

The Inner Form of Style: On Heinrich Wölfflin's "Tactical" Formalism

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the enduring relevance of Heinrich Wölfflin's approach to style, in light of the renewed interest in it among "postformalist" art historians. By delving into the theoretical foundations of the *Principles of Art History*, I explore Wölfflin's Goethean interpretation of Kantian epistemology, revealing a conception of style characterized by its dynamic and symbolic "inner form" rather than mere static formalism. This analysis not only highlights affinities with Max Weber's thought but also uncovers a previously overlooked connection to Wilhelm von Humboldt, offering valuable insights for current discussions on style.

Résumé

Dans cet article, j'étudie la pertinence de l'approche de Heinrich Wölfflin en matière de style, au vu de l'intérêt qu'elle suscite chez les historiens de l'art « postformalistes ». Explorant les fondements théoriques des *Principes fondamentaux de l'histoire de l'art*, et notamment la lecture goethéenne que Wölfflin fait de l'épistémologie kantienne, je montre que sa conception du style se caractérise par le dynamisme et le symbolisme d'une « forme interne » plutôt que par un formalisme statique. Cette analyse met en évidence des affinités avec Max Weber, mais aussi un lien négligé avec Wilhelm von Humboldt, offrant ainsi un précieux éclairage pour les discussions actuelles sur le style.

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From a rhetorical perspective, style is traditionally regarded as a “formal ornament defined by a deviation in relation to the neutral or normal use of language.”¹ As evident from its wording, this definition implies a fundamental duality: style pertains to form rather than content, manner rather than matter, the sensible rather than the conceptual—in short, style addresses the “how” rather than the “what,”² where the “how” is incidental yet conveys suggestive connotations compared to the stable core of the “what.” As Antoine Compagnon aptly notes, the overarching “axiom of style is ... this: *there are several ways of saying the same thing*, distinguished from one another by style.”³ In other words, the formal or decorative aspect of style is a symptomatic expression of the ethos of individuals or entire cultures, reflecting their distinctive attitude toward the world.

This intimate connection between style and form, as differentiated from content, extends beyond the realm of language and literary studies. It also holds a significant and rich history within various humanistic disciplines, including art history.⁴ As Jaś Elsner asserts, “[f]or nearly the whole of the twentieth century, style art history has been the indisputable king of the discipline.”⁵ Since works of art serve as the primary data of art history, and because this data is primarily visual, art historians have long emphasized the significance of formal analysis and the perceptual investigation it entails. Perhaps more so than in literary studies, form emerges as a paramount element of investigation in the study of visual arts, where it can never be dismissed as nonessential. This is why art historians have largely conceived of style as a “system of forms:” by grouping series of artworks according to their formal qualities—similarities and dissimilarities—they have attempted not only to characterize the production of individual artists, schools, or entire periods, but also to visualize the evolution of this “system” over time.⁶

Undoubtedly, the theoretical prominence of style has waned since the critical shifts of the 1970s and 1980s. Contemporary art historians frequently minimize its conceptual relevance and often regard formalistic methodologies with skepticism, if not outright hostility, favoring instead more contextualized approaches.⁷ Despite this prevailing attitude, form and style persist as foundational pillars (or at least unconscious reflexes) within the discipline, quietly shaping its core principles.⁸ They notably continue to exert influence in art historiography⁹ and theory, particularly evident in discussions surrounding artistic agency.¹⁰ In this context, the current resurgence of historical and philosophical interest in Heinrich Wölfflin¹¹ (Fig. 1)—considered a seminal figure in the history of formalism¹²—takes on particular significance, as this revival coincides with the emergence of a “postformalist” (or “semi-formalist”) approach in art history and aesthetics, which specifically regards Wölfflin as its main precursor.¹³

[insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1. Front-page of *Der Welt-Spiegel*, October 15, 1911, which reads: “Privy councillor Heinrich Wölfflin, the famous Berlin art historian, accepted an appointment to the University of Munich.”

Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

¹ Antoine Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, trans. Carol Cosman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 125–126 [*Le Démon de la théorie : littérature et sens commun* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 199].

² Andrea Pinotti, “Formalism and Kunstwissenschaft: The ‘How’ of the Image,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies*, ed. Krešimir Purgar (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 109–129, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71830-5_7.

³ Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, 126 [*Le Démon de la théorie*, 199].

⁴ Ulla Fix, Andreas Gardt, and Joachim Knappe, eds., *Rhetorik und Stilistik/Rhetoric and Stylistics: Ein internationales Handbuch historischer und systematischer Forschung/An International Handbook of Historical and Systematic Research* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2008).

⁵ Jaś Elsner, “Style,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 98.

⁶ Meyer Schapiro, “Style,” in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 51–101. See also James S. Ackerman, “A Theory of Style,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 3 (Spring 1962): 227–237.

⁷ Andrea Pinotti, “Formalism and the History of Style,” in *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe*, ed. Matthew Rampley et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 75–90, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004231702_007.

⁸ Elsner, “Style,” 98.

⁹ See for instance Andrea Pinotti, “Styles of Renaissance, renaissances of style,” *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 9 (December 2013): 9/AP1, <https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/pinotti.pdf>; Sam Rose, *Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ See for example Caroline van Eck, Miguel John Versluys, and Pieter ter Keurs, “The biography of cultures: style, objects and agency. Proposal for an interdisciplinary approach,” *Les Cahiers de l’École du Louvre*, no. 7 (2015): 2–22, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cel.275>.

¹¹ See among others Matteo Burioni, Burcu Dogramaci, and Ulrich Pfisterer, eds., *Kunstgeschichten 1915. 100 Jahre Heinrich Wölfflin: Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Passau: Dietmar Klinger Verlag, 2015); “Symposium: The 100th Anniversary of Wölfflin’s *Principles of Art History*,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 149–188; Evonne Levy and Tristan Weddigen, eds., *The Global Reception of Heinrich Wölfflin’s Principles of Art History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020); Danièle Cohn and Rémi Mermet, eds., *L’Histoire de l’art et ses concepts. Autour de Heinrich Wölfflin* (Paris: Éditions Rue d’Ulm, 2020), <https://www.doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsulm.2930>.

¹² Wölfflin has been regarded as the archetypal formalist art historian since the early twentieth century. See Edgar Wind, *The Eloquence of Symbols: Studies in Humanist Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 22.

¹³ David Summers, “Form,” *Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description*, *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1989): 372–406; David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2003); David Summers, “Art History Reviewed II: Heinrich Wölfflin’s ‘Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe’, 1915,” *The Burlington Magazine* 151 (2009): 476–479; Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Whitney Davis, “What Is Post-Formalism? or, Das Sehen an sich hat seine Kunstgeschichte,” *nonsite* 7 (2013), <https://nonsite.org/what-is-post-formalism-or-das-sehen-an-sich-hat-seine-kunstgeschichte/>; Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Whitney Davis, *Visuality and Virtuality: Images and Pictures from Prehistory to Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Jakub Stejskal, *Objects of Authority: A Postformalist Aesthetics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2023); Tobias Teutenberg, “Bedingend und bedingt. Heinrich Wölfflins geometrischer (Post-)Formalismus und das Sehen in der Moderne,” *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 46 (2023): 219–248.

As Jakub Stejskal remarks,

postformalism explains the appearance of material artefacts without taking their form as a given, accessible equally to their initial consumers as well as contemporary audiences. The postformalist takes seriously Heinrich Wölfflin's claim that vision ... has a history. The pragmatic stress on deriving art objects' appearance from their use context means that the focus shifts from analysing style, iconography, and expressed meaning towards the question of how the formatting of an art object ... implies the behaviour of its observers.¹⁴

To put this in Whitney Davis's words, Wölfflin can be seen as the "godfather" of postformalism because his formalism primarily focuses not on the history of visual forms and objects, but on the "*history of visual imaging and imagining*—what Wölfflin ... called *Sehformen*."¹⁵ However, a significant ambiguity arises regarding the exact status of these *Sehformen*, or "forms of seeing." When Wölfflin asserts that "[e]very artist finds certain preexisting 'optical' possibilities, to which he is bound," and that "[s]eeing as such has its own history,"¹⁶ it prompts the questions: does this history pertain to perception, imagination, or depiction? Does it encompass all three dimensions? And if so, what precisely is the relationship between them?¹⁷

In addressing this issue, most of Wölfflin's commentators and successors have interpreted his claim in a weak sense. They perceive the history of *Sehformen* either merely as a history of visual attention¹⁸ or as a history of the decorative feeling specific to each (art) historical period.¹⁹ Even Davis, who sympathizes with the idea of a feedback loop between perception and depiction,²⁰ hesitates to fully embrace the stronger version of what he terms Wölfflin's "vision historicism"²¹—that is, to definitively dismiss the notion of a pre-given world that forms the backdrop of human experience.²² Yet Wölfflin explicitly states that "one not only sees things differently; one sees *different things* as well,"²³ implying that each historical period apprehends another form or type of reality. In my view, Davis's reluctance stems from postformalism's lingering adherence to the rhetorical tenet of style, which, as we have seen, assumes that there are several ways of expressing the *same* thing. This elemental dualism between object and subject pervades Davis's arguments. He contends that postformalists "look at what people in the past did with the things, what they used them to do, in order to infer the network of aspects that the things had for them ... We look especially at how they *replicated* things: which features they chose to preserve, what they allowed to vary."²⁴

This pragmatic dualism tends to oversimplify the relationship between perception and depiction, reducing it to a purely causal influence or instrumental connection—from "seeing to making to seeing"²⁵—without investigating its further implications. In the following, I aim to delve into these implications more deeply. Specifically, I intend to demonstrate that the "circularity"²⁶ of Wölfflin's analysis, entangled between vision and artistic creation, not only anticipates the recent postformalist move but also surpasses it in radicality, owing to its profound awareness of the sensory, cultural, and historical embeddedness of human life. As I will show, Wölfflin's approach to style is less rhetorical than morphological in Johann W. von Goethe's sense, since he acknowledges the irreducible variability of any visual reality. His concept of *Sehform*—also referred to as the "inner form" of style—is precisely intended to highlight this aspect.

The Theoretical Sources of Wölfflin's Thought

Wölfflin's most comprehensive exploration of the question can be found in his renowned work of 1915, *Principles of Art History*, as well as in several related texts written between the 1920s and 1940s. For the purpose of this discussion, both the *Principles* and the related writings will be treated as a theoretical whole, without digging into the details of their historical development.²⁷ Before we proceed to analyze them,

¹⁴ Stejskal, *Objects of Authority*, 7.

¹⁵ Davis, "What is Post-Formalism?," § 1.

¹⁶ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, trans. Jonathan Blower, ed. Evonne Levy and Tristan Weddigen (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015), 93 [*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Basel and Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1984), 24].

¹⁷ See Andrea Pinotti, "Do Styles Have a Body? A History of Images and a History of Perception," in *History and Art History: Looking Past Disciplines*, ed. Nicholas Chare and Mitchell B. Frank (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 134–148, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429288623>.

¹⁸ See for instance Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 136–159.

¹⁹ See for example Jason Gaiger, "Intuition and Representation: Wölfflin's Fundamental Concepts of Art History," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 164–171.

²⁰ Whitney Davis, "Succession and Recursion in Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History*," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 157–164.

²¹ Davis, "What is Post-Formalism?," § 5.

²² The contrast between a natural backdrop and the cultural variations made manifest in the history of artistic styles closely parallels Erwin Panofsky's dualistic approach. See Rémi Mermet, "Cassirer et Panofsky : un malentendu philosophique," *Labyrinth* 22, no. 1 (2020): 56–78, <https://doi.org/10.25180/lj.v22i1.217>.

²³ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 237 [*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 185].

²⁴ Davis, "What is Post-Formalism?," § 5.

²⁵ Davis, "Succession and Recursion," 159.

²⁶ Davis, "What is Post-Formalism?," § 1.

²⁷ Some of these related texts have been later included in the *Principles* (such as the "Revision" of 1933), while others have been collected in the volume titled *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte: Gedrucktes und Ungedrucktes* (Basel: Schwabe, 1941). These texts demonstrate that Wölfflin continually refined his ideas in response to the criticisms he received, but they also show that these ideas form a coherent corpus, whose core concepts were already established in 1915.

however, it is essential to briefly revisit their conceptual origins. Wölfflin's pursuit is indeed part of a broader intellectual movement that flourished in German-speaking countries at the turn of the twentieth century, known as *Kunstwissenschaft* (literally: the science of art). Within this movement, notable figures such as Alois Riegl, August Schmarsow, Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky, and Wölfflin himself attempted to uncover the "fundamental" principles or concepts (*Grundbegriffe*) underlying the evolution of artistic style, with the aim of establishing art history as a "rigorous science" (*strenge Wissenschaft*).²⁸ This endeavor was integral to what philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, one of Wölfflin's mentors²⁹ (Fig. 2), termed the "Critique of Historical Reason"—a rallying cry for an entire generation of scholars who sought to expand Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* beyond the confines of the natural realm, in order to bestow scientific legitimacy upon the then-emergent human sciences³⁰.

[insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2. Heinrich Wölfflin, Notes on "Stoff und Form," written in the context of Wilhelm Dilthey's seminar at the University of Berlin during the winter semester of 1885–1886, University Library Basel, NL 95, Nachtrag 1973, I.1.a, Notebook n. 13, "Philosophica," Fall 1885–Summer 1886, 32–33.

In this connection, many Wölfflin specialists have noted the neo-Kantian character of his thought, which reflects both his fidelity to Kant's critical spirit and his departure from strict Kantian principles.³¹ This ambivalence is apparent in Wölfflin's striving to transpose Kant's transcendental framework—namely, the *a priori* conditions of human experience and knowledge—into both the domains of the sensible (referred to as "psychology") and the historical. This transposition is already evident in his doctoral dissertation, *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture* (1886), where he elucidates how our bodily experiences condition our perception of the expressive qualities of architectural forms from the past.³² It becomes even more pronounced in his *Habilitationsschrift, Renaissance and Baroque* (1888), where he applies this theoretical framework to a specific historical development: the gradual transformation of Renaissance into Baroque architecture in late sixteenth-century Rome.³³

While Kant's influence on Wölfflin has been widely discussed, only a few scholars, such as Danièle Cohn and Andreas Ay,³⁴ have examined Goethe's impact on his thought. In fact, Wölfflin's modifications to Kant's transcendental method owe much to his lifelong engagement with Goethe's morphology—a theory aimed at capturing the immanent dynamism and productivity of nature by describing its ever-changing forms. Despite his admiration for Kant's philosophy, Goethe rejected its principled separation between intuition and understanding, just as he rejected what he perceived as the teleological violence imposed on facts by Georg W. F. Hegel's philosophy. As Wölfflin puts it, Goethe conceived of form not as *eidos*, as "something imposed from the outside," but rather as *morphe*, as "life itself made visible," where life "refers to the connection of the parts in a whole."³⁵ Stated differently, he viewed form as always-already symbolic—another Goethean concept—for its structuring principle, its inner meaning, is inherent in its manifestation. This is why art and nature are intertwined in Goethe's work: both exist only in the meaningful deployment of their visible forms. So, when Wölfflin writes that "[c]ertain sentences of [Goethe's] *Metamorphosis of Plants* have their exact parallel in art history,"³⁶ he is not promoting a scientific art history modeled after natural history or biological evolution. Quite the contrary: in his *Classic Art* of 1899, Wölfflin explicitly opposes the naturalistic reductionism of Hippolyte Taine's interpretation of art.³⁷ He does so by appealing to the theories of the

²⁸ See Hubert Locher, "Wissenschaftsgeschichte als Problemgeschichte. Die 'kunstgeschichtlichen Grundbegriffe' und die Bemühungen um eine 'strenge Kunstwissenschaft,'" in *Disziplinen im Kontext. Perspektiven der Disziplingeschichtsschreibung*, ed. Christian Thiel and Volker Peckhaus (Munich: Fink, 1999), 129–162; Andrea Pinotti, "I concetti fondamentali come strumenti di orientamento: una questione kantiana," *Schifanoia* 52–53 (2017): 289–298.

²⁹ On Wölfflin's life and thought, see Joan G. Hart, "Heinrich Wölfflin: An Intellectual Biography" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1981), especially 73–90 on Dilthey; Meinhold Lurz, *Heinrich Wölfflin: Biographie einer Kunsttheorie* (Worms: Werner'sche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1981), especially 60–64 on Dilthey.

³⁰ See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences (Selected Works 1)*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) [Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und ihrer Geschichte, *Gesammelte Schriften* (WDGS) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1914ff), I]; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) [*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Akademie-Ausgabe (AA) (Berlin: Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1900ff), III].

³¹ See among others Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 98–151; Mildred Galland-Szymkowiak, "Empathie (Einführung) et écriture de l'histoire de l'art chez Heinrich Wölfflin," *Phantasia* 1 (2015), <https://popups.uliege.be/0774-7136/index.php?id=354>; Gottfried Boehm, "Verkörperung: Einführung in Heinrich Wölfflins Prolegomena," in Heinrich Wölfflin, *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur, Gesammelte Werke, Schriften* 1, ed. Tristan Weddigen and Oskar Bätschmann (Basel: Schwabe, 2021), 9–31.

³² Heinrich Wölfflin, "Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture," in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics 1873–1893*, ed. and trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 149–190 [*Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur*].

³³ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, trans. Kathrin Simon (London: Collins, 1964) [*Renaissance und Barock: eine Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien, Gesammelte Werke, Schriften* 2, ed. Tristan Weddigen, Oskar Bätschmann, and Joris van Gastel (Basel: Schwabe, 2023)].

³⁴ Danièle Cohn, "La forme-Goethe," in *La Lyre d'Orphée: Goethe et l'esthétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 33–67; Andreas Ay, *Nachts: Goethe gelesen. Heinrich Wölfflin und seine Goethe-Rezeption* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2010).

³⁵ Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 52.

³⁶ Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 53. On the *Metamorphosis of Plants*, see Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Essential Goethe*, ed. Matthew Bell (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 917–937 ["Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen," Weimarer Ausgabe (WA) (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1887ff), II/6, 23–94].

³⁷ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance*, trans. Peter and Linda Murray (London: Phaidon, 1952), 287 [*Die klassische Kunst: eine Einführung in die italienische Renaissance* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1914), 275], referring to Hippolyte Taine, *Philosophy of Art*, trans. John Durand (New York: Holt & Williams, 1873) [*Philosophie de l'art* (Paris: Germer Baillière, 1865)].

sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand, with whom he was acquainted. Indeed, Hildebrand's harsh criticism of both naturalism and historicism in art and science prompted Wölfflin to emphasize art history's autonomy not only from the natural sciences but also from other historical sciences.³⁸ This marks the origin of what Wölfflin will henceforth refer to as the "double root of style," which distinguishes between the immediate expressiveness of works of art—connecting art history to cultural history in general—and the history of their visible form—constituting the realm of art history proper.

This reference to Hildebrand is pivotal. Alongside philosopher and art theorist Konrad Fiedler,³⁹ whom Wölfflin also knew personally, Hildebrand developed the (quite Goethean) view that the visual arts elucidate our relationship with the sensible world. Both Hildebrand and Fiedler, followed by Wölfflin, dismiss the myth of pure sensation. They argue against the existence of an innocent eye, asserting that perception (*Wahrnehmung*) is intrinsically active, conditioned by an underlying mental representation (*Vorstellung*) of space, or, better still, by a formative force that shapes it from within.⁴⁰ In this context, the artist's task is to extend and strengthen—to bring to awareness—this formative force by objectifying it in a depiction (*Darstellung*). The artist's gesture, which is both a bodily and spiritual activity, links together all three dimensions of *Wahrnehmung*, *Vorstellung*, and *Darstellung*. It dialectically connects the eye and the hand, seeing and making, perception and expression.⁴¹ For Fiedler, Hildebrand, and Wölfflin, there is no such thing as artistic imitation in the naïve sense of the word. Art provides constancy and consistency to a visible world that is constantly in-the-making, constituting the culmination of what must paradoxically be called the sensory *production* of reality.

However, Wölfflin's perspective diverges from that of Fiedler and Hildebrand by thoroughly historicizing their theoretical framework. As Wölfflin states, "one always sees in forms,"⁴² where the plural implies the historical diversification of the formative force of seeing. This emphasis on the diversity of *Sehformen* not only enriches our understanding of artistic activity but also legitimizes the historian's role vis-à-vis the artist. Wölfflin never forgot Dilthey's lesson: in a morphological approach to culture, aesthetics and hermeneutics are interconnected. The work of art, with its meaning deeply embedded in its tangible form, becomes the paragon of historical interpretation—the quintessential object from which "the understanding of what is singular may be raised to the level of universal validity."⁴³ As this argument reveals, Dilthey's Critique of Historical Reason also owes much to a Goethean reading of Kant: "This is true symbolism," Goethe says, "where the particular represents the general, not as dream and shadow, but as a live and immediate revelation of the unfathomable."⁴⁴ Guided by Goethe's insights on the cognitive power of imagination—what he termed the "exact sensorial" fantasy⁴⁵—Dilthey positioned the inherent creativity of human experience at the core of the interpretive process of the human sciences,⁴⁶ thus paving the way for Wölfflin's hermeneutical reinterpretation of Hildebrand's and Fiedler's theory of seeing in the *Principles of Art History*.⁴⁷

The "Principles" of Art History

Calling Wölfflin a hermeneut can come as a surprise, considering that the most frequent criticism leveled at his opus magnum is its perceived abstraction. For instance, in his classic examination of style, Richard Wollheim dismisses the epistemological value of "general" concepts of style, such as those outlined in Wölfflin's *Principles*, arguing that their "taxonomic" nature fails to capture the "reality" of past artistic creation. Wollheim suggests that unlike "generative" concepts of individual style, which grasp something of the artist's psychological reality, general concepts of style merely reflect the art historian's shifting interests.⁴⁸ Yet this perspective is entirely foreign to Wölfflin: he never contrasts the attention paid to singular artworks

³⁸ See Adolf von Hildebrand, "The Problem of Form in the Fine Arts," in *Empathy, Form, and Space*, ed. Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 227–279 ["Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst," *Gesammelte Schriften zur Kunst*, ed. Henning Bock (Cologne and Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1969), 41–349]; Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kleine Schriften*, ed. Joseph Gantner (Basel, Schwabe, 1946), 84–106.

³⁹ See Konrad Fiedler, *Schriften zur Kunst*, ed. Gottfried Boehm (Munich: Fink, 1991).

⁴⁰ "Formative force" or "formative power" (*bildende Kraft*) is a key concept in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, a book that Goethe particularly favored as his point of entry into Kant's philosophy, as it transcends the dichotomies implied by the *Critique of Pure Reason*. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 202 [AA, V, 374]; Goethe, *The Essential Goethe*, 983–986 [WA, II/11, 47–53].

⁴¹ Hence Wölfflin's insistence on the epistemological significance of drawing: see Wölfflin, *Kleine Schriften*, 164–165. Also see, among others, Elke Schulze, *Nulla dies sine linea: Universitärer Zeichenunterricht—eine problemgeschichtliche Studie* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2004); Maria Heilmann et al., eds., *Lern! Zeichnen! Techniken zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1525–1925* (Passau: Klinger, 2015); Elvira Bojilova "In dem Gesang der Linie offenbart sich die Wahrheit der Form.' Die Faktur der Graphik als Metapher," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 64, no. 2 (2019): 209–234, <https://doi.org/10.28937/1000108397>.

⁴² Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 7.

⁴³ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and the Study of History (Selected Works 4)*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 235 ["Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik," WDG, V, 317].

⁴⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, trans. Elisabeth Stopp, ed. Peter Hutchinson (London: Penguin Books, 1998), no. 314, 47 [Hamburger Ausgabe (HA) (Hamburg: Beck, 1948ff), XII, 471, no. 752].

⁴⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Scientific Studies (The Collected Works 12)*, ed. and trans. Douglas Miller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 46 [WA, II/11, 75].

⁴⁶ See Danièle Cohn, "Présentation," in Wilhelm Dilthey, *Écrits d'esthétique (Œuvres 7)*, trans. Danièle Cohn and Evelyne Lafon, ed. Sylvie Mesure (Paris: Cerf, 1995), 7–24.

⁴⁷ See Joan G. Hart, "Reinterpreting Wölfflin: Neo-Kantianism and Hermeneutics," *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (1982): 292–300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1982.10792814>.

⁴⁸ Richard Wollheim, "Pictorial Style: Two Views," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979), 183–202.

or artists with the formulation of broader analytical concepts, as evidenced by his monograph on Albrecht Dürer and his posthumously published lectures.⁴⁹ Wölfflin has always insisted on the intertwining of empirical research and conceptual reflexivity. As early as 1884, he writes in his notebook: “Only when we have conceived [*begriffen*] can we distinguish the phenomena. Only when we distinguish the phenomena can we synthesize individual ones into concepts [*Begriffen*].”⁵⁰

[insert Figure 3 here]

Figure 3. Heinrich Wölfflin, Sketch after a fresco by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (*Thetis Consoling Achilles*, 1757, 300 x 200 cm, Villa Valmarana ai Nani, Vicenza), University Library Basel, NL 95, Nachtrag 1973, II.1.b, Sketchbook no. 7, 1891.

In other words, Wölfflin did not deduce his *Principles of Art History* from thin air. He meticulously observed the distinctive features of European paintings, sculptures, and buildings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whether through firsthand experience during his numerous journeys in Italy (Fig. 3), France, and Germany or via photographic reproductions—a tool he was among the first art historians to fully appropriate.⁵¹ Wölfflin was not the cold and disincarnate analyst commonly suggested; his personal diaries reveal his deep sensitivity to the aesthetic power of art.⁵² It is, therefore, unfair to criticize him for advocating an “art history without names” solely focused on formal laws. Wölfflin used this expression—“art history without names”—only once, in the first preface to the *Principles*.⁵³ But he soon realized that this ambiguous expression could be misconstrued, as his intention was never to sacrifice the subjectivity of the artist on the altar of science. On the contrary, Wölfflin continually insisted on the necessity of concepts in ascertaining facts. His attempt to draw up a list of categories for the analysis of style was only aimed at providing art historians with a reliable set of criteria for judging individual works of art from the Renaissance and the Baroque.

In this sense, it would be a mistake to regard Wölfflin’s “principles”—the linear and the painterly, plane and recession, closed form and open form, multiplicity and unity, and clearness and unclearness—as a pure formal logic whose universality lies precisely in its formality. As inferred from the preceding section, Wölfflin’s concepts are not exclusively visual. While they focus on the “mode of representation as such” (*Darstellung als solche*) and set aside style as a direct expression of individual, regional, or national mindsets,⁵⁴ they are symbolic in the Goethean sense—that is, they possess meaning as visual forms. More precisely, the *Principles of Art History* perpetuates and deepens Hildebrand’s and Fiedler’s opposition to the idea of art as imitation. Wölfflin contends that imitation is always imbued with “decoration,” defining decoration as a “specific type of beauty” that is historically determined.⁵⁵ This “decorative schema,” far from superficial, explicitly alludes to the formative force of seeing that links perception to artistic depiction through the faculty of imagination. Wölfflin makes it clear:

When I speak of forms of *perception*, forms of *seeing*, and the development of *seeing*, these are certainly loose expressions, and yet they appeal to those analogies in which we speak of the “eye” of the artist and the artist’s way of “seeing” things, by which we really mean the way things take shape in his imagination.⁵⁶

In essence, Wölfflin’s notion of the “eye” does not solely point to the physical organ, nor does his concept of *Sehform* simply encompass the psychological or phenomenological experience of vision. In a more complex way, these notions refer to the symbolic process through which human cultures actively grasp or rather shape the visible world—bringing it to meaningful existence precisely as visible. Works of art from the past are the paradigmatic traces of this creative activity, its objective, enduring, and most accomplished products. As Wölfflin puts it, the linear is “an understanding of solids in terms of their palpable character—their outlines and surfaces,” as exemplified in Renaissance art, while the painterly is “a mode of perception that is capable of submitting to mere optical semblance,” as displayed in Baroque art, and so on.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Die Kunst Albrecht Dürers, Gesammelte Werke, Schriften* 6, ed. Tristan Weddigen, Oskar Bätschmann, and Joris van Gastel (Basel: Schwabe, 2024); Hans Körner and Manja Wilkens, eds., *Drei Münchner Vorlesungen Heinrich Wölfflins* (Passau: Klinger, 2016).

⁵⁰ Jacob Burckhardt and Heinrich Wölfflin, *Briefwechsel und andere Dokumente ihrer Begegnung 1882–1897*, ed. Joseph Gantner (Basel: Schwabe, 1989), 44.

⁵¹ Wölfflin even wrote a series of essays about the use of photographic reproductions in art history: Heinrich Wölfflin, “How One Should Photograph Sculpture,” trans. Geraldine A. Johnson, *Art History* 36, no. 1 (2013): 52–71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2012.00926.x>. [“Wie man Skulpturen aufnehmen soll,” *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* 7 (1896): 224–228, 8 (1897): 294–297, 26 (1915): 237–244.] Also see, among others, Heinrich Dilly, “Lichtbildprojektion—Prothese der Kunstbetrachtung,” in *Kunstwissenschaft und Kunstvermittlung*, ed. Irene Below (Gießen: Anabas-Verlag, 1975), 153–172; Robert S. Nelson, “The Slide Lecture, or the Work of Art ‘History’ in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (Spring, 2000): 414–434; Costanza Caraffa, ed., *Fotografie als Instrument und Medium der Kunstgeschichte* (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2009).

⁵² Heinrich Wölfflin, *Autobiographie, Tagebücher und Briefe*, ed. Joseph Gantner (Basel: Schwabe, 1984).

⁵³ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 72 [this expression can be found in the preface to the very first edition of the book].

⁵⁴ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 93 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 24].

⁵⁵ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 98–99 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 29–31].

⁵⁶ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 320 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 277].

⁵⁷ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 96 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 27].

I will not comment on the content of each category: I refer the reader to Wölfflin's book. Instead, I will concentrate on the theoretical significance of these concepts, whose "fundamental" nature needs to be clarified. As Wölfflin acknowledges at the very end of his book, his "principles" are not transcendental categories in the Kantian sense:

In accordance with its breadth, the whole process of the change in imagination has been subordinated to five pairs of concepts. Without risking confusion with the Kantian categories, one might call them categories of perception. Though they obviously tend to sound similar, they are nevertheless not deduced from one principle. (To a Kantian way of thinking, they will appear to have been merely "picked out at random" [*aufgerafft*]). It is possible that other categories could be proposed—though I have not been able to discern them—and those given here are not so closely interrelated as to be unthinkable in a somewhat different combination. Still, they are to a certain extent mutually dependent and, putting the literal meaning of the word aside for a moment, one might well designate them as five different views of one and the same thing.⁵⁸

As indicated by his discomfort with using the metaphor of the "five different views of one and the same thing"—which exhibits naïve, "rhetorical" realism that clearly conflicts with his Hildebrandian and Fiedlerian inclination—Wölfflin grapples with a paradox. Within a rigorous Kantian framework, discussing "categories of perception" appears contradictory, as a category is defined as that which lies beyond all perceptual experience. However, what may seem paradoxical from a Kantian perspective may not be so in a Goethean context. Wölfflin's categories do not seek to subsume empirical intuitions under universal forms; rather, they aim to reveal the very structure of these particular intuitions. Put differently, the "principles" of art history are not deduced from the unity of pure reason but derived from the diversity of artistic phenomena themselves. This immanent approach elucidates why Wölfflin's principles may "appear to have been merely 'picked out at random'"—an expression that alludes to a well-known paragraph in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant distinguishes the systematicity of his table of categories from the mere conceptual accumulation found in the Aristotelian corpus.⁵⁹ Wölfflin explicitly rejects Kant's rigid epistemological model in favor of the operative flexibility inherent in Goethe's morphological understanding of reality. As Goethe asserts, "[w]hen something has acquired a form it metamorphoses immediately to a new one. If we wish to arrive at some living perception of nature we ourselves must remain as quick and flexible as nature and follow the example she gives."⁶⁰ According to this view, there is no need for a universal table of categories, as categories are nothing more than *productive questions* that we address to reality. Therefore, I dissent from those who, echoing Panofsky's influential critique of Wölfflin,⁶¹ seek to rationalize the *Principles of Art History* by making Wölfflin's concepts more Kantian, that is, less historical and more universal.⁶² Indeed, the "fundamental" character of Wölfflin's categories does not lie behind or above their phenomenality. If they can be described as "fundamental," it is because they attempt to capture the inner structure of Renaissance and Baroque forms of seeing, their specific formative force. Only by contrasting these two structuring "systems" can the historian elucidate the transition (*Übergang*) from one to the other, the transformation of one into the other, thus giving meaning to the history of artistic forms.

Category and Ideal Type

How does Wölfflin effectively apply such a morphological perspective to art history? How does he avoid taxonomic labeling and abstract categorizing to uncover the formation process of styles instead? Following Joan Hart, I argue that Wölfflin's method is very similar to that of Max Weber,⁶³ who is also profoundly influenced by Goethe's morphology. "To quote Goethe," Weber writes, "there is 'theory' in 'facts,'" meaning that historical knowledge is never a given but a symbolic construct founded on the cognitive power of imagination.⁶⁴ In this context, Wölfflin's art-historical categories can be directly paralleled with Weber's ideal

⁵⁸ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 306 [*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 264].

⁵⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 213 [AA, III, 93].

⁶⁰ Goethe, *The Essential Goethe*, 979 [WA, II/6, 10].

⁶¹ Erwin Panofsky, "The Problem of Style in the Visual Arts," trans. William Diebold and Sonja Drimmer, *Critical Inquiry* 49, no. 4 (Summer 2023): 676–684, <https://doi.org/10.1086/724946> ["Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 10 (1915): 460–467, <https://doi.org/10.11588/digit.3818.23>]; Erwin Panofsky, "On the Relationship of Art History and Art Theory: Towards the Possibility of a Fundamental System of Concepts for a Science of Art," trans. Katharina Lorenz and Jaś Elsner, *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (Autumn 2008): 43–71, <https://doi.org/10.1086/595628> ["Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 18 (1925): 129–161, <https://doi.org/10.11588/digit.3820.11>].

⁶² See for example Andreas Eckl, *Kategorien der Anschauung: Zur transzendentalphilosophischen Bedeutung von Heinrich Wölfflins "Kunstgeschichtlichen Grundbegriffen"* (Munich: Fink, 1996). It is noteworthy that the latest proponents of this perspective also advocate for a weak interpretation of Wölfflin's "vision historicism." See Jason Gaiger, "The Analysis of Pictorial Style," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42, no. 1 (January 2002): 20–36; Bence Nanay, "Two-Dimensional Versus Three-Dimensional Pictorial Organization," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 149–157.

⁶³ Joan Hart, "Heuristic Constructs and Ideal Types: The Wölfflin/Weber Connection," in *German Art History and Scientific Thought: Beyond Formalism*, ed. Mitchell B. Frank and Daniel Adler (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 57–72.

⁶⁴ Max Weber, *Collected Methodological Writings*, ed. Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster, trans. Hans Henrik Bruun (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012), 175 [Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe (MWG) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984ff), I/7, 460].

types in sociology—an assumption reinforced by Weber’s acknowledgment of the scientific significance of Wölfflin’s thought.⁶⁵ The question then follows: what are we to understand by “ideal types” in art history? Weber defines the ideal type as,

a mental image that is not historical reality, and certainly not “true” reality [...]. It has the status of a purely ideal *limiting* concept against which reality is *measured*—with which it is *compared*—in order to bring out certain significant component parts of the empirical substance of [that reality]. Such concepts are constructions in which we apply the category of “objective possibility” to construct connections that our *imagination*, oriented towards and schooled by the contact with reality, *judges* to be adequate.⁶⁶

In other words, although the ideal type is deeply rooted in cultural reality, it cannot be apprehended simply as an *average* of actual cultural phenomena. In a decidedly Goethean tone, Weber describes the ideal type as an imaginary “accentuation” of the most prominent features of these phenomena, through which sociologists or historians develop specific concepts to help establish points of orientation amid the mass of empirical material.⁶⁷ Indeed, this definition refers to both Goethe’s exact sensorial fantasy and his concept of intensification (*Steigerung*), by which he means the process of saturation of phenomena that reveals their internal law, the free spontaneity of their inner development.⁶⁸

Drawing upon this definition, the famous German philosopher Ernst Cassirer—another devoted Goethean⁶⁹ and one of the first to fully acknowledge Wölfflin’s epistemological significance⁷⁰—stated that art-historical concepts such as the “Gothic,” the “Renaissance,” and the “Baroque” were not “names for historical periods at all, but ... concepts of ‘ideal types,’ in Max Weber’s sense.”⁷¹ In Cassirer’s view, art-historical concepts can help us to characterize the form and structure of different historical styles, but they do not express *actual* historical facts. Put slightly differently, this means that art historians, in order to elucidate artistic phenomena, have no choice but to construct an ad hoc table of categories that is then applied to the very phenomena that inspired it. This critical, and even hermeneutical, circularity is unavoidable: it lies at the very heart of the methodology of the humanities—and even of science more generally. All “concepts of style are *provisional*,” Cassirer says, “but *this* is no objection against their ‘scientificity,’ on the contrary, *this* provisional character can never be overcome in physics either.”⁷² Consequently, neither the “Renaissance” nor the “Baroque” are universal or eternal categories: they are interpretive designations given to a series of artworks that share a common “structural” orientation, for the purpose of making sense of the visual experience of the past. If such categories can sometimes acquire a more general, transhistorical, or transcultural meaning, it is only because of their theoretical operativeness. Wölfflin is unequivocal: if one wishes to use his concepts of the “linear” or the “painterly” to explicate “Japanese” or “old Nordic art,” for instance, these concepts “will have to be adapted and readapted time and again.”⁷³

For this reason, Wölfflin’s *Principles of Art History* can definitively be regarded as presenting genuine ideal types.⁷⁴ As he writes in the conclusion of the book:

This change in forms of perception has been described here with reference to the classical and baroque types. We did not set out to analyze the art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—that is something far richer and livelier—but just the schema, the perceptual and expressive possibilities to which art was obliged to confine itself and to which it indeed kept in both cases. Naturally, we were not able to go about exemplifying this other than by drawing upon the individual work of art, but everything that was said of Raphael and Titian, Rembrandt and Velázquez, was merely meant to illuminate the general path, not to throw light on the particular value of the work in hand. That would involve a longer, more precise discussion. But limiting oneself to the significant is unavoidable. Ultimately the direction can be read off most clearly from the most outstanding works, those that actually set the pace.⁷⁵

Wölfflin’s categories are ideal types in that they are imaginary accentuations of the most exemplary works of art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here lies the fertile paradox of style: its conceptual hold on reality resides entirely in its ideal-typical irreality. There is no purely “linear” or purely “painterly” painting or

⁶⁵ Weber, *Collected Methodological Writings*, 324 [MWG, I/12, 489].

⁶⁶ Weber, *Collected Methodological Writings*, 127 [MWG, I/7, 208].

⁶⁷ Weber, *Collected Methodological Writings*, 125 [MWG, I/7, 203–204].

⁶⁸ Goethe, *The Essential Goethe*, 960–977 [WA, II/1, 307–359].

⁶⁹ See for example Barbara Naumann and Birgit Recki, eds., *Cassirer und Goethe: Neue Aspekte einer philosophisch-literarischen Wahlverwandtschaft* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002).

⁷⁰ See Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, trans. Steve Loft (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 56–86 [“Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften,” *Ernst Cassirer Gesammelte Werke* (ECW) (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998ff), 24, 414–445].

⁷¹ Cassirer, ECW, 24, 181–182.

⁷² Ernst Cassirer, *Kulturphilosophie. Vorlesungen und Vorträge 1929–1941, Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte* (ECN) (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995ff), 5, 169.

⁷³ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 79 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 5–6].

⁷⁴ I therefore totally disagree with Andreas Eckl’s interpretation. See Eckl, *Kategorien der Anschauung*, 202.

⁷⁵ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 305 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 263–264].

drawing: the “linear” and the “painterly” are “limit values” against which actual works of art of the past can be compared, as Lambert Wiesing points out in *The Visibility of the Image*.⁷⁶

[insert Figure 4 here]

Figure 4. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1915), 36-37.

This is why, in accordance with Goethe’s close association between intensification and polarity,⁷⁷ Wölfflin’s concepts always come in pairs of opposites: “Grünwald is clearly more painterly than Dürer, but next to Rembrandt he can immediately be identified as a sixteenth-century artist—that is, as a man of the silhouette.”⁷⁸ As can be deduced from this statement, the comparative nature of Wölfflin’s method (Fig. 4) always results in “relative judgments,” which, importantly, does not mean *relativistic* judgments.⁷⁹ Ideal-typical concepts, even though they are not universal, help us to build objective knowledge of human reality, but this knowledge must always be reevaluated against the facts. Wölfflin’s approach to science is fundamentally open and dynamic. For him, it is only by constantly re-elaborating the categories of art history that art historians can grasp the distinctive meaning of the different styles of the past. To put it in Weber’s words once more:

some sciences are fated to remain eternally youthful, namely all *historical* disciplines: all those that are constantly confronted with new questions by the ever-advancing flow of culture. The very nature of the task of those disciplines implies that *all* ideal-typical constructions are transitory, but that, at the same time, one inevitably needs ever-*new* ones.⁸⁰

Weltansicht and Weltanschauung

In short, the inherently dynamic character of art history arises from the “ever-advancing flow” of the history of art itself. Michele Bertolini, in his commentary on the *Principles of Art History*, accurately highlights this correlation between the morphological creativity of artistic forms and the interpretive movement of the art historian who seeks to understand this creativity.⁸¹ According to Bertolini, the postulate of the “double root of style” emerges as the logical consequence of Wölfflin’s alignment with Goethe’s symbolic theory of knowledge and its central idea of an “inner form” of development, “in which the inner form does not preexist the phenomena themselves, like a schema overlaid on them, but is both revealed and constructed, produced in the immanence of research, unfolding itself as a concrete transcendental.”⁸² As a matter of fact, Wölfflin delineates between the “inner” and “outer” forms of art specifically to reveal the history of its (visual) “grammar and syntax,”⁸³ thereby uncovering within the works themselves the transformation of their mode of expression over time:

A historical consideration of art will initially always be inclined to make the history of art into a history of expression, in that it seeks the personality of the individual artist in his work and sees the great transformations of form and representation as a direct reaction to those variously rooted movements of the spirit that, taken as a whole, constitute the worldview [*Weltanschauung*] of any given age, the way it feels about the world. Who would contest the basic legitimacy of such an interpretation and the indispensability of a survey broad enough to encompass culture as a whole? And yet, if implemented in a one-sided way, it does run the risk of giving short shrift to the specificity of art, insofar as it operates with perceptual imagination. Visual art, as an art of the eye, has its own preconditions and lives by its own laws. It is not the case that a changed “mood” will be uniformly and directly reflected by art in the same way that facial expressions reflect emotions: the expressive apparatus does not remain the same in different epochs. And if art has been compared to a mirror that reflects the changing picture of “the world,” then this analogy is doubly misleading: comparing the creative labor of art to a reflection is not a good analogy. If we are to permit the expression at all, we should have to bear in mind that the structure of the mirror itself has always been subject to change.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ Lambert Wiesing, *The Visibility of the Image: History and Perspectives of Formal Aesthetics*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 45–46 [*Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes: Geschichte und Perspektiven der formalen Ästhetik* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1997), 64–66].

⁷⁷ Goethe, *The Essential Goethe*, 951–952 [WA, II/11, 164–166].

⁷⁸ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 112 [*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 46].

⁷⁹ On the comparative nature of art history in general, see Jaś Elsner, ed., *Comparativism in Art History* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁸⁰ Weber, *Collected Methodological Writings*, 133 [MWG, I/7, 224].

⁸¹ Michele Bertolini, “Linee per una morfologia della storia: gli orizzonti metodologici e disciplinari della ricerca storica da Heinrich Wölfflin a Ernst Cassirer,” *Itinera* 4 (2012): 213–258, <https://doi.org/10.13130/2039-9251/2341>.

⁸² Bertolini, “Linee per una morfologia della storia,” 215.

⁸³ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 305 [*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 263].

⁸⁴ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 319 [*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 276].

This changing structure is explicitly what Wölfflin refers to as the “inner form.” The problem is that he sometimes gives the impression that this “inner form” develops more or less independently from cultural history—he even compares its evolution to the ontogeny of a living organism. Does this imply, in the final analysis, that art does not fully belong to culture and society? And that artists have absolutely no control over their own artistic language?

These legitimate concerns have been repeated over the century following the publication of the *Principles of Art History*. Here, for instance, is what Henri Zerner wrote about Wölfflin’s “formalism” in 1976:

Riegl’s formalism ... is very different from Wölfflin’s. For the latter, the “double root of art” implies a truly autonomous development and completely distinct organic laws ruling the history of style. With Riegl, the separation of art from other human activities appears essentially as a methodological tactic. It ensures the proper interrogation of the specific works, the respect for art as a special domain of understanding, and, in the end, the contribution of art history to the social sciences as a particular branch of a more general *Geisteswissenschaft*.⁸⁵

In contrast to Zerner, I contend that Wölfflin’s “formalism,” though it may seem to neglect cultural analysis, is ultimately no less “tactical” than Riegl’s. One might even go so far as to suggest that Wölfflin’s “formalism,” when properly understood, is the most effective approach to comprehending art’s specific contribution to the history of culture. As Wölfflin himself states in his *Thoughts on Art History (Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte)*, “after all, everything is form in the visual arts, and a complete analysis of form will necessarily grasp the spiritual as well.”⁸⁶

When closely examining the theory of the “double root of style,” it becomes apparent that Wölfflin does not separate form from content or spirit, as he distinguishes between an “inner” and an “outer” form. *What* the outer form expresses is no less formal than *how* the inner form expresses it. In the visual arts, form is always-already spiritual, and the spiritual content is always-already formal because form *is* the very manifestation of meaning in the visible realm. Wölfflin, therefore, discerns between two levels of visible/spiritual—that is, of symbolic—formations solely to examine their interrelationship. As such, the inner and outer forms can be seen as two sides of the same coin. While the specific meaning of the outer form depends on the global structure of the inner form, the inner form only reveals itself through the specific shape of the outer form of the work of art. The inner form, Wölfflin writes, is not simply a “shell into which a certain content is poured.”⁸⁷ Instead, “outer and inner forms necessarily belong together, like man and woman. Both are dependent on each other. Only in their union is art generated.”⁸⁸

While this sexual comparison (with its likely gender-biased connotation) might seem unexpected in such a theoretical context, it becomes perfectly comprehensible when considered in light of an overlooked source of Wölfflin’s thought: the philosophy of language developed by Goethe’s close friend, Wilhelm von Humboldt.⁸⁹

As Jürgen Trabant recalls, Humboldt identified the vital force of sexuality as the foundation of imagination, conceiving it as the generative faculty that reunites what Kant kept separated: intuition and understanding.⁹⁰ This sexual matrix is also present in Humboldt’s definition of language as “the formative organ of thought,”⁹¹ which would later influence Fiedler’s productive theory of art.⁹² Although Wölfflin never mentions Humboldt in his published works, his correspondence reveals a late yet keen interest in Humboldt’s theory of the “inner linguistic form” (*innere Sprachform*),⁹³ such that it is almost certain that Wölfflin derived the concept of the “inner form” of art from Humboldt, rather than directly from Goethe.⁹⁴

In Humboldt’s view, indeed, the *innere Sprachform* is the structuring power of a language. It encompasses not only the creative arrangement of words and sentences but also the manner in which the world is apprehended and objectified through them. The distinctive character of a language—Wölfflin would define it as its style—stems from this underlying imaginative force. This force finds its clearest manifestation not in everyday pragmatic conversations but in literary works, where its poietic nature precipitates, to use a chemical

⁸⁵ Henri Zerner, “Alois Riegl: Art, Value, and Historicism,” *Daedalus* 105, no. 1 (Winter 1976): 185.

⁸⁶ Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 3.

⁸⁷ Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 10.

⁸⁸ Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 7.

⁸⁹ For more on the intellectual affinity between Goethe and Humboldt, see Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Instructions pour la réalisation d’une carte générale des langues*, ed. and trans. David Blankenstein et al. (Paris: Éditions Rue d’Ulm, 2020).

⁹⁰ Jürgen Trabant, *Humboldt ou le sens du langage* (Liège: Madarga, 1992), 16–21.

⁹¹ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language. On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, trans. Peter Heath, ed. Michael Losonsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 54 [“Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts,” *Gesammelte Schriften* (WHGS) (Berlin: Behr, 1903ff), VII/1, 53].

⁹² See Stefan Majetschak, “Die Sprachlichkeit der Kunst. Konrad Fiedlers Sprach- und Kunsttheorie im Lichte der Sprachphilosophie Wilhelm von Humboldts,” in *Auge und Hand. Konrad Fiedlers Kunsttheorie im Kontext*, ed. Stefan Majetschak (Munich: Fink, 1997), 113–126.

⁹³ Humboldt, *On Language*, 81–88 [WHGS, VII/1, 86–94].

⁹⁴ Wölfflin, *Autobiographie*, 409. It is possible that Karl Vossler, Wölfflin’s friend and colleague at the University of Munich, was instrumental in this borrowing. On Vossler, see Michel Espagne, “Karl Vossler: le devenir des langues et l’histoire des cultures,” *Revue germanique internationale* 19 (2014): 103–117, <https://doi.org/10.4000/rgi.1473>.

metaphor.⁹⁵ In this regard, *innere Sprachform* is closely associated with Humboldt's concept of *Weltansicht*, which should not be confused with another Humboldtian concept, *Weltanschauung*.⁹⁶ *Weltanschauung*, as later popularized by Dilthey, refers to the ideological conception of the world expressed in the various productions of an individual or an entire culture. This is why I believe that Wölfflin's outer form can be described as a visual counterpart to *Weltanschauung*.

Conversely, *Weltansicht* refers to the way the formative force of a language literally shapes the experience of its speakers, constituting what is "natural" to them. A particular *Weltansicht* does not prevent anyone from formulating any opinion or any idea whatsoever. In Trabant's words, "languages are not assemblages of affirmations about the world which we hold to be true. Languages affirm nothing about the world; they give us the world in a certain way, thereby allowing assertive discourses (among others) upon the nature of the world."⁹⁷ Humboldt's concept of *Weltansicht* seems thus perfectly equivalent to Wölfflin's concept of inner form: understood as that which is "self-evident to people,"⁹⁸ it is the common visual language of a certain historical period, through which artists and cultures give form to their *Weltanschauungen*.⁹⁹ As Wölfflin writes in the *Principles of Art History*: "All artistic perception is bound up with certain decorative schemas, or—to repeat the expression—visibility crystallizes for the eye in certain forms. And each new form of crystallization brings a new aspect of world content to light."¹⁰⁰ Or again, a few pages later:

What we want to show is that the expressive element of our schematic concepts [that is, of the inner form] has to be defined in a very general way. The concepts certainly have a spiritual aspect to them, and if they can be taken to be relatively inexpressive (for the individual artist), they are nevertheless highly expressive of the overall physiognomy of an age, and closely interwoven—whether determinant or determined—with the nonpictorial history of spirit.¹⁰¹

"bedingend und bedingt"

The description of the inner form as both "determinant" (*bedingend*) and "determined" (*bedingt*) is illuminating. Despite Wölfflin's argument for the relative autonomy of the inner form—which sometimes leads him to untenable conclusions, such as when he attributes the return of linear art in the eighteenth century to the "unnatural" influence of culture on vision¹⁰²—he ultimately recognizes that the inner and outer forms condition each other. Simply put, this means that the inner form of art unconsciously shapes the visual experience of the artists of a certain time and place. In return, these artists reshape the inner form of their time and place through their concrete *use* of it in their work. Usage and practice therefore explain how the outer form quietly, but effectively, participates in the development of the inner form—what Wölfflin somewhat vaguely terms the "effect of one picture on another."¹⁰³ Particular attention is warranted here: unlike Davis's interpretation mentioned in the introduction, "usage" should not be understood in a purely instrumental sense, as if art were merely a tool for communicating pre-ordered ideas or replicating already-given things. Instead, art should be seen as an end in itself—a driving force through which cultures strive to forge an objective, shared (visual) reality.

This perspective aligns with the idea that "[a]rt, like language, is not an *ergon*, but an *energeia* (= W. von Humboldt)"¹⁰⁴—that is, not a fixed product but an ever-renewed productive activity. As Henri Dilberman notes regarding Humboldt's *innere Sprachform*: "Nothing is substance in language; everything is form, and even form in act, acting form."¹⁰⁵ Contrary to Renato Barilli's suggestion, Wölfflin's notion of inner form is thus far from being similar to Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of language (*langue*).¹⁰⁶ From a Humboldtian perspective, it is impossible to separate language from speech (*parole*). Language exists solely *in* speech acts themselves (what Humboldt terms *die Rede*), which always occur in and refer to a specific context of enunciation.¹⁰⁷ This insight is particularly significant because it explains how language plays an operative role

⁹⁵ See Denis Thouard, "Glossaire," in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Sur le caractère national des langues*, ed. and trans. Denis Thouard (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 169–171.

⁹⁶ See James W. Underhill, *Humboldt, Worldview and Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 53–57. Also see Thouard, "Glossaire," 180–182.

⁹⁷ Trabant, *Humboldt ou le sens du langage*, 56 (English trans. by Underhill, in Humboldt, *Worldview and Language*, 55).

⁹⁸ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 307 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 265].

⁹⁹ Wölfflin never explicitly uses the concept of *Weltansicht*, but it is quite clear that it aligns closely with his understanding of the "inner form" of art. Therefore, I disagree with Andrea Pinotti, who criticizes Wölfflin for confusing the history of vision with a history of *Weltanschauungen*; see Andrea Pinotti, "Do Styles Have a Body?," 136.

¹⁰⁰ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 310 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 268].

¹⁰¹ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 322 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 279].

¹⁰² Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 312–314 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 271–272].

¹⁰³ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 323 [Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 280].

¹⁰⁴ Wölfflin, *Autobiographie*, 469, referring to Humboldt, *On Language*, 49 [WHGS, VII/1, 46].

¹⁰⁵ Henri Dilberman, "Wilhelm von Humboldt et l'invention de la forme de la langue," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 131, no. 2 (2006): 172. Also see Thouard, "Glossaire," 171–172.

¹⁰⁶ Renato Barilli, *Scienza della cultura e fenomenologia degli stili* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2007), 183–189.

¹⁰⁷ See Jean Quillien, "G. de Humboldt et la linguistique générale," *Histoire Épistémologie Langage* 3, no. 2 (1981): 85–113; Jürgen Trabant, "Signe et articulation: la solution humboldtienne d'un mystère saussurien," *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 54 (2001): 269–288; Thouard, "Glossaire," 174–176. Once again, speech or *Rede* should not be narrowly construed as merely pragmatic or informative; rather, it generically refers to the vitality of language itself.

in the history of culture: within the speech act, the formative power of language (*forma formans*) not only reappropriates its past and present embodiments (*forma formata*) but also engages with all that is extralinguistic. Speech is the meeting point between the subject and its cultural environment. In Wölfflin's words, the issue translates as follows:

Another question is the extent to which "the eye" is able to undergo its own development and the extent to which it determines and is determined by the other spheres of the spirit. Clearly there is no optical schema that, having proceeded from nothing but its own premises, could be laid over the world like a dead template; people will always see things the way they want to, but this does not preclude the possibility of there being some constant law at work throughout the change. Identifying this law would be a central problem, perhaps the central problem of a scientific art history.¹⁰⁸

It would be misguided to interpret the choice of the word "law" as indicative of a deterministic—if not totalitarian¹⁰⁹—perspective on history. In his endeavor to establish the methodological rigor of art history, to elevate *Kunstgeschichte* to the status of a true *Kunstwissenschaft*, Wölfflin purposefully employs a lexicon imbued with scientific connotations. Just as linguistics attempts to discover, amid the variety of linguistic phenomena, certain "laws" or regularities governing the evolution of language, so Wölfflinian art history endeavors to uncover certain "laws" or regularities governing the evolution of style.¹¹⁰ However, these laws are not as inflexible as the laws of physics or biology. For Wölfflin, as for Humboldt, historical evolution always presupposes human freedom—or better yet, historical evolution manifests the freedom afforded by language, whether visual or verbal. In a morphological context, language is not an implacable constraint that exerts absolute control over individuals, confining them within the strict borders of an inherited system. On the contrary, grammar and syntax serve as the framework for any possible spiritual liberation: they are the "rules" that enable creation, in that their formative force never "overrules the individual who is the real sovereign of language."¹¹¹

This is one of Wölfflin's greatest strengths: his conception of freedom is not abstract but embedded in historical actuality. Unlike Julius von Schlosser, he never opposes the expressive freedom of artists (what Schlosser terms their "style") to the general description of the language of art.¹¹² For Wölfflin, language is always-already stylistic in itself. In an article titled "Über Formentwicklung" ("On the Evolution of Form"), he explicitly argues that artists innovate by deliberately exploring all the latent potential of the visual language passed down to them by their predecessors (and their culture more generally).¹¹³ As with any form of language, the transmission of visual language from one generation to the next is an overall *active* process. When we learn to speak, see, or draw, we not only inherit a "vocabulary, grammar, and style," but also the ability to *transform* this vocabulary, grammar, and style *from within*, as Cassirer puts it.¹¹⁴ This is precisely why art evolves over time, and it is this evolution, which is both determined and free, that Wölfflin sought to highlight in his *Principles of Art History*.

Wölfflin's other significant contribution to art history lies in his view that the essence of art can only be apprehended in the irreducible diversity of its styles, understood as *Weltansichten*. Classic and Baroque styles are not mere ornamental varnishes that artists apply to a pre-given world; rather, they are two specific modes of access to reality, two ways of giving form to (visual) objectivity that are equally valid and worthy of interest. Far from implying a solipsistic conception of cultures, Wölfflin's comparative method echoes the hermeneutical move of Humboldt's linguistics, which suggests that language diversity always comes with the possibility of intercomprehension, rooted as it is in the universal faculty of speech. In his critique of philosopher Paul Feyerabend's relativistic approach to science—an approach that draws inspiration from Riegl's theory of art—Carlo Ginzburg makes a Humboldtian-sounding observation that perfectly describes what is at stake here:

The Latin word *interpretatio* means translation. The interpreter who compares different styles of thought in order to stress their intrinsic diversity performs a sort of translation, a word that comes easily in this context, insofar as styles, having being originally related to writing, have been often compared to languages in order to stress their intrinsic diversity. But translation is also the most

¹⁰⁸ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 99 [*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 31].

¹⁰⁹ See Arnold Hauser, "The Philosophical Implications of Art History: 'Art History without Names,'" in *The Philosophy of Art History* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985), 117–276 [*Philosophie der Kunstgeschichte* (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagbuchhandlung, 1958), 127–306].

¹¹⁰ See Wölfflin, *Kleine Schriften*, 177.

¹¹¹ Jürgen Trabant, "How Relativistic are Humboldt's 'Weltansichten'?", in *Explorations in Linguistic Relativity*, ed. Martin Pütz and Marjolijn H. Verspoor (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2000), 41.

¹¹² Julius von Schlosser, *Stilgeschichte und "Sprachgeschichte" der bildenden Kunst: ein Rückblick* (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1935). Accordingly, Wölfflin's position—as I understand it—directly challenges Davis's distinction between form and style. Indeed, as Davis puts it: "Formalism and stylistic analysis identify quite different causes for 'form' and 'style,' respectively, namely, the form-making 'sensitivity' of the maker in the former case—that is, his or her aesthetic intuition in the Kantian sense—and his or her configurative habits in the latter." (Whitney Davis, "Formalism as Art History," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], vol. 3, 78–83).

¹¹³ Heinrich Wölfflin, "Über Formentwicklung," in *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 8–15.

¹¹⁴ See Cassirer, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, 115 [ECW, 24, 474].

powerful argument against relativism. Each language is a different and, to a certain extent, incommensurable world: but translations *work*. Our ability to understand different styles may throw some light on our ability to understand other languages and other styles of thought—and the other way around.¹¹⁵

Just like Ginzburg's "interpreter," Wölfflin is acutely aware of his own situatedness as an art historian¹¹⁶—one should add, as a Swiss-German art historian.¹¹⁷ Consequently, he emphasizes the necessity of constantly learning and teaching how to see (*sehen lernen/sehen lehren*) artworks from different times and places, that is, of comprehending and thereby translating and retranslating the *Sehformen* from the past into present art-historical discourse. As Wölfflin so clearly concludes in *Das Erklären von Kunstwerken (The Explanation of Works of Art)*:

there are many different "styles." Their number is infinite. Although our sense of sight has the remarkable ability to react to completely unfamiliar types of forms and our historical education ensures that this ability is developed early on in all directions, it is not easy to always find the right approach. It *can* happen that even the most inexperienced person reads a foreign work of art more or less correctly, namely when a related disposition comes into play, but in general, one cannot overestimate the difficulty of interpreting foreign art accurately. One must indeed have learned Japanese in order to understand a Japanese drawing, that is, one must master not the Japanese language, but the Japanese pictorial attitude.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

[insert Figure 5 here]

Figure 5. Emanuel La Roche, *Indische Baukunst*, with a foreword by Heinrich Wölfflin (Munich: Bruckmann, 1921), title page.

Wölfflin's principled openness to forms and styles beyond the canon of European art (Fig. 5) stands as one of the most topical legacies of the "tactical" formalism outlined in the *Principles of Art History*, as demonstrated by the theoretical affinity between "postformalism" and world art history.¹¹⁹ This illustrates that Wölfflin's relevance lies not so much in his results, in the specific content of categories such as the linear or the painterly, but in his method, in the idea of an inner form of style that manifests itself in a diversity of *Weltansichten*. Admittedly, many of Wölfflin's conclusions, such as the homogeneity of period styles or the cyclical alternation of the linear and the painterly, are now outdated. However, his morphological, ideal-typical, and hermeneutical approach to creation can and must continue to inform contemporary thinking on the arts. For example, Wölfflin's insistence on combining a non-normative study of styles with a critical analysis of the value of each artwork remains thought-provoking,¹²⁰ especially in light of the success of visual studies and *Bildwissenschaft*, which has prompted the question of the value of images beyond the traditional realm of art.¹²¹ Similarly, the young Wölfflin's embrace of Dilthey's connection between history and psychology, which laid the groundwork for the emergence of the history of vision in the *Principles of Art History*, offers fruitful insights for neuroaesthetics and embodied cognition on the interactions between perception and culture.¹²² Finally, the resurgence of interest in style among computer vision scientists, who willingly resort to a dehistoricized, mathematized version of Wölfflin's categories,¹²³ raises the crucial issue of

¹¹⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, "Style as Inclusion, Style as Exclusion," in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, ed. Peter Galison and Caroline A. Jones (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 45, referring to Paul Feyerabend, "Science as Art: An Attempt to Apply Riegl's Theory of Art to the Sciences," *Art + Text* 12–13 (1983): 16–46 ["Wissenschaft als Kunst: eine Diskussion der Riegelschen Kunsttheorie verbunden mit dem Versuch, sie auf die Wissenschaften anzuwenden," in *Wissenschaft als Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 15–84]. On the question of translation in Humboldt, see Denis Thouard, *Et tout langage est étrangère : le projet de Humboldt* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2016).

¹¹⁶ Once again, Wölfflin's position is very close to that of Weber, who is far from promoting the (illusory) ideal of the neutrality of science. See Isabelle Kalinowski, "La critique selon Max Weber : les sciences sociales peuvent-elles et doivent-elles prétendre à 'l'objectivité' ?," in *Les études critiques en management : une perspective française*, ed. Damon Golsorkhi, Isabelle Huault, and Bernard Leca (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2009), 81–96.

¹¹⁷ See Wölfflin's last monograph, *The Sense of Form in Art: A Comparative Psychological Study*, trans. Alice Muehsam and Norma A. Shatan (New York: Chelsea Pub. Co., 1958) [*Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl: die Kunst der Renaissance, Gesammelte Werke, Schriften* 8, ed. Tristan Weddigen, Oskar Bätschmann, and Joris van Gastel (Basel: Schwabe, 2024)]. Éric Michaud has recently argued that this book and all the related writings that Wölfflin dedicated to the issue of national styles rest on a pervasive racist ideology (see Éric Michaud, "Wölfflin in France: From Racialism to Structuralism," in *The Global Reception of Heinrich Wölfflin's Principles of Art History*, 199–214). Contrary to this interpretation—and despite Wölfflin's usage of the term "race," which was common at the time, even in scientific productions unrelated to promoting a racist agenda—I contend that Wölfflin constantly encouraged intercultural dialogue to foster a universal sense of humanity, rooted in mutual understanding. See Rémi Mermet, "De l'affinité entre les peuples : Heinrich Wölfflin et la question des styles nationaux," *Archives de philosophie* 87 (2024), forthcoming. On the political connotations of Wölfflin's thought, also see Evonne Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language of Formalism (1845–1945)*: Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Gurlitt, Brinckmann, Sedlmayr (Basel: Schwabe, 2015).

¹¹⁸ Wölfflin, *Kleine Schriften*, 167. The same pedagogical inclination can be found in Wind; see Edgar Wind, "Theory of Art versus Aesthetics," *The Philosophical Review* 34, no. 4 (July 1925): 359.

¹¹⁹ See, for instance, Summers, *Real Spaces*.

¹²⁰ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 92–93 [*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 23–24]; Wölfflin, *Kleine Schriften*, 172, 177.

¹²¹ See for instance William J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹²² See Whitney Davis, "Neurovisuality," *nonsite* 2 (2011), <https://nonsite.org/neurovisuality/>; Horst Bredekamp and Marion Lauschke, eds., *John M. Krois: Bildkörper und Körperschema: Schriften zur Verkörperungstheorie ikonischer Formen* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011).

¹²³ See Wolfgang Ernst and Stefan Heidenreich, "Digitale Bildarchivierung: der Wölfflin-Kalkül," in *Konfigurationen. Zwischen Kunst und Medien*, ed. Sigrid Schade and Georg Christoph Tholen (Munich: Fink, 1999), 306–320; Hubertus Kohle, *Digitale Bildwissenschaft* (Glückstadt: Werner Hülsbusch, 2013), 66–70; Harald Klink, "Heinrich Wölfflin in Zeiten digitaler Kunstgeschichte," in *Kunstgeschichten 1915*, 415–421; Ahmed Elgammal et al., "The Shape of Art History in the Eyes of the Machine," *Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Artificial*

“mechanical objectivity”—the mistaken belief in the impartiality of quantitative data in cultural analysis.¹²⁴ Wölfflin’s complex and dynamic perspective on style offers the beginning of a solution to this fallacy, as it reminds us that objectivity is never a given but an interpretive construct. Considering the growing importance of computational methods in the humanities, it is now incumbent upon us to perpetuate this critical awareness.

Intelligence 32, no. 1 (2018), <https://arxiv.org/abs/1801.07729>; Eva Cetinic, Tomislav Lipic, and Sonja Grgic, “Learning the *Principles of Art History* with Convolutional Neural Networks,” *Pattern Recognition Letters* 129 (2020): 56–62, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.patrec.2019.11.008>.

¹²⁴ Amanda Wasielewski, *Computational Formalism: Art History and Machine Learning* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2023), 25, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14268.001.0001>.