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Philip Sohm. *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xii + 315 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-78069-8.

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The Language of Rhetoric: Cinquecento and Seicento Italian Art Theory

Philip Sohm's *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy* establishes critical parameters and descriptive terminology in an attempt to identify for the modern reader the origins of the concept of style. This is not an easy task. In fact, unabridged dictionaries have devoted multiple columns to just such an attempt. The word itself derives from the Latin *stylus*, a pointed instrument for writing, and that origin in the art of making legible signs (along with the sharp nature of the instrument!) continues to haunt semantic discussions to this day. Sohm attempts to tackle this issue for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as he had previously articulated eloquently for Venetian theory and brushwork of the eighteenth century in *Pittoresco: Marco Boschini, His Critics, and Their Critiques of Painterly Brushwork in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Italy* (1991). While intended for the specialist of Italian Renaissance and Baroque art, Sohm's latest book serves to lay the foundation for twentieth-century theories as well. Combining language and theory gathered from over 250 references, Sohm has created an invaluable, thought-provoking source for art historians in addition to transforming a complex and contentious topic into one that is both informative and accessible.

Entitled "Style and Language," part 1 lays the groundwork for his subsequent discussion. Considering how the "s" word has been debased and diluted by mass culture, it is no wonder that the term needs a new appraisal. (Sohm specifically cites the Style section of the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*, but recently there has been a plethora of coffee-table design books describing the variable nature of style as "Italian," "Provençal," or "San Antonio.") On the other hand, the author seeks to avoid the parochialism of the term as used to describe national or regional styles (deemed "stereotyping"), such as Venetian colorism or Lombard realism, the latter terminology resurrected only lately for an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum.[1] Sohm further points out that there exist in the Italian language alone over two hundred adjectives used to modify the term "style" (p. 34), resulting in such expressions as the "Stylish Style," used to define a brief, but specific period known as Mannerism. At the other extreme, he reproaches the formalists who "detached style from content and from the artist's character" (p. 9), culminating with those art historians who "avoid its terminology altogether" (p. 2).

Sohm's conclusion that "style as a concept reflects the semantic structure of language best known to the writer" (p. 3) has led him to ultimately "define style as language" (p.16); this accounts for its incredible fluidity. At the same time, Sohm, paying homage to Michael Baxandall, recognizes the vagaries and limitation of language, which is "not well equipped to offer a notation of a particular picture" (p. 44).

In part 2, entitled "Definitions of Style," Sohm concentrates on four theories of style formulated between 1550 and 1700 by Giorgio Vasari, Nicolas Poussin, Marco Boschini, and Filippo Baldinucci, "their rarity [making] them precious" (p. 10). Giorgio Vasari's *Vite*, the first edition of which was published in 1550, provides the foundation for any discussion of the development of style. Vasari frequently reminds his reader that he writes as an artist for other artists and not as a writer (yet ironically, he is historically best remembered for his abilities as the latter rather than the former). It is inevitable that as the Renaissance artist strove to be considered more than just a mere craftsman, so the art historian desired to be compared with their illustrious literary counterparts;

only Bernini and Michelangelo could claim equal competence in both the verbal and visual arenas. Vasari postulated a "rising trajectory" from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, from *buon* to *migliore* to *ottimo*, from Giotto to the "divine" Michelangelo. Vasari was also the first to establish a Tuscan bias for drawing over Venetian color. Vasari's theories remained virtually unchallenged for years, even into the twentieth century in the writings of Bernard Berenson.

On the other hand, the mid-seventeenth century has been described by Giovanni Battista Passeri as "a querulous age obsessed with style" (p. 19). Passeri, as Sohm amusingly and ironically points out, proposed silence as the best response to art, yet that did not stop him from entitling a particularly verbose lecture to be delivered at the prestigious Accademia di San Lucca in Rome, *Il Silenzio.* Salvatore Rosso echoed the same sentiment in his *Self-Portrait* (c. 1640), which bears the inscription: *AUT TACE AUT LOQUERE MELIORA SILENTIOú* ("Be silent, or say something better than silence") as he challengingly dares the viewer to respond. The seventeenth century was a particularly diverse period and even today scholars dispute over the meaning and origin of the "Baroque style."

The career of the French painter Nicholas Poussin unfolded in the Rome of Gianlorenzo Bernini. Poussin, who never completed his treatise on painting, derived a universal *maniera magnifica* that elevated subject matter over style; in fact, as Sohm points out, Poussin "manipulated style for expressive and ethical purposes" (p. 121). To this end, he preferred ancient, stoic subjects and applied the theory of Greek musical "modes" to his painting. Poussin was the most rigid and classical of Baroque painters and theorists, and his "Grand Manner" actually proved more influential for the petrification of French Academic painting of the nineteenth century.

In keeping with the seventeenth-century preference for individuality over conformity, Marco Boschini offered a new approach. A jack-of-all-trades (dealer, jeweler, writer, engraver, and painter), Boschini reacted against the "stoniness" of Raphael and Poussin in favor of his native Venetians. His personal hero was the idiosyncratic Tintoretto, the very painter whom Vasari most disliked. He identifies five painters (Tintoretto, Titian, Giorgione, Bassano and Veronese) as the five "vowels" of Venetian painting. Whereas both Vasari and Poussin preferred paintings to have a smooth, polished finish, Boschini uses many terms to describe brushstroke (*bota*, *bulega*, *ciera*, *spegazzone*, and *tresco*). Boschini preferred an agitated surface, which leads Sohm to an interesting discussion of *macchia.* Although as an art term it literally means "sketchy," Sohm points out that it never loses its connotation as messy and stained (e.g. *caffè macchiato*). Vasari describes Titian's late works, "executed in broad strokes and stains" (p. 150), negatively whereas Boschini has the opposite reaction using the same terminology. As one can easily see, these terms provide fertile ground for misinterpretations. It is this disagreement between Vasari and Boschini that becomes codified into the debate between line versus color, Poussin versus Rubens, Ingres versus Delacroix, and ultimately Picasso versus Matisse. The implications and reach of Sohm's book seem further than his choice of title would imply.

Filippo Baldinucci was the curator of the Medici ducal collection. He also aspired to be the new Vasari. His *Notizie* represents an expansion of Vasari's *Vite* to include much of Europe. As a result, Baldinucci now provides fourteen definitions of style using eighty different terms (Sohm actually counts the number of terms used). Interestingly, ten of these definitions are used to classify "bad" art. Baldinucci welcomed this seicento expansion of style as a "market response by artists to satisfy the demands of collectors who had refined and narrowed their tastes" (p. 173). No style remains universal and no artist, including the "divine" Michelangelo, achieves the "empyrean height of perfection" (p. 174).

By the end of the book, Sohm has successfully and lucidly made his case that, at least for early modern Italy, the specific agenda of the writer determined the meaning of style. His study is both a welcome and innovative addition to the literature on the subject. Sohm clarifies his discussion of early modern theory by referring to contemporary scholars such as David Summers, George Kubler, Michael Baxandall, Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey. More than one third of the book is devoted to scholarly footnotes and bibliography plus an appendix of useful subjects and terms. The appendix, however, is not intended to be a complete lexicon; in fact, Sohm alludes to his own forthcoming volume on that subject (p. 87). The sparse illustrations are all black and white; Parmigianino's enigmatic *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* graces the cover but is not referred to in the text. The painting itself is as subjective and allusive as the nature of style itself.

Style turns out to be personal and can be defined as that certain "je ne sais quoi" that is evoked when all language fails. Like *sprezzatura*, you either have it or you don't.

Note

[1]. Andrea Bayer, ed., *Painters of Reality: The Legacy of Leonardo and Caravaggio in Lombardy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

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