Book Reviews


The concept of style is a tricky one. Most art-historians have always rightly recognized it to be at the very centre of their subject, ‘non-stylistic art’ being a contradiction in terms. Though outstanding art-historians have tried to clarify the concepts of style, form, content and their interrelationships, these concepts are still murky. It is therefore that a book on the subject of artistic style written by two experimental psychologists is likely to arouse considerable interest. Unfortunately their contribution proves to be a disappointment.

The specific issue the authors chose to examine is how far variations in artistic style could be explained by assuming that artists have differentially capitalised on particular visual mechanisms and that it is the specific sample of such mechanisms which they have exploited that constitutes the essence of their style. Stated otherwise: The thesis is that one of the essential features of artistic style consists of the particular characteristics of the eye’s mechanisms that the painter chooses to explore. Eye is used by the authors as a shorthand for the entire visual system, comprising all its neural and cognitive aspects. Given this claim, the way to proceed is clearcut. One needs (1) a method to specify the particular set of visual mechanisms exploited by individual artists, (2) a method to measure the similarity of the styles of individual artists, (3) a procedure to describe the relationship between these two provinces. None of these can be found in the book.

No independent measures of artistic style or of exploitation of sets of visual mechanisms are given. Throughout the book an artist’s alleged reliance on some characteristics of the eye is taken as a definition of his artistic style. Actually, the authors put the style of an artist on a par with the presence of some specific features in a painting. For instance, they present three paintings by Van Gogh and show that the artist uses multiple points of convergence in each of them (p. 136–140). According to the authors, Van Gogh in that way acknowledges that his eyes moved whilst looking at the scene. The authors then equate the manifestation of this property of the eye with the style of the painting (p. 148). Of course, paintings can be classified according to the number of points of convergence, or according to the presence of blurred and non-blurred figures. Of course it is an interesting hypothesis to interpret these characteristics of paintings as resulting
from the artist's choice to acknowledge the fact that the eye moves in scanning a
scene, that it adjusts itself by focusing on different objects in the scene, and that
acuity varies over the visual field. Surely it is a fascinating conjecture that such
samples of visual phenomena allegedly selected by the artist for presentation to the
viewer of his work are the essence of his artistic style. Of course the next step is to
substantiate this conjecture. Alas here the book fails.

It has to fail, because artistic style is not the subject of this volume. There are
232 entries of the list of References. Only one of them relates to style. There are
205 entries of the Subject Index. Only five of them relate to style. There are 53
pages with Notes. Only one of them is related to style. Actually this is a book on
visual perception, especially on the construction and perception of perspective
(there are 28 entries in the References directly relating to perspective), and on the
use of depth cues in picture making. As a book on producing and perceiving
pictures, it is outclassed by the recent volumes of Edgerton (1991), Hagen (1980),
Kemp (1990), and Vitz and Glimcher (1984). The reader with an interest in the
subject of artistic style would do better to consult the volumes by Gombrich (1968),
Lang (1987), Panofsky (1964), Schapiro (1953), and Wölflin (1915). The reader
with an interest in the possible relationship between mechanisms of perception
and artistic style should be patient for a while yet.

Frans Boselie

NIC!

University of Nijmegen
P.O. Box 9104
6500 HE Nijmegen
The Netherlands

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