



CHICAGO JOURNALS

WINTERTHUR



Style as Evidence

Author(s): Jules David Prown

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Autumn, 1980), pp. 197-210

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180742>

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Style as Evidence

Jules David Prown

JAMES ACKERMAN OBSERVES in his descriptive definition of art history as a scholarly discipline that what distinguishes art historians from other historians is that their primary data are works of art.¹ Although they share with historians the fundamental goal of enlarging our understanding of man through increased knowledge of the past and in the process may utilize many of the same techniques and source materials, art historians are methodologically exceptional in that aspect of art history known as formal or stylistic analysis. The terms “formal analysis” and “stylistic analysis” apply to those aspects of art historical investigation that concentrate on the art object itself, its configuration and style. “Form” and “style” have overlapping but different meanings. Form is restricted to the configuration of the object itself, while style refers to a distinctive manner or mode which, whether consciously intended or not, bears a relationship with other objects marked in their form by similar qualities. The argument of this essay is that style is inescapably culturally expressive, that the formal data embodied in objects are therefore of value as cultural evidence, and that the analysis of style can be useful for other than purely art historical studies.²

Jules David Prown is professor, Department of the History of Art, Yale University.

For helpful suggestions regarding this essay, the author is grateful to James Ackerman, Peter Gay, Henry Glassie, George Kubler, Charles Montgomery, Shirley Martin Prown, Robert Thompson, Bryan Wolf, and colleagues at the National Humanities Institute at Yale University in 1976–77 and 1978–79.

¹ James S. Ackerman, “Western Art History,” in James S. Ackerman and Rhys Carpenter, *Art and Archaeology*, Humanistic Scholarship in America: The Princeton Studies (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 127.

² In concentrating on the perception and analysis of form and style, I will necessarily eliminate from consideration here

Art and architecture belong to a larger class of artifacts usually described as material culture. But they stand apart from other artifacts—for example, tools or mechanical devices—in that they are especially responsive to formal analysis. This reflects the nature of art objects and architecture, as well as the fact that art history has a longer tradition of object analysis than most other disciplines. Scholars in a variety of fields which can be informed by the data embodied in things (including but not restricted to art objects)—history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and others—have something to learn from art history and its special but not arcane methodologies, just as art historians surely have much to learn from other

other modes of studying art which make art history in and of itself an interdisciplinary field—the technical analysis of materials, investigations into social and cultural history to illuminate the lives of artists and the circumstances of patronage, iconographical studies of content (a province of intellectual history), consideration of philosophical problems of aesthetics, studies in the psychology and physiology of perception, and the quantitative analysis of objects common to archaeology, anthropology, and sociology. This restriction is adopted solely in order to develop a theoretical argument and to demonstrate as clearly as possible the value of style as evidence. In actual practice, while there is some procedural advantage in keeping modes of investigation discrete, it is obviously desirable to bring into play as many approaches as lie within the competence of the investigator and relate to the material under study. In arguing for the evidential significance of style, I do not intend to draw qualitative distinctions between “high art” and “low art” or between art and other kinds of artifacts. I will indicate below some reasons why certain categories of objects are more culturally expressive through their style than others, but I hold no brief for any particular class distinction in art. The extent to which objects convey information through their form seems to be more a matter of category—the type of objects rather than of the social class that used or enjoyed them. The American objects I use as examples tend to be high art, but that reflects my familiarity with this material. It is clear that other categories of objects can provide formal evidence. For example, Henry Glassie has discovered a wealth of meanings in the unassuming physical properties of Virginia folk housing (*Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975], esp. chap. 7, “Reason in Architecture,” pp. 114–75).

disciplines and their methodologies. (Linguistics is an obvious example.) The fact is, though, that historical scholars, other than art and music historians and archaeologists, generally prefer to work with verbal data.³ The twentieth-century scholar using documents, literature, diaries, letters, philosophical writings, or other forms of verbal expression as source material has a sense of communicating directly with the past as he experiences the same mode of verbal communication with which he is familiar in his own daily existence. While it may be that the medium has become today's message, this theory has not been applied retroactively; for historians the messages from the past are in words and rarely in other media. Even when the words are in a foreign or extinct language, they can be translated or deciphered, and the scholar can take comfort in the sense that he is dealing with a direct statement made by another person, once alive—an intelligence who speaks across the years.

Historians are less at ease when they are called on to consider as evidence nonverbal materials which have survived from the past, the mute heritage of things produced over the centuries by the minds and hands of men. Every time a person in the past manipulated matter in space in a particular way to satisfy his practical or aesthetic needs, he made a type of statement, albeit a nonverbal statement that is considerably more difficult for most of us to comprehend than a written statement. Yet it is the nonverbal, unspoken, perhaps even unconscious, nature of this statement that gives it particular importance.

In any age there are certain widely shared beliefs—assumptions, attitudes, values—that are so obvious that they remain unstated. As such, they are most clearly perceivable, not in what a society says it is doing in its histories, literature, or public and private documents, but rather in the way in which it does things. The way in which something is done, produced, or expressed is its style. Style is manifested in the form of things rather than in content.⁴ Certain aspects of human activity or creation are more purely expressive of style than others, in inverse proportion to the extent to which

they are consciously purposeful. Functional intention obscures style. The configuration of a functional object, such as a tool or machine, is almost completely determined by its purpose, and style is a peripheral consideration. Form in such a case clearly follows function. The configuration of an object or activity purposefully concerned with a message, such as a story or play, is strongly conditioned by that message. Form, in part, again follows function. Music, on the other hand, is relatively nonpurposeful and is therefore more purely expressive of style. Form is dominant, and function flows from it.

Among the visual arts, painting is, like literature, often heavily loaded with content, serving as a vehicle for some sort of communication. Style in painting is affected and sometimes obscured by the requirements of the subject matter. Works of architecture and the decorative arts are normally less overtly concerned with subject matter than painting, but they do have an intended function. However, unlike tools or machines, their formal component is of at least equal importance with their functional component. As a rule, function is easier to pin down than content. The function of a house, a chair, or a teapot is usually easily defined, whereas the meaning of a story, a play, or a painting can be elusive. The difficulty that one encounters in comprehending function resides in the degree of complexity. The function of a piece of scientific equipment, although precise and specific, may be difficult or impossible for the nonspecialist to decipher. Where function and form are partners, as in architecture and the decorative arts, it is easier to perceive form if the function is not too complex. Therefore we can usually discern style most readily and clearly in the decorative arts where the function is simple and constant.

Function is the constant against which stylistic variables play. For example, chairs are quite limited in their configurational possibilities by their functional requirements; to hold the human body in a sitting position, the seat should provide a horizontal plane at a certain height above the floor, a substructure is required to carry the weight of the chair's occupant, and a back lends vertical support. Yet there is great variety in the configuration of chairs produced in different times or in different places. This variety reflects shifts in style rather than shifts in the programmatic requirements of chairs. In the case of chairs, style can be factored out as separate from the seating function, which by and large does not change, and from overt meaning, which is not present except in elaborately dec-

³ The remainder of this paragraph and the next few paragraphs are taken, with some alterations, from my article, "The Work of Art and Historical Scholarship," *Ventures* 8, no. 2 (Fall 1968): 58–60. I am grateful to the dean of the Yale Graduate School for permission to incorporate that material here.

⁴ To say that form and content are discrete is not to say that they are unrelated. They affect and modify each other. Moreover, the principal argument of this essay is that style possesses significant meaning, or content. On the other hand, content by itself does not in any obvious sense possess style.

orated examples. This style, now isolable and identifiable, must necessarily reflect values of the individual and of the society that produced the object. In a Philadelphia side chair of 1796 (fig. 1), for instance, there is a great deal going on that has nothing to do with function. The painted decoration, the outward flare of the rear legs, the shape of the spade feet, and above all the treatment of the back, with its oval outline and the replication of feathers and bows in painted wood, are unrelated to function, but obviously these elements were of sufficient importance to the maker, the purchaser, and, by indirection, the society to which they belonged to make the effort worthwhile.

A West African chair (fig. 2), the throne of a traditional ruler of the Bamiléké people in what is now the United Republic of Cameroon, shares only



Fig. 1. Side chair, Philadelphia, 1796. (M. and M. Karolik Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)

the most basic functional characteristics with the Philadelphia chair—the seat a reasonable distance above the ground, bracing below, and vertical support for the back. The elaborate carving responds to very different values or attitudes or needs that this society found important enough to be worth expressing.

It might be noted here that chairs are particularly revealing of cultural values because they so easily become human surrogates, as is obviously the case with the Bamiléké chair. We use such human analogues as feet, legs, back, and seat in our descriptive terminology for chairs, even for such an abstract example as the Philadelphia chair. It is not unreasonable to speculate that aspects of an object that seem to echo the human anatomy may reflect in abstract terms the ways in which individuals in a society perceive themselves. This is overt in the Bamiléké chair where the human elements look human and is covert or repressed in the Philadelphia chair—which in itself tells us something about the two cultures.

Although a society may prevaricate or intentionally distort actuality in its utterances (journalism, propaganda, diplomatic communications,

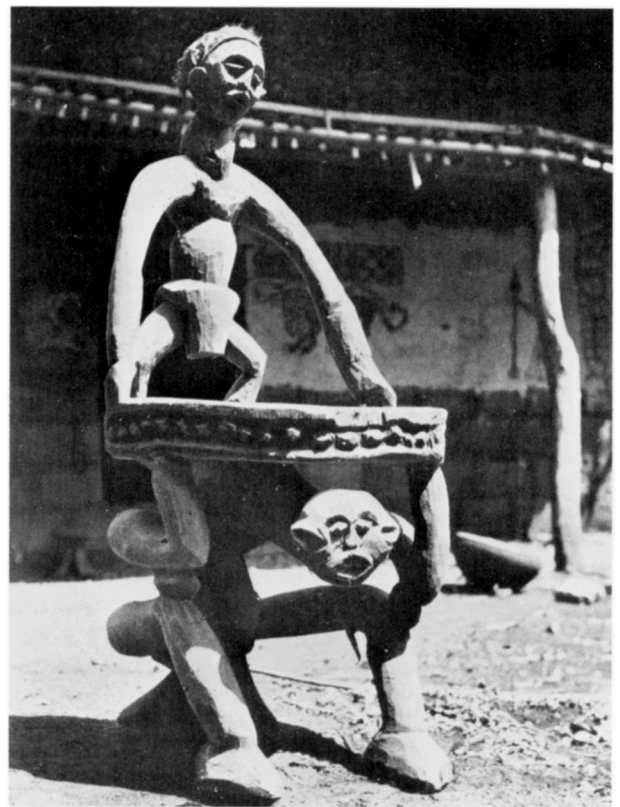


Fig. 2. Armchair, Bamiléké people, United Republic of Cameroon, undated. From Raymond Lecoq, *Les Bamiléké* (Paris: Editions Africaines, 1953), p. 97, fig. 66.

advertising) or in its pictorial statements (portraiture, mythological or religious art, socialist realism), a society does not bother to deceive itself or others in such mundane things as most buildings or the furniture or the pots that it makes for its own use. Architecture and the decorative arts are thus a kind of abstract art out of the past. They are like music in that they are more concerned with style than they are with content. However, there is an essential difference in that music is expressed in time, whereas architecture and decorative arts exist in space. The perception of style in music requires exposition in time, as opposed to the plastic arts in which the perception of style can be explosively instantaneous. This immediate sensory confrontation through objects with the beliefs of another society, removed in time and/or place from one's own, should theoretically provide insights into that society.

If the thesis that a society in a particular time or place deposits a cultural stylistic fingerprint, as it were, on what it produces is correct, two conclusions follow by which the thesis can be tested. First, we would expect to find shared stylistic elements in the objects—furniture, silver, architecture—produced in the same place at the same time. Second, we would expect to find a change in style concurrent with a shift in cultural values. As a case in point, the discussion that follows considers stylistic commonalities on either side of the striking instance of marked stylistic change in the arts in America that occurred between the third and fourth quarters of the eighteenth century over the watershed years of the revolutionary war when America made the transition from colony to nation.⁵

John Singleton Copley's portrait of Paul Revere (fig. 3) represents the Boston silversmith in the act of making a teapot. The composition hinges on a responsive play between the solid spherical shapes of the head and the teapot, the former the source of creativity and the latter the thing created. The picture celebrates worldly stuffs—polished wood,



Fig. 3. John Singleton Copley, *Paul Revere*. Boston, 1765–70. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Joseph W. Revere, William B. Revere, and Edward H. R. Revere.)

gleaming silver, soft flesh, fabric, hair.⁶ With Revere feeling the heft of the teapot, the painting conveys the essence of the dominant aesthetic sensibility of the third quarter of the eighteenth century in colonial America, namely, a delight in the substantiality, the corporeal reality, of things.

A heavy, solid prerevolutionary Philadelphia rococo (Chippendale-style) side chair (fig. 4) interacts with the space that surrounds and penetrates it. Its outline is irregular, with knees and ears jutting out in different directions. In contrast, a post-revolutionary side chair from Salem, Massachusetts (fig. 5), of the mid-1790s, like the painted chair discussed earlier (fig. 1), represents a completely different aesthetic. The forms are self-contained; the shield-shaped back enclosing an urn and drapery swag does not interact with surrounding space. Its parts are more slender, and indeed the chair is much lighter to lift than its rococo counterpart. It also breaks more easily, reflecting a willingness of the producing culture to sacrifice a practical benefit (durability) for other values.

⁶ It does so with a skill and delight in the texture of things not seen since the days of Vermeer, DeHooch, and other Dutch masters who painted in and for a similarly prosperous, mercantile, and Protestant society almost a century and a half earlier—a parallel which also suggests the extent to which style expresses the values of the society that produced it.

⁵ It should be noted that the objects illustrating the present essay were chosen for the clarity with which they display certain stylistic features. In that sense they are not typical. Nor are they typical in quality; theirs is exceptionally high. But the stylistic elements themselves are commonly found in a large number of surviving buildings, pieces of furniture and silver, and paintings of the second half of the eighteenth century in America and are typical. For an overlapping but more general analysis of this stylistic transition, see my essay, "Style in American Art: 1750–1800," in *American Art, 1750–1800: Toward Independence*, ed. Charles F. Montgomery and Patricia E. Kane, catalogue of the Yale University/Victoria and Albert Museum Bicentennial exhibition (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), pp. 32–39.



Fig. 4. Side chair, Philadelphia. 1760–80.
(Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, Yale University Art Gallery.)

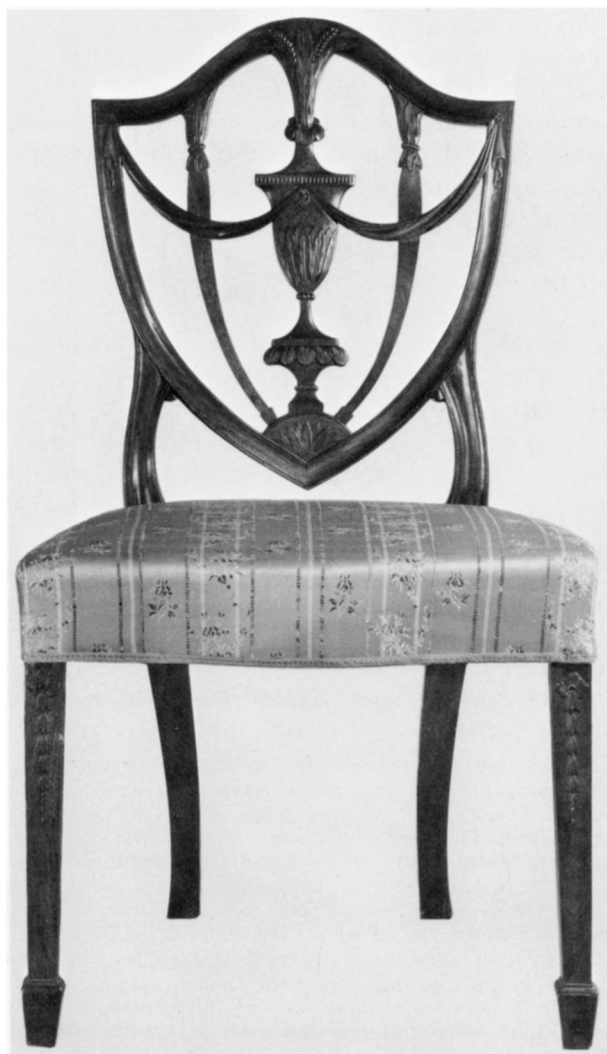


Fig. 5. Side chair, carving attributed to Samuel McIntire, Salem, Massachusetts, ca. 1795. (M. and M. Karolik Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)



Fig. 6. Card table, New York, 1760–70. (Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, Yale University Art Gallery.)

A prerevolutionary Chippendale-style New York card table (fig. 6) is substantial, weighty. The primary material is mahogany shaped into curves and reverse curves characteristic of the rococo style. Along the apron or skirt the wood is carved into a gadrooned band, like an applied twisted rope, which breaks up the light that falls upon it into highlights and shadows. The knees are carved with leaf forms, and the legs terminate in claw-and-ball feet. The decorative details here, as in most rococo furniture, derive from real, or at least possible, organic natural forms. The twisted rope, leaf forms, and claw-and-ball feet are carved out of wood and have their own three-dimensional, palpable existence, replicating organic natural objects.

In a postrevolutionary, neoclassical Massachusetts card table (fig. 7), the curve and reverse curve give way, notably in the legs, to straight lines. The table is simpler and more direct than its ornate rococo counterpart. The rococo table interacts with the surrounding space, while the neoclassical table tends to be self-contained and aloof, its severe outline setting it apart from the space in which it exists. The surface of the neoclassical table is more precise and clean-cut than the earlier piece; the carved mahogany is replaced by sliced veneers applied to the surface. On the apron of the neoclassical card table, where rope gadrooning on the rococo table actually breaks the light striking it into highlight and shadow, a band of alternating light



Fig. 7. Card table, Massachusetts, 1785–1815. (Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, Yale University Art Gallery.)

and dark wood inlays provides an abstraction of the same visual effect. Instead of palpable details like leaves and claw-and-ball feet, there are two-dimensional inlaid images of urns and eagles.⁷

⁷ Formal analysis can describe these differences and focus attention on factors causing varied perceptual responses which, as this essay aims to demonstrate, is an important and often neglected procedure. Nevertheless, as suggested by this card table, a more complete understanding requires utilization of a broader array of scholarly tools—iconography to identify the classical motifs; history to understand classical antiquity and its meaning for the latter eighteenth century, especially for the new American Republic created in the image of ancient Rome; philosophy to understand the Enlightenment and the significance of decorative motifs that are the creations of the minds of men rather than replications of things found in nature, like leaves, shells, etc.

A tea set by Abraham Dubois (fig. 8) of about 1795 is similarly closed in form, the smooth surfaces setting off the urn and Roman helmet shapes from their surroundings. Neoclassical objects frequently embody geometrical shapes and designs, as in the circles and squares forming the base plinths of the Dubois tea service. Geometry, an abstract, intellectual activity, produces designs that lie at the opposite end of the formal spectrum from irregular shapes found in nature, such as the shells, leaves, and birds' heads that run riot on an object such as the earlier rococo Joseph Richardson teakettle and stand (fig. 9). The colonial pleasure in the palpability of objects as opposed to the federal period's preference for abstraction is again evident



Fig. 8. Abraham Dubois, tea set. Philadelphia, 1785-95. (Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, Yale University Art Gallery.)

Fig. 9. Joseph Richardson, teakettle on stand. Philadelphia, 1745-55 (Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, Yale University Art Gallery.)



if one lifts comparable objects; a neoclassical teapot or card table is invariably much lighter than its rococo counterpart.

Intellectual pleasure in geometrical design is evident in the inlay patterns on a veneered neoclassical Baltimore sideboard (fig. 10). In the sideboard there are two doors at the extreme left and right, but one covers a cupboard and the other drawers; disparate functions are masked behind a symmetrical facade. There is a comparable indulgence in geometry in the room shapes of Gore Place, the home of Christopher Gore, in Waltham, Massachusetts (fig. 11). Service areas, closets, and stairways are tucked away in a willful intellectual exercise, like the drawers in the sideboard, in order not to obtrude upon the geometric purity of the room shapes.

The cool surfaces of sheet silver and of wood veneers on neoclassical objects were repeated to some extent by the brickwork of neoclassical architecture, as in Gore Place (fig. 12). The surface or skin is taut. Window and door openings are cut directly into the brick, and these, along with the pediments of the wings, provide a series of geometrical shapes—squares, rectangles, semicircles, and triangles. The house and the sideboard share such design elements as hard surfaces, interior intellectual ingenuity masked by exterior symmetry, and the use of geometrical designs; the sides of both appear sliced and featureless to stress frontality. The appeal is planar rather than plastic, optical rather than haptic.

The stylistic difference between pre-revolutionary and postrevolutionary objects extends even to picture frames. The elaborate 1769 carved wood frame on Copley's portrait of Isaac Smith (fig. 13) has the rococo characteristics of penetrating and being penetrated by space. Indeed, the frame unites the painted world of Isaac Smith with the physical world in which the painting and the viewer exist. It relates the portrait to the interior in which it hangs and in its own day linked the sitter with his own house and worldly goods. By contrast, the later neoclassical frame (of undetermined origin) around a Gilbert Stuart portrait (fig. 14), a simple rectangle with an interior oval spandrel, separates the painted figure from its physical surroundings with a clean geometrical fence. The interaction between the painted figure and the surrounding world is visual, not physical.

We have considered evidence of stylistic commonalities in two periods and of stylistic change between those periods. The manifestations of identical elements of style in a broad range of ob-

jects produced in a given time and place cannot be considered coincidence; clearly cultural preferences were being expressed. And stylistic shifts, as between rococo and neoclassical objects, mark a change in cultural values. Our analysis of objects has obviously yielded information, but what do objects tell us that we do not know and, in some ways, know in much greater detail from other, largely verbal, sources?

The change in values manifested in neoclassical objects obviously relates to the arrival and acceptance in America of Enlightenment ideas. Based on a conviction that man is inherently good and rational but corrupted by faulty institutions of church and state, Enlightenment theory pointed to classical antiquity as proof of man's capacity to create an ideal social and political structure and concluded that it was therefore possible in modern times to recreate a society equally admirable. This goal of social betterment contributed significantly to pressure for political change and ultimately, in America and France in the latter years of the eighteenth century, led to revolution. The War of Independence brought about in America a political system embodying Enlightenment thought, with high regard for man's reason and for man's capacity through the exercise of reason to create a better world, with a vision of antiquity as the prototype of that world. We know this without recourse to surviving artifacts, although neoclassical objects confirm our understanding. Abstract and geometrical designs are assertions of the dominion of the mind, although almost certainly they were not consciously so intended. Classical shapes and motifs testify to the paradigmatic role of antiquity. We could easily go a step beyond simple confirmation and conclude that the fact that intellect was applied to problems of design in furniture or silver or architecture during this period, just as men used their minds to create a more ideal political system, testifies to the pervasiveness and consistency of a particular set of cultural values. But how does this stylistic analysis of American neoclassical objects enlarge our understanding of those cultural values and of the society that produced them?

We have isolated and identified several basic recurring stylistic elements found in American neoclassical objects—geometrical shapes that are mental constructs as opposed to natural forms, sheer surface planes that isolate self-contained objects from their surroundings, abstract two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional elements. These works appeal to the eye and to the mind rather than to the hand of the beholder. They stand aloof, and there is little promise of tac-



Fig. 10. Sideboard, Baltimore, 1785–1815. (Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, Yale University Art Gallery.)

Fig. 11. Floor plan, Gore Place, Waltham, Massachusetts, 1806. From Talbot Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture in America* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 11, fig. 1.

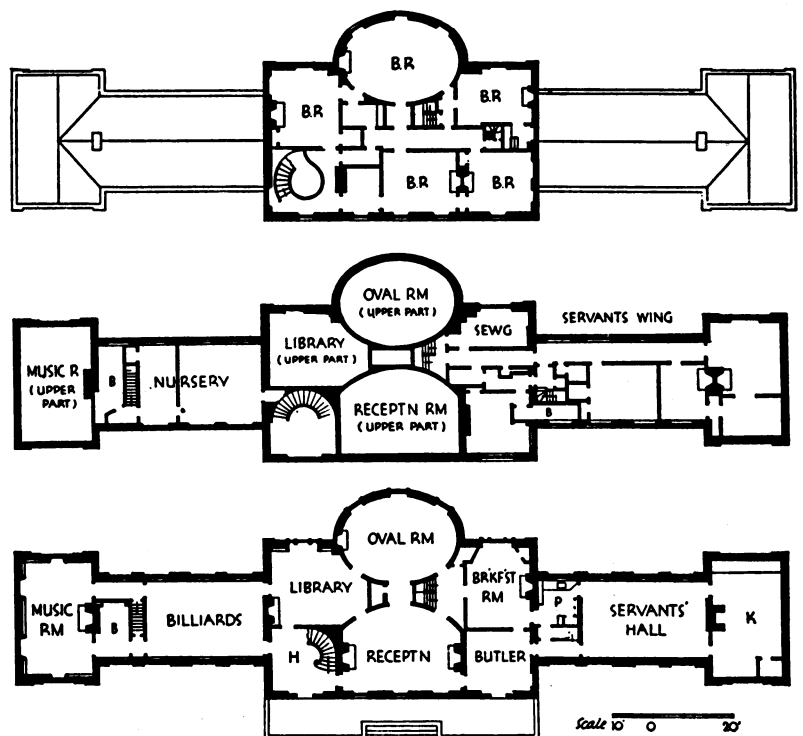




Fig. 12. Gore Place, Waltham, Massachusetts, 1806. (Photo, courtesy Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, Yale University Art Gallery.)

tile pleasure in the cool, hard, sometimes angular surfaces.

Analysis of the stylistic features of objects qualitatively alters our understanding of the time and place, the culture, that produced them. Although analysis of style usually does not provide new factual information about the engendering culture, it does provide a different, more subjective, more visceral mode of understanding, an affective mode triggered by sensory perceptions. The artifact through its form acts as an “artistic sign,” not as a “communicative sign,” to use Mukařovský’s terms. Unlike most linguistic signs, including the documents and records that are primary sources for historians, it does not communicate information about something outside of itself. “The understanding that the artistic sign establishes among people does not pertain to *things*, even when they are represented in the work, but to a certain *attitude* toward *things*, a certain attitude on the part of man toward the *entire* reality that surrounds him, not only to that reality which is directly represented in the given case.”⁸ Artifacts as artistic signs that il-

luminate beliefs embodied within the object itself, rather than communicative signs oriented toward some external aim, can constitute primary material not only for art historians but also for all students of society and culture.

The analysis of the stylistic character of American neoclassical objects helps us to understand both the facts and the feelings of an age that distrusted art as a luxury that led ineluctably to extravagance, vice, folly, effeminacy, corruption, and, ultimately, national decay.⁹ We understand better the dilemma of individuals within that society, like John Adams, whose (as one scholar has put it) “emotional response to the arts, his driving, uncontrollable, sensuous appreciation of the physical things around him . . . was immediate, it changed according to his mood, it surprised him, and more than anything else it frightened him.”¹⁰ It frightened him because he shared Enlightenment convictions regarding the corrupting power of art. Adams wrote to his wife from Paris in 1778, with

⁸ See Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years, 1790–1860* (New York: George Braziller, 1966), pp. 30–36.

¹⁰ Wendell Garrett, “John Adams and the Limited Role of the Fine Arts,” in *Winterthur Portfolio 1* (Winterthur, Del.: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1964), p. 243.

⁸ Jan Mukařovský, “The Essence of the Visual Arts,” in *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), p. 237.

regard to the richness and magnificence of Paris and Versailles, "I cannot help suspecting that the more elegance, the less virtue, in all times and countries."¹¹ Through our perception of the coolness, the distance, the abstract qualities, the intellectual as opposed to sensual appeal of neoclassical objects, we have firsthand experience of an age that distrusted art. For the postrevolutionary American mind, earlier rococo objects, with their exuberance and sensual appeal, represented indulgence in feelings and emotions; they aroused irrational responses; they embodied aspects of human nature that could imply social and political instability. The neoclassical objects were aesthetically sanitized, art made safe for John Adams and his contemporaries.

Through stylistic analysis of objects, we encounter the past at first hand; we have direct sensory experience of surviving historical events, not necessarily important events, but authentic events nonetheless.¹² This affective mode of apprehension through the senses that allows us to put ourselves, figuratively speaking, inside the skins of individuals who commissioned, made, used, or enjoyed these objects, to see with their eyes and touch with their hands, to identify with them empathetically, is clearly a different way of engaging the past than abstractly through the written word. Instead of our minds making intellectual contact with minds of the past, our senses make affective contact with senses of the past. This has certain advantages. The minds of men differ remarkably from time to time and place to place. The inability of one human being to understand the mind of another, even within a single nation or culture, is all too clear to us in the twentieth century. The gap of understanding between cultures is even greater. We apparently begin to understand and appreciate the values of different cultures, especially those technologically less advanced, only when they are on the verge of annihilation. The gulf between minds over time is no less great. It would be a disturbing experience, for instance, for a contemporary American, sharing something by way of language but little in terms of cultural values, to try to communicate with a seventeenth-century American, to penetrate the toughness and inflexibility of the seventeenth-century mind.

As different as minds may be or become, there

is reason to believe that, although some people have finer tuning of one sense or another, the sensory apparatus and perceptions of all individuals are not and have not been drastically dissimilar. This conclusion is beyond physiological or philosophical verification. But in the absence of proof to the contrary, the assumption of common sensory equipment and perceptions is reasonable, allowing for the facts that one's cultural perspective undoubtedly colors perception and that senses develop or atrophy over time (our sense of smell, for example, is probably less highly developed than that of our prehistoric ancestors). The premise, and it is admittedly a large one, is that rough is rough, wet is wet, hot is hot, and red is red to all human perceivers. Corollary assumptions are that physical man himself provides a constant measure in regard to scale (big, small) and that there are constants in man's experience of the physical world (the pull of gravity, the cycle of day and night). In confronting authentic objects of another period or place and allowing for changes in the physical condition and context of the objects, just as we have allowed for some change in human perception, we do in fact perceive something of what its producers and users perceived. We empathize with them sensorially and are affected in ways that must bear some relationship to the ways in which they were affected. This is confirmed by the capacity of art to retain or become reinfused with freshness and significance through the ages. In any era people will respond to certain older works of art because their formal qualities resonate with contemporary formal values. A century ago Vermeer and Vivaldi were ignored; today they are valued, but Murillo, Troyon, and Clementi are less highly regarded than they were. Art remains relatively constant in its transmission of affective aesthetic qualities, but the cultural preferences of human perceivers change from generation to generation. *Ars longa, vita brevis.*

Before concluding, I would like to suggest that, in yielding a greater affective understanding of other cultures, stylistic analysis can lead to more concrete and original cultural interpretations.¹³

¹³ This may also be true of our own culture. Style is as much reflective of the values of a contemporary and familiar society as of those far removed in time and/or place. It is more difficult, however, to perceive values we share, perhaps unconsciously. We are partially blinded by familiarity. If one is looking for reflections of culture in objects, one's cultural perspective is, among other distorting factors, a polarizing lens that reduces those reflections that resonate with one's own culture. And when we are looking directly for reflections of our own culture, it is as if the polarizing lens were revolved to the optimum setting for blocking out reflections.

¹¹ Garrett, "John Adams," p. 244.

¹² Peter Gay, *Art and Act: On Causes in History—Manet, Gropius, Mondrian* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), notes: "The most undramatic work of art presents precisely the same causal puzzles as the eruption of a war, the making of a treaty, or the rise of a class" (p. 3).



Fig. 13. John Singleton Copley, *Isaac Smith*. Boston, 1769. (Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Maitland Fuller Griggs.)

This can be little more than a suggestion here, however, since the case is complex to argue. Moreover, the evidence is scanty, in part because we have only begun to exploit the value of stylistic analysis for the study of culture. There are, however, a few obvious examples. In the case of an obliterated culture, pre-Homeric or pre-Columbian, for example, which has little or no surviving literature, stylistic analysis of surviving artifacts is one of the fundamental ways of knowing that culture (others are quantification and laboratory analysis). The history of art itself has long employed stylistic analysis in combination with other investigative techniques to achieve its results. Perhaps the clearest evidence for the practical utility of stylistic analysis lies in its traditional application in the work of sorting out true objects from false, of determining what is and what is not an authentic work of a particular hand, or of a particular area, or of a particular time. This process is known as connoisseurship. Once stylistic criteria have been established by the examination of objects known to be authentic and have been ingested by the scholar (or connoisseur), it becomes possible for him, by application of these internalized stylistic standards, to discern objects that are authentic and to reject those objects or parts of objects that



Fig. 14. Gilbert Stuart, *Mrs. Loftus Tottenham*. Dublin, ca. 1790. (Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy.)

do not ring true. The process can be rapid, even automatic, and often unconscious. Connoisseurship is an efficient and effective procedure not only for would-be acquirers of works of art but also for scholars in general. By applying stylistic standards, it provides a shortcut to historical truth, a way to know quickly what fits and is appropriate for a particular time and place and what is false, faked, untrue. As it works for art objects it can work for other classes of objects or categories of human behavior or activity which are marked by a particular style (dress, coiffures, manners, forms of address, dance steps, military formations, rhetoric, music, etc.) to the extent that stylistic components can be winnowed out from function or content. The applicability of stylistic analysis to data other than art objects is still largely a hypothetical truism; it remains to be demonstrated on a broad scale, but, to point to a familiar example, Claude Lévi-Strauss has made significant cultural interpretations on the basis of the formal aspects of painted face markings and of village plans in his studies of South American tribes.¹⁴

It seems clear, then, that objects reflect cultural values in their style, and that these values can

¹⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1974), esp. pp. 178–97, 215–46.

therefore be apprehended through stylistic analysis. This mode of affective engagement through the senses yields a different kind of cultural understanding than can be obtained through verbal sources. It therefore enlarges our knowledge of other cultures. Moreover, its internal, visceral character makes subsequent understanding

more rapid, almost instinctive, because the process is sensory rather than intellectual. Stylistic analysis, a standard art historical procedure, can undoubtedly be a useful tool for scholars in other fields who are interested in cultural understanding and can overcome inhibitions they may have about working with nonverbal materials.