The Problem of Style

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It has long been said that the practical existence of humanity is absorbed in the struggle between individuality and generality, that at almost every point of our existence the obedience to a law valid for everyone, whether of an inner or an outer nature, comes into conflict with the purely internal determination of our existence, with the individuality of the person who obeys only his own vital sense. But it might seem paradoxical that in these collisions of the political, economic and moral fields only a much more general form of contrast expresses itself, which is no less able to bring the nature of artistic style to its fundamental expression.

I begin with a very simple experience from the psychology of art. The deeper and more unique the impression of a work of art is on us, the less the question of style tends to play a role in this impression. On viewing any of the countless, rather ungratifying statues of the Seventeenth century, we are above all aware of their baroque character; with the neo-classical portraits from around 1800 we think mainly of the style of their times; nothing about numerous quite indifferent pictures from the present excites our attention, except perhaps that they display the naturalistic style. Facing a statue by Michelangelo, however, a religious painting by Rembrandt, or a portrait by Velasquez, the question of style becomes completely irrelevant; the work of art takes us utterly prisoner in the unified wholeness with which it confronts us, and whether it additionally belongs to some temporal style or other is a question which will not occur, at least not to the merely aesthetically interested observer. When a foreignness of sensibility does not permit us to grasp the real individuality in the work of art, so that we can only penetrate to its more general and typical features — as is often the case for instance with oriental art — only then does our consciousness of style remain active and especially effective even with regard to great works. For the decisive thing is

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this: style is always that type of artistic arrangement which, to the extent it carries or helps to carry the impression of a work of art, negates its quite individual nature and value, its uniqueness of meaning. By virtue of style, the particularity of the individual work is subjugated to a general law of form that also applies to other works; it is, so to speak, relieved of its absolute autonomy. Because it shares its nature or a part of its design with others it thus points to a common root that lies beyond the individual work – in contrast to the works that grow purely out of themselves, that is, from the mysterious, absolute unity of the artistic personality and its uniqueness. And just as the stylization of a work contains the note of a generality, a law of perception and feeling that applies beyond the specific artistic individuality, the same can be said with respect to the *subject* of the work of art. A stylized rose is supposed to represent the general character of a rose, the style of a rose, not the individual reality of a specific rose. Different artists attempt to achieve this through quite different constructions, just as for different philosophers that which appears as common to all realities is quite different, even opposite. For an Indian artist, a Gothic artist, or one from the Empire period, such stylization will therefore lead to quite heterogeneous phenomena. But the meaning of each is nonetheless not to make the rose perceptible, but rather its law of formation, the root of its form, which is universally active as the unifying force in all the multiplicity of its forms.

Here, however, an objection seems unavoidable. We do speak after all, of Botticelli's or Michelangelo's style, of Goethe's or Beethoven's. The right to do so is the following: that these great figures have created a mode of expression flowing from their very individual genius, which we now sense as the general character in all their individual works. Then such a style of an individual master may be adopted by others so that it becomes the shared property of many artistic personalities. In these others it expresses its destiny as a style, of being something over or beside the expression of personality, so that we quite rightly say, 'These have Michelangelo's style', just as we have a possession that has not grown from us ourselves, but been acquired externally and only subsequently incorporated into the sphere of our ego.

Michelangelo, by contrast, is this style himself, it is identical to Michelangelo's own being, and by virtue of that it is also that general character which is expressed in and colours all artistic utterances of Michelangelo, but only because it is the root-force of

these works and these works only. Therefore, it can only be distinguished logically, so to speak, and not objectively from what is unique to the individual work as such. In this case, saying that style is the man himself is well justified, even more clearly in the sense that the man is the style. In the cases of a style coming from outside, on the other hand, shared with others and the period, that maxim has at best the meaning that it shows where the limits of the originality of the individual lie.

From this general theme — that style is a principle of generality which either mixes with the principle of individuality, displaces it or represents it — all the individual features of style as a psychic and artistic reality are developed. It displays in particular the fundamental distinction between applied arts and fine art. The essence of the work of applied art is that it exists many times; its diffusion is the quantitative expression of its usefulness, for it always serves a need that is shared by many people. The essence of the work of fine art, on the other hand, is uniqueness. A work of art and its copy are something totally different from a model and its realization, something different from the copies of a fabric or piece of jewellery manufactured according to a pattern. The fact that innumerable fabrics and pieces of jewellery, chairs and book bindings, candelabras and drinking glasses are manufactured without distinction from a single model, is the symbol that each of these things has its law outside itself. Each such object is only the chance example of something general, in short, its sense of form is style and not the singularity with which a psyche is expressed according to its uniqueness in precisely this one object.[1] This is by no means a denigration of applied art, no more than the principle of generality and the principle of individuality possess a ranking among themselves. Instead, they are the poles of the human creative ability, neither of which could be dispensed with, and each of which determines every point of life, inward and outward, active and enjoying, only in cooperation with the other, although in an infinite variety of mixtures. And we will become acquainted with the vital needs which can only be satisfied by the stylized, not the artistic individual object.

Just as previously the concept of artistic individual design was disputed by the fact that even great artists have a style — namely, their own, which is a law, and therefore a style, of their own — the corresponding objection comes up here. We also observe, especially today, how the objects of applied art are individually designed, by

definite personalities with the unmistakable cachet of such; we often see only one copy of an individual object, perhaps manufactured for only one user. But there is a peculiar situation, which can be pointed out here, that keeps this from being a counter-example. To say of some things that they are unique, and of others that they are one individual thing out of many, often has only a symbolic meaning, and certainly that is the case here. With that we refer to a certain quality which is characteristic of the thing and gives its existence the meaning of singularity or repetitiveness, without some contingent exterior fate always having to realize this quantitative expression of its nature. We have all had the experience that a sentence we hear disgusts us with its banality, without being able to maintain that we have often heard it, or even ever heard it at all. It is just inwardly, qualitatively old hat, even if no one else has ever actually used it; the sentence is banal because it deserves to be banal.

And conversely we have the irrefutable impression that certain works and certain people are unique — even if chance combinations of existence actually produce another or many other exactly identical personalities or objects. That doesn't affect any of these, because they have the right, one could say, to be unique, or rather, this numerical designation is only the expression of a qualitative nobility of nature, whose basic nature is incomparability. And such is the situation with the singularities of applied art: because their essence is style, because the general artistic substance of which their particular shape is formed always remains tangible in them, it is their *meaning* to be reproduced, they are internally constituted for multiplicity, even though expense, caprice or jealous exclusivity only permit them by chance to become reality once.

Matters are different with those artistically formed objects of use which actually refuse this style-meaning through their design and wish to have or do indeed have the effect of individual works of art. I should like to lodge the strongest protest possible against this tendency of the applied arts. Those objects are destined to be incorporated into life, to serve an externally given end. In this they contrast completely with the work of art, which is imperiously closed within itself. Each work is a world unto itself, it is its own end, symbolizing by its very frame that it refuses any participation as a servant in the movements of a practical life outside itself. A chair exists so that one can sit on it, a glass in order that one can fill it with wine and take it in one's hand; if due to their design these two give the impression of that self-satisfied artistic nature which

follows only its own laws and expresses the autonomy of its psyche totally within itself, then the most repulsive conflict arises. Sitting on a work of art, working with a work of art, using a work of art for the needs of practice – that is cannibalism, it is the degradation of the master to the status of slave, and this is not a master who occupies that status by the contingent favour of fate, but inwardly, in accordance with the law of his nature. The theoreticians, whom one hears pronouncing in the same breath that the piece of applied art should be a work of art and that its highest principle is practicality, do not seem to sense this contradiction: that the practical is a means – which therefore has its end outside itself – while the work of art is never a means, but a work closed in itself, one that unlike the 'practical' never borrows its law from anything that is not itself. The principle that if possible every object of use should be a work of art like Michelangelo's *Moses* or *Jan Six* by Rembrandt is perhaps the most common misunderstanding of modern individualism. It would give to things that exist for other people and purposes the form of those whose meaning resides in the pride of being-for-themselves; to the things that are used and used up, moved and handed around it would give the form of those which outlast the bustle of practical life unmoved, like a blessed island; finally to those things that appeal because of their utilitarian end to the general in us, to that which we share with others, it would give the form of those objects which are unique because an individual soul has embodied its uniqueness in them, so that they gravitate towards the point of uniqueness in us, where each man is alone with himself.

And here finally lies the reason why all this conditionality of the applied arts does not signify a denigration. Instead of the character of individuality, applied art is supposed to have the character of style, of broad generality – which of course does not mean absolutely broad, open to every philistine and all tastes – and thus it represents in the aesthetic sphere a different principle of life than actual art, but not an inferior one. We must not be deluded into thinking that the subjective achievement of its creator can display the same refinement and nobility, the same depth and imagination as that of the painter or the sculptor. The fact that style also appeals to the observer at levels beyond the purely individual, to the broad emotional categories subject to the general laws of life, is the source of the calming effect, the feeling of security and serenity with which the strictly stylized object provides us. From the stimulation points

of individuality to which the work of art so often appeals, life descends with respect to the stylized object into the more pacified levels, where one no longer feels alone. There – or so at least these unconscious events can be interpreted – the supra-individual law of the objective structure before us finds its counterpart in the feeling that we too are reacting with the supra-individual part of ourselves, which is subject to universal laws. Thus we are saved from absolute responsibility, from balancing on the narrowness of mere individuality.

This is the reason why the things that surround us as the basis or background of daily life should be stylized. For in his own rooms, a person is the main thing, the point, so to speak, which must rest on broader, less individual, subordinate layers and distinguish himself from them, in order to bring about an organic and harmonious overall feeling. The work of art hanging in its frame on the wall, resting on its pedestal, or lying in a portfolio, shows by this external demarcation alone that it does not intervene in direct life, like tables and glasses, lamps and rugs, that it cannot serve people as a 'necessary extra'. The principle of calm, which the domestic surrounding of a person must support, has lead with miraculous instinctive practicality to the stylization of this environment: of all the objects we use, it is probably furniture which most consistently carries the cachet of some 'style'. This becomes most evident in the dining-room, which even for physiological reasons is supposed to favour relaxation, the descent from the surging excitements of the day into a broader comfort shared with others. Without being aware of this reason, the aesthetic tendency has always encouraged that the dining-room be especially stylized, and the 'style movement', beginning in Germany in the 1870s, concentrated initially on the dining-room.

Just as the principle of style as well as that of the uniqueness of form have everywhere tended to display some sort of a mixture and reconciliation with their respective opposite, a higher power also rectifies the exemption of home furnishings from individual artistic design with the demand for their stylization. Oddly enough this demand for style only exists – for modern man at least – for the individual objects of his surroundings, but not for the surroundings as a whole. The residence, as furnished by the individual in accordance with his taste and needs, can by all means have the personal, unmistakable tone that flows from the special nature of this individual, which would nonetheless be unbearable if every single object

in it betrayed the same individuality. This might seem paradoxical at first glance. But assuming that it is true, it would first of all explain why living in rooms that are kept strictly in a certain historical style has a peculiarly unpleasant, strange and cold quality for us, while those that are composed of pieces in different but no less strict styles according to individual taste, which must of course be firm and consistent, seem most liveable and warm to us.

An environment consisting entirely of objects in *one* historical style coalesces into a closed unity which excludes the individual who lives there, so to speak; he finds no gap where his personal life, free from any past style, could enter into it or join it. This becomes quite different, oddly, as soon as the individual constructs his environment of variously stylized objects; by his doing the objects receive a new centre, which is not located in any of them alone, but which they all manifest through the particular way they are united. This centre is a subjective unity, an experience by a personal psyche and an assimilation to it which becomes tangible in the objects. This is the irreplaceable attraction which leads us to furnish our rooms with objects from past times, and especially those which bear the calm happiness of a style, i.e. a supra-individual law of form, to create a new whole, whose synthesis and overall form are of a thoroughly individual nature and suited to one and only one specially attuned personality.

What drives modern man so strongly to style is the unburdening and concealment of the personal, which is the essence of style. Subjectivism and individuality have intensified to breaking-point, and in the stylized designs, from those of behaviour to those of home furnishing there is a mitigation and a toning down of this acute personality to a generality and its law. It is as if the ego could really no longer carry itself, or at least no longer wished to show itself and thus put on a more general, a more typical, in short, a stylized costume. There is a very delicate shame in the fact that a supra-individual form and law are placed between the subjective personality and its objective environment. Stylized expression, form of life, taste – all these are limitations and ways of creating a distance, in which the exaggerated subjectivism of the times finds a counterweight and concealment. The tendency of modern man to surround himself with antiquities – that is, things in which the style, the character of their times, the general mood that hovers around them is essential – this tendency is certainly not a contingent snobbery. Instead it goes back to that deeper need to give

the individually excessive life an addition of calm breadth and typical lawfulness. Earlier times, which only had one style which was therefore taken for granted were situated quite differently in these difficult questions of life. Where only one style is conceivable, every individual expression grows organically from it; it has no need to search first for its roots; the general and the personal go together without conflict in a work. The unity and lack of problems we envy in Greek antiquity and many periods of the Middle Ages are based on such an unproblematic general foundation for life, that is to say, on the style, which arranged its relationship to the individual production much more simply and freer of contradictions, than is possible for us, who have a variety of styles at our disposal in all areas, so that individual work, behaviour and taste have a loose optional relation to the broad foundation, the general law, which they do require after all. That is the reason why the products of earlier ties often seem to have so much more style than those of our own age. For we say an object is devoid of style if it appears to have sprung from a momentary, isolated, temporary sentiment, without being based on a more general feeling, a non-contingent norm. This necessary fundamental aspect can very well be what I term the individual style. In great and creative people, the individual work flows from such an all-encompassing depth of being that it is able to find there the firmness and the foundation, the transcendence of here and now, which comes to the work of the lesser artist from an external style. Here the individual is the case of an individual law; anyone who is not that strong must adhere to a general law; if he fails to, his work fails to have style — which, as is now easily understood, can only happen in periods with multiple style possibilities.

Finally, style is the aesthetic attempt to solve the great problem of life: an individual work or behaviour, which is closed, a whole, can simultaneously belong to something higher, a unifying encompassing context. The distinction between the individual style of the very great and the general style of the lesser expresses that broad practical norm: 'and if you cannot become a unity yourself, then join a unity as a serving partner'. It expresses this in the language of art, which grants even the most modest achievement at least a ray of the splendour and unity that shine in the practical world only on the very great.

Translated by Mark Ritter.

Notes

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1. Therefore, *material* also has such a great importance for style. The human form, for instance, demands quite a different type of expression if it is presented in porcelain or in bronze, in wood or in marble. For the material is in fact the *general* substance, which offers itself equally to an arbitrary number of different forms, and thus determines these as their general prerequisite.