, pp. 358–59.

does not license a rejection of attribution. On the contrary, it premises the whole enterprise. At issue is not some unattainable or absolute certainty in attribution but rather the “grammar” of the argument: a grammar that *constitutes* what we call certainty. Fit, or lack thereof, with such grammar is always up for rational debate—debate, that is, in which there are patterns of argument and counterargument, attunements and dissonances of thinking.<sup>62</sup> Such debate will not have an end, which is a sign not of triviality, but of seriousness. But, again, an attribution is not flawed simply because it is unsupported by external evidence. For the validity of that evidence would itself require further support, and so on until the spade turns. There is no external evidence in this sense, yet we still can and do have confidence in attributions. “Is our confidence justified?—What people accept as a justification—is shewn by how they think and live” (*PI*, §325, p. 106). Art historians and archaeologists accept style as the *sine qua non* of justification. They think it and live it, every day.

It is a distinctive feature of such scholars that they make this commitment or seek to evade it (one is tempted to say that it is *the* distinctive feature). Owning up to it would amount to refusing the crude oppositions of formalism and historicism that subtend much current work in archaeology and the history of art. The importance of such suppositions to high-end museum culture, and to the art world of collectors and galleries, requires no elaboration; it is what lays them open to the charge of self-debasement. But these suppositions are equally characteristic of both mainstream, “contextualist” art history and the various forms of visual studies (also known as visual culture) that have emerged in the wake of poststructuralism.<sup>63</sup> These latter tendencies noisily repudiate some version of “formalism” in the name of what is claimed to be a more intellectually respectable, or politically acute, or theoretically sophisticated integration of artwork and society. To this end they typically displace the meaning of artifacts onto a reified “culture” or “discourse,” which usually turns out to be an assemblage of more or less obscure texts. But if knowledge of the past comes only through artifacts, then this procedure is at best a mere tautology and at worst an act of *mauvaise foi*. Absent an inaugural moment of attribution, the explanation of one set of artifacts (say, pictures) in terms of another set

62. Compare Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* pp. 86–96. One can, for instance, argue about the internal consistency of connoisseur’s arguments: does Beazley, for instance, make a coherent argument for why he applies the criteria he does? I have argued that he does not in Neer, “Beazley and the Language of Connoisseurship.”

63. For a recent, related critique of visual culture, see W. J. T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture,” in *Art History, Aesthetics, and Visual Studies*, ed. Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Williamstown, Mass., 2002), pp. 231–50.

of artifacts (say, books) amounts to nothing more than passing the buck. We cannot use society, visual culture, or any other quasi-Platonic ideality to explain representations, because the operative terms are indistinguishable. In art history and archaeology, style *just is* politics, history, discourse in the same way that meaning is use. Put differently, style is not so much an explanatory tool for these disciplines as it is a topic—the topic—of discussion.<sup>64</sup> It is what art history and archaeology are all about. In this sense, the alleged conservatism of stylistics—something both its friends and its enemies take for granted—is simply a mirage. Because connoisseurship sees “culture” (or “politics,” or “discourse”) in morphology, it encourages a worldly—that is, political—formalism: one that is prepared to draw far-reaching conclusions on matters of historical fact from the smudges on a painted thigh, say that of Manet’s *Olympia* (T. J. Clark), or the perspectival construction of a painted dining room, say that of Leonardo’s *Last Supper* (Leo Steinberg). Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* is an especially ambitious recent instance of this mode. It may sound odd to find such work sharing affinities with connoisseurship, but that very oddness is symptomatic. For all such work, whether it goes by the name of art history or archaeology or film, aims at what might be called a natural history of, in, and as art. It thereby investigates the extent to which we, today, do or do not share criteria of judgment, do or do not participate in a shared grammar of concepts, do or do not live a common form of life. That we may turn out to do none of these things is a standing threat, variously to scholars and readers, that no amount of coercion or persuasion can dispel (the point being, precisely, not to dispel it). Those are, quite simply, the stakes.

64. A point made in Davis, *Replications*, p. 182.