

Chapter 1

Introduction

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Why a volume on style in archaeology?

This volume addresses the use of style in archaeological inquiry. What we think of as style is pervasive in human society, no matter how we may define it. And style is involved in all archaeological analysis, whether it is covertly or overtly discussed. It is style that creates and defines artifact types, culture types and even types of evolutionary trajectories. Style is at work and can be studied at the level of the individual, a group, or a society. Style is rooted in both time and space. Style is opinionated: an object or event can have good style, bad style, old style, new style, or can even be a combination of styles. Style is not separate from the social contexts that give the cultural materials in question their social values. It is no wonder that style has been referred to as elusive, controversial, and the proverbial “black box.” It is no wonder that many debates in the archaeological literature are over the use of style in analysis, in interpretation, and in legitimation of specific archaeological viewpoints. For all of these reasons, the study of style and its place in research and interpretation in archaeology is central and determining.

As recently as twenty years ago, Hans Georg Gadamer, “one of the founding fathers of modern hermeneutics, could still write without hesitation: ‘the notion of style is one of the undiscussed self-evident concepts upon which our historical consciousness is based’” (Gadamer 1965: 466, as cited by Sauerländer 1983: 253). Given the scholarly “earthquakes”

that have affected archaeology since then, this statement of Gadamer’s is now open to question. But to dismantle the concept of style itself is a major historical and epistemological endeavor. Although there are several explicitly historical essays in this volume (e.g., chapter 2, by Conkey and chapter 4, by Sackett), and although all of the essays have epistemological implications, the in-depth and comprehensive historical and epistemological essays on the uses of style in archaeology remain to be written. To write such essays, we must at least return to our roots in the culture-history “paradigm,” where style was so inherent in archaeological interpretation; in some ways, we are still there, in this volume.

What we have tried to do here is to present chapters with differing perspectives on style in archaeology, particularly in the context of how a concept of style may be *used* in archaeological analysis and interpretation. This volume presents views of the mid-1980s; style here is not reducible to an “undiscussed, self-evident concept” or to a set of agreed-upon attributes or topics. Rather, style is now taken as “a highly conditioned and ambivalent hermeneutical ‘construct’ worked out at a distinct moment in social and intellectual history” (Sauerländer 1983: 254).

Our closest intellectual neighbor in the use of style for the analysis of cultural materials has been art history (Schapiro 1953). As in art history (Sauerländer 1983), archaeology has used style as a mirror, if not also as a key, in order to make all

the cultural materials of the past accessible to us. Stylistic types (as defined by Krieger 1944) created the time–space divisions of the past and the archaeological “cultures.” By our style types and definitions, we create the past. Some of the effects of this have been the detachment of the types from their past; and, in addition, the past has become our own creation. As in art history, archaeologists have used style in a way that detaches from these cultural materials “what may have been their original message and function . . . reducing them to patterns, samples . . .” (Sauerländer 1983: 254). Yet our style types and definitions have provided us with a link to the past, and have yielded new insights into it.

What this volume shows is that these uses of style in archaeology (as in art history) have neither gone away *nor* gone unquestioned. Rather, these approaches as well as the outcomes are being contested and provide the basis for substantive debate about the concepts and uses of style in archaeology.

Despite the necessity of style in archaeological research, archaeologists remain frustrated in their pursuit of the role and use of style. Style, like ideology, remains elusive, implicit, and ambiguous. Stylistic inferences in archaeology are, to many, unsettlingly underdetermined. Without a unified theory of style and its methodological program, and without any real possibility of one in the future, why do we have a volume on the uses of style in archaeology?

Style is *unavoidable* in all archaeological interpretation, from the style of the analyst or from the style in which artifacts were made, to the style of the prehistoric cultural materials, even to the style of our narrative accounts about the past. Style is pervasive and unavoidable because there is nothing to discuss or be interpreted without assigning or inferring style. Without style we have little or nothing to say. In some ways, it is this diverse and thorny issue of style as both subject and object that has generated this volume, as it generates archaeology.

Can there be a unified concept of style?

In an early and classic article on style for anthropologists, Schapiro (1953: 288) suggested three dimensions of style:

- (1) form elements, motifs;
- (2) form relationships;
- (3) qualities.

Of these three dimensions, only the first relates directly to the physical, material world. The other two dimensions derive from and produce context and cultural meaning through use. It is through action and reaction that these cultural qualities, the elements, forms, and form relationships, are culturally mediated; without these cultural qualities, the elements or forms do not exist.

The very processes of cultural transmission are through “the style of things,” through social actions (e.g., a way of farming), through the recognition and use of materials (e.g., a stone hoe). As that hoe may be found in different archaeological contexts (in a burial, or in fields), the hoe provides the archaeologist with different cultural meanings.

Style is always grounded in some cultural context or frame of reference. From this, it should not be surprising that style is diverse, multivalent and elusive, especially when in another context.

The diverse uses of style in archaeology remain unsatisfying and only partial because, in part, archaeologists have preferred a materialist approach. Objects and materials from past activities are the focus of our interpretation; the elements, shapes, and distributions have been taken as style, as culture. But this approach alone is not sufficient to understand style and one cannot use the same approach for all questions. Style is also ideas, intentions, and perceptions. Because these are highly variable, polysemic, and ambivalent, there are many possible styles for objects and actions.

Any specific stylistic analysis must therefore outline the styles involved and must provide support for the choices. This area has become the locus of much debate in interpretation. These are the “qualities” of Schapiro’s definition. Involving all three of Schapiro’s dimensions in an analysis forces the archaeologist beyond material analysis. This is one tension that makes a style hard to define and hard to use.

Most would agree that, at its most delimited and fundamental level, style is some sort of a “formal statement of the particular ways in which different artifacts are similar to each other” (Davis 1986c: 124). This would be a stylistic description which – as Davis goes on to point out – in and of itself says nothing about sources of variation, rates or kinds of change, nor about history, society, meaning, use, or culture. In order to make any further statements about variation, causality, rate, or direction of change, or about any correlations so that style may be used as an archaeological descriptive or as an historical “tool,” archaeologists must draw upon a wide range of further assumptions. Any general or inclusive theory of style must include these assumptions and any archaeological *use* of style necessarily goes beyond the formal statement and invokes various further assumptions that may or may not be made explicit by the analyst. If only because the range of these assumptions can be so great, and if only because the use of stylistic descriptions in the service of these assumptions can be so ampliative, it is hard to imagine how there could be any single, general, comprehensive theory of style.

In his critique of the emergence of a “symbolic anthropology,” Spiro (1969) made a point that may be applicable to any attempts to formulate an inclusive theory of style for archaeologists. As he saw how widely and, to him, how loosely the term “symbolic” was being used, and how so many events, behaviors, or objects were being considered “symbolic,” Spiro suggested that this “new” symbolic anthropology was little more than a revitalization movement for cultural anthropology, and that symbolism was being used so inclusively that it was not much different from “culture.” Any general theory of style that is so inclusive as to cover the range of assumptions noted above (and perhaps more) may also be not much different from a general notion of culture.

We have come to think that if only a single, unified

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theory of style could be agreed upon, with a specific set of stages and procedures for analysis and interpretation, then we could answer most archaeological questions more easily and with much agreement. But there is not nor will there be a theory or method to “capture” style. We should not concern ourselves with trying to define a concept of style or with specifying *one* way to do stylistic analysis.

The use of style must remain flexible *and* problematical. It will also remain ambiguous and underdetermined. Archaeologists will have to accept both ambiguity and the relatively underdetermined nature of our archaeological inferences.

To abandon the hope for a unified theory of style does not necessarily deny that there can be a conceptual and analytical unity to the *use* of style in archaeology. In the concluding chapter of this volume, Wiessner suggests that many of the ways in which she and others have been “defining” and using style are not disparate but complementary. She suggests that there are some fundamental features of style that *we can agree on* and that could structure our use of style in analysis and interpretation.

However, these features may only be applicable in certain contexts and with certain kinds of archaeological materials, and Wiessner herself gives these features much more universality than we would. She does not, however, propose her views as a unified general theory of style that can transcend context and analyst; rather she proposes a consensual base of understanding that, we would argue, must be situational or contextual to be efficacious.

On the uses of style in archaeology

Perhaps most of the tension in the archaeological uses of style derives from the very nature of what archaeological research is all about. By definition, we are analysts, and we are trying to “make sense” out of cultural materials and cultural representations that are no longer enmeshed in their former context. As analysts, we use style as a “tool” to help us make sense out of the materials and out of the past. Often, style can be used in a passive way to serve as a mirror that reflects to us certain ideas or characteristics about the past.

But while there is this analytical, “outsider’s” view, where style in material objects is used *by us* to write prehistory, there is also the perspective that there were active human beings who thought up, made, used, re-used and often discarded that which we have as archaeological materials. For these past human actors, there were styles of making, of using, of knowing, and ever-changing contexts that these styles derived from and defined. As archaeologists, we often claim that we want to “get at” these active uses of style by prehistoric peoples, yet in the process of trying to access these, we all too easily slide into the “outsider’s” role, where style becomes *our* analytical tool. Some archaeologists have taken an explicit stand on this, preferring, for example, to use style in archaeological research only as an analytical tool that tells us

about such things as society or ethnicity in the past (see Sackett, chapter 4, this volume).

The most problematic way in which this tension is manifest is when archaeologists unwittingly slip back and forth between these two postures: from seeking clues as to the meanings of and contexts in which the styles of cultural materials were “at work” in that culture, to the manipulation of attributes or patterns in these materials as measures of certain cultural phenomena that we want the styles to “reveal” to us. There is no way to eliminate the analytical, “outsider’s” posture, but the tension between what the materials were about in the past and what we have made them out to be in the present can be mediated somewhat by a more self-aware perspective on our archaeological practice (e.g., Shanks and Tilley 1987).

This slippage between the two “faces” of style as it is used in archaeology is certainly a source of tension but it is also a source of dynamism. There is no doubt that the two perspectives on what style is (a tool to us; a potential source of meaning to prehistoric peoples) are part of, are embedded in, and define wider debates and tensions in archaeological theory and method. The cultural materials are simultaneously artifacts/tools and texts (Derrida 1974).

Some historical observations

There has been a sequence of alternative perspectives on what style is about and what, therefore, it can tell us about the past. Although many of these perspectives are reviewed in more detail in chapter 2, by Conkey (as well as in less detail in other chapters), a brief review here will serve as a reminder that there has been a diversity in the uses of style, even when archaeologists have agreed, for example, that style is formal variation, or that style is communication. There are many ways we could categorize the predominant views on style of the last two decades; this diversity is striking in contrast to the agreed-upon use of style by the culture historians prior to the 1960s.

To culture historians (e.g., Krieger 1944) style was in the service of chronology and the typologies that were developed were explicitly time-sensitive. Here, as Sauerländer describes it for art history, “stilus” (style) and “chronos” (time) intersect. Certainly Gadamer’s observation – on style as a self-evident concept upon which historical consciousness is based – applies to the archaeological practice of the culture-historical “school.” And yet we are still working with the results created by this approach, despite all the impact of successive waves of theoretical “earthquakes” since the 1960s.

We still depend upon the products of the culture-history approach and its concept and use of style. Foremost among these products are the divisions of the past into named spatial and temporal units, the definitions of archaeological “cultures,” and above all, what follows from these, namely, the very unquestioned periodizations (e.g., the Neolithic) that are based on and thus privilege certain tools, technologies, “styles” of ceramics or of other materials.

Any overview of alternative uses of style since the mid-1960s, with the advent of the New Archaeology, would certainly include the following: there were those uses that saw style as a “measure” in the service of defining bounded spatial and temporal distributions; style was an analytical tool of the archaeologist (e.g., Whallon 1968). At first, it was an analytical tool that could be used explicitly to locate social units and to chart changes in those units (e.g., Deetz 1965). Then came a concern for style as a measure of more specific social processes, especially social interaction and social exchange (see Plog 1978 for a review).

Style has always been seen as formal variation but there is debate as to what that formal variation refers to or derives from. In the mid-1970s, style was both formal variation and communication; it was about information exchange and about the establishment and maintenance of social boundaries (Wobst 1977). There was debate over the relation between style and function, and style came to take on communication as one of its functions. There was also the idea that style was no longer the residual that “we” could find once we had identified the function of an object (Wobst 1977; Sackett 1982). This had been the view promoted by the partitive approach of the New Archaeology, especially as charted out by Binford (1965) and as guided by the hope that we could “isolate” relevant variables.

With the 1970s development of the notion that style had a function, and that style could be thought of as formal variation that referred to processes of information exchange, there was more possibility for understanding the active aspect of style. Although early attempts at using style in this way produced quite functionalist interpretations, where style was assumed to be “adaptive” (e.g., Conkey 1978a), further analyses have suggested how, in some cases, a materialist view on the uses of style *in* past societies – as a means for political manipulation, for example – can be put to work (see Earle, chapter 8, this volume).

And, despite the strong proclamations against a normativist conception of archaeological materials that were launched in the 1960s (e.g., Binford 1965), it is perhaps not surprising that “style as a way of doing” has recently

re-surfaced (see Wiessner, chapter 10, this volume). But this view on style is more complex than a passive normativism; a close reading of Hodder (chapter 5, this volume) and Wiessner (chapter 10, this volume) illustrates how two analyses, starting from some similar fundamental assumptions – style as a way of doing – reach very different, if not incompatible, concepts of style. Wiessner’s view retains some functionalism – style as social communication. Hodder’s view retains some passive aspects – style involves the relational referral of an individual event to a general way of doing. Style as more than a way of doing is a view that holds style and material culture to be part of the means by which humans make sense of their world and with which cultural meanings are always in production.

On the chapters in this volume

There are nine chapters here that cover a range of theoretical positions and methodological approaches to the uses of style in archaeology. Although there are two possible sections to the volume, we have chosen not to make an organizational division. The first chapters are obviously more theoretical and historical in scope and intent; the later chapters are obviously more about specific attempts to use style with specific archaeological or ethnoarchaeological materials. The final chapter by Polly Wiessner was designed as an overview paper, and she does draw upon most of the chapters in the volume, especially the latter group, but in doing so, she uses them to present her own views and to make a case for a consensual and unified approach to style.

This volume on style does not take a particular stand or present a set of papers that will reinforce any particular programmatic for the uses of style in archaeology. It is not intended as a manifesto. The conference that provided the basis for the volume (see the Preface) was intended to survey the field, and to take in a fuller spectrum. Because there is no one way to view an artifact, a site, or a human culture, issues of style will remain fundamental in all archaeological research. As in all of archaeology, with more styles of archaeological research, there will be more uses of style in archaeology.

Chapter 2

Experimenting with style in archaeology: some historical and theoretical issues

Margaret W. Conkey

In the introduction to this chapter, the author points out that, after many years of critical thinking, archaeologists still continue to debate what style is and what its use may be in cultural interpretation. Towards this end, the chapter outlines the last century of American archaeology. In the historical outline, the author highlights the major issues that have prompted so much debate. She then turns to some analytical implications of these theoretical orientations. Through her analysis of the use of style in archaeology and in related disciplines, Conkey provides the reader with a presentation of how philosophers, art historians, critical theorists, ethnographers, and archaeologists have grappled with the study of material culture. Ultimately, the issue revolves around the concept of culture and the place of materials and material culture in the anthropological study of human culture.

Introduction

More than ever, archaeologists are grappling with the concept, the theory, and the uses of style in archaeological analysis and interpretation. This is not only healthy but provocative. This chapter is an attempt to probe the underside of the archaeological study of style by assessing our intellectual history of the past two decades, and by exploring some emergent theoretical issues relevant to the use of style in archaeology. Thus, in favor of intellectual history and theoretical issues, this chapter will *not* address measures of style, nor provide an analysis of style or predictive models of style, which can be found elsewhere in this volume.

Archaeologists have always been concerned with

identifying and interpreting similarities, differences, homogeneity, and heterogeneity among the artifacts and cultural products of the human past. According to Dunnell's account of the past fifty years of American archaeology (1986; see also 1982), it was during the culture-history phase – which has predominated throughout the twentieth century, up until the late 1960s – that the archaeological record itself came to be described primarily in terms of styles. The kind of style that was being employed was one that aimed to find homologous similarities. These similarities, and the resultant definition of “types,” were in the service of chronologies, which were the agreed-upon goal of culture-historical archaeology. “No effort was made to explain why stylistic types displayed the distributions in time and space that proved so useful. That they did was enough” (Dunnell 1986: 32).

The use of style became a more explicit and discussed method of archaeological inquiry with the methodological program of the New Archaeology in the 1960s.¹ The definition of styles was no longer confined to the identification of “types,” and new kinds of stylistic analysis have become prominent and privileged endeavors in the archaeological research of the past two decades. There are at least two general reasons for the elevation of certain kinds of stylistic studies.

First, if one accepts Dunnell's characterization (1986) of the New Archaeology as having shifted the search from homologous similarities to analogous similarities, then one

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could make the case that new conceptions and uses of style were not only necessary but perhaps central to the new task of making analogical inferences. These inferences, it was hoped, would (to paraphrase Flannery 1967) reveal the adaptive cultural system – rather than the Indian or the cultural norms – behind the artifact. Secondly, the early and very compelling first case studies in New Archaeology (e.g., Deetz 1965; Hill 1966, 1970; Longacre 1963) all employed a concept of style and an explicitly stylistic analysis as the central method to render analogous inferences about prehistoric social life.

Since then, a variety of explicit conceptual frameworks for the study of style have been proposed and tried out. In retrospect, these varying approaches since the 1960s (e.g., Conkey 1978a; Sackett 1982; Wiessner 1983, 1984; Wobst 1977) seem to have been presented to us as contrastive or as replacements for previous approaches. We seem to have tried one, then another alternative approach, suggesting each time how the current view supersedes the earlier approach and corrects for what appear to have been its weaknesses. To a great extent, this has promoted an either/or perspective on stylistic analysis: one should adopt either one approach or another, often regardless of context or data.

Thus, it is not surprising that there appears to be a typology for the study of style. Each new perspective is identified with its own tenets and advantages, and is presented after a review of preceding approaches. For example, the debut of the “isochrestic” approach (Sackett 1982) is accomplished following an intellectual history that charts each of its conceptual ancestors. As with many typologies, we have named the differing approaches with labels that are not immediately understood, such as “iconological” or “isochrestic.”

There may be another reason why the recent history of the study of style appears to be typological. There is little doubt that archaeologists have always thought style to be a grand concept, one that has explanatory value in and of itself; and yet it is also “elusive” (DeBoer and Moore 1982: 147). As archaeologists we have tried to grasp the concept of style in a way that we know best from all of our archaeological work – by typing it and by classifying it. Although we often refer to the various conceptual frameworks as different dimensions or different approaches, we have tended to treat them as mutually exclusive. There are at least two immediate problems that result from this.

First, the studies and assumptions that one of us might consider under a given approach – e.g., the iconological – are not necessarily the same as those that someone else might include. As a result, we may not be working with a common vocabulary nor with a set of shared understandings, which makes communication and, above all, evaluation difficult. Second, because the literature has presented various approaches as named “types” of stylistic analysis (e.g., in S. Plog 1980), students all too often take these types as givens and as starting points for sorting out how to do stylistic analysis, rather than going back to original papers and studies, looking

for continuities, and deciding for themselves what is involved in various approaches and perspectives. Often these approaches are individualized and associated with specific researchers or proponents, which has led in some instances to critiques that are more *ad hominem* than substantive (e.g., Binford 1986; Sackett 1986a).

These aspects of the study of style have structured our perception of its recent history, which appears to be one of contrastive types of stylistic analysis, each one expanding upon, if not replacing, what had been widely held. Although this view of our history – as a linear sequence of approaches to style – may have insulated us, until recently, from serious confrontation with why and how we study style, I would argue that two fundamental and related theoretical challenges are the more important factors in accounting for our current encounters and engagement with style.

The first challenge is that posed by developments in critical and social theory (e.g., Leone, Potter and Shackel 1987; Wylie 1985a), which demand that archaeologists confront not only history and context but also our predominantly naive and simplistic notions about human social formations and groups. This challenge is particularly relevant in the archaeological study of style because if there is any one thing we have had in the back of our minds for the use of stylistic analyses, it has been to find or to reveal social units or specific historical entities.

The second challenge is to become more intensely concerned and knowledgeable about design theory and artifact production systems: that is, what processes bring forms and all material culture – from endscrapers to landscapes – into existence in the first place. Although there are many other reasons (some of which will be argued in the concluding sections of this chapter), minimally we need to study design and production processes because at the base of any stylistic analysis lie assumptions about how to provide stylistic descriptions for the materials we study. For example, we may employ formal analysis (e.g., Washburn 1977) or iconographic analysis (e.g., Donnan 1978). An anthropological and archaeological knowledge of production may be one of the few ways in which we can confirm, on independent grounds, the very “measures” we have assumed to be relevant and valid for providing stylistic descriptions (see Davis, chapter 3, this volume).

These introductory observations are only some outlines of the current state of the study of style. Given these, the discussion to follow has two goals: (1) to provide an historical account of the study of style over the past two decades, which will try to avoid the typological and linear characterization in favor of one that can elucidate continuities and probe the agendas of stylistic analysis; and (2) to outline some conceptual expansions of the past few years that signal that there could be an emergent reconsideration of why and how we use style in archaeological inquiry.

The intent here is not to propose yet another concept of style; rather, it is to rethink how we have used style and what

we think we are doing in our interpretations of the past. The very word “style” has perhaps been more of a barrier than a facilitator to our understanding of humans and material culture. With the many definitions that we have paraded before ourselves, it is no wonder that style has been considered “elusive,” “intractable,” “multifaceted,” and a veritable “black box.” What we have lumped together and labelled as “style” may have these characteristics, but they are not inherent in the label “style,” just as style itself is not inherent in artifacts or behavior. The word “style,” like the rest of language, works by difference, and we certainly have used the study of style as our *access to difference*. Style, as a term (which itself is derived from a descriptor of writing, “stilus” [see Sauerländer 1983]) – like the rest of language – is not just a medium for description but a medium of social practice (see Hodder, chapter 5, this volume). But the emphasis on the definitions of “style” has led to more concern with what style is or is not at the expense of inquiry into “why style?” and “how style?”

Some cultural factors

Most of the following sections are devoted to tracing the study of style within the context of American anthropological archaeology. But first I would like to inject a few notions drawn from analyses of wider social and intellectual contexts within which anthropology has been situated. These notions *may* have something to do with how the archaeological study of style has emerged as a prominent concern. Historians of western culture have charted the emergence and elaboration of – and now decline, or least reaction to – “modernism,” which came in with the social, political, and technological revolutions of the twentieth century (Burgin 1986; Jameson 1984). The rise of Americanist archaeology (Sabloff and Willey 1980) certainly coincides with modernism, and two aspects attributed to modernism seem intriguing and relevant to an inquiry into the history of the use of style in archaeology.

First, it seems that the very idea of style as an entity, and of style as a unique and personal phenomenon that can be linked to a centered subject has been a central feature of modernist thought,² and one that has influenced all sorts of cultural practices of the twentieth century: music, architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, etc. This is not the place to elaborate on how this emphasis on “unique style” has been manifest in cultural production (see, e.g., Jameson 1984; Burgin 1986; Williams 1961), but an emphasis on style analysis in all these domains (sculpture, literature, even in archaeology) can be seen as part of the predominant *visualist* ideology of modernism (Ong 1967, 1977). This ideology has emphasized not only that knowledge can be described, compared, classified, and generalized, but also that ways of knowing are visually rooted. For example, when one comes to understand an idea, the usual response is “I *see* what you mean.”

Second, the archaeological emphasis on style can also be seen as an example of what Derrida (e.g., 1974) has referred to as “logocentrism,” another characteristic feature of modernist

thought. He coined this word, claims Burgin, to refer to “our tendency to refer all questions of meaning of ‘representations’” – e.g., novels, films, paintings, even artifacts or archaeological features – “to a singular founding presence which is imagined to be ‘behind’ them, whether it be ‘author’, ‘reality’, ‘history’, ‘zeitgeist’, ‘structure’, or whatever” (Burgin 1986: 32).³ In stylistic studies, logocentrism is at work when the meaning of an artifact is referred to its “style,” when the style of an artifact is referred to its (social) “group.”

These ways of thinking (visualist, logocentric) should be investigated not merely out of historical interest, but because they still affect the way we talk and think; they are endemic throughout western history (Burgin 1986; Gombrich 1972). Since this kind of thinking underlies the archaeological study of artifacts and other cultural productions, it is no wonder that archaeological practitioners have themselves often mused about the reification of style, how it may be an instance of Whitehead’s “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (Sackett: personal communication) or, more strongly, as Davis notes (chapter 3, this volume: 23): “without style we have nothing to talk about, no problem to solve.”⁴

One historical path

The history of inquiry into style is historical.⁵ What the earlier studies did should be viewed in their own context, only some of which I can account for here. When we find the approaches pursued one or more decades ago to be inadequate or underdetermined, this is because we are now neither asking the same questions nor conceiving of the archaeological record in the same way. The alternatives drawn upon by previous workers to account for their materials and styles, those that they ruled out, and those that they felt they could support are different from the alternatives we now work with (David P. Braun: personal communication). Thus, this account is not intended to dismiss past uses of style because we have developed “better” ones; we are developing different ones, drawing upon different conceptions of the record, considering different alternatives, and for different intellectual and sociopolitical purposes.

One intellectual thread running through this historical account of the uses of style in archaeology involves the idea that the analysis of pattern(s) came to be a central concern of archaeology. One simplistic view of the post-evolutionary twentieth-century anthropology – in which the archaeological study of style has been situated – suggests that archaeological research and social anthropology diverged from each other in several ways. An early divergence is placed with the well-known reaction against early evolutionism and the peripheralization of objects and material culture within ethnography and social anthropology. A second divergence comes in the 1960s when the “New Archaeology” leans towards Leslie White’s evolutionary and systematic view (White 1959) on culture and artifacts in human life (see Keesing 1974 for a general review of this and other views on culture). Although I will take quite a few paragraphs to develop the historical

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implications, one result has been the primacy of pattern-recognition and the reverence of the (archaeological) object in archaeological research.

Earlier approaches

As Miller (1983) has insightfully suggested (and develops further than I will here), the relationship of twentieth-century anthropology to the culture being studied was to be a direct relationship that was mediated through language – ethnographic fieldwork, informant interviews, etc. – and not through objects. Miller suggests that cultural objects – masks, spears, bows-and-arrows – *had* been a central vehicle through which the nineteenth-century evolutionists (e.g., Tylor 1865) encountered and classified the non-western world. These objects could “stand for” certain groups, certain cultural roles, and certain stages of cultural development. Even though the objects in anthropology began by “standing for” or being symbolic of the peoples we wanted to study, objects – and the study of material culture – were, as Miller (1983) suggests, peripheralized in the twentieth-century ethnographic endeavor.

In archaeology, the peoples we wanted to study – such as the Hohokam, the Maya, the Aurignacians – became *labels* for artifacts that, in turn, have monopolized our attention. The objects-as-artifacts, and the patterns among and between them, became the immediate subjects of our inquiry. The artifacts became the objects of our scientific inquiry *and* the objects of our knowledge (which are not always isomorphic [Tagg 1985]).

This conflation of the objects of inquiry with objects of knowledge is particularly apparent when, on the one hand, the artifact styles or assemblages were equated with social/historical entities (e.g., the “red-on-buff culture” [Gladwin and Gladwin 1935]), or, on the other hand, the artifact takes on an autonomous role to the point that the spread or change in artifacts alone appears to cause cultural changes. Such is the case in the anthropomorphizing of artifacts, which have been portrayed as capable of breeding and diffusing on their own (see Gruber 1986; Sackett 1983).

Burgin (1986), among others, suggests deep roots for the writing of art history as a history of objects, which can be extended to archaeology: ever since the commodity connoisseurship of the Renaissance the idea of art as object has been a core concept. We have internalized this idea such that, even in prehistoric/archaeological contexts, when we talk about cultural production it is the production of objects, of materials.⁶ The practice of culture in the past is both limited to and equated with the production of cultural materials – ceramics, stone tools, and all the things we investigate for style. This practice-as-production was thus defined as an artisanal activity: “a process of crafting [fine] objects in a given medium” (Burgin 1986: 39). Thus what we, in turn, produce in our archaeological narratives is a history of objects and a decontextualized notion of artisanal activities: stone tool-making, basketmakers. There are, however, other histories to be written and other views on these cultural practices.

During most of the twentieth century (up until the late

1960s), culture-history has been the dominant sense-making model for archaeology (Dunnell 1982). The archaeological record came to be described primarily in terms of styles, and the definition of artifact types was based on styles (e.g., Krieger 1944). Furthermore, as Dunnell suggests, given the archaeological record described in this way, and given that the kind of style being used was one designed to record homologous similarities, the only process that could explain the record as it had been conceptualized and described are “processes that explained homologous similarities: diffusion, trade, persistence, migration” (Dunnell 1986: 31).

To the culture-historian, style was to be used in the service of chronology. The significance of variation was that it would be a record of change: “it allowed the culture-historians to tell time” (Dunnell 1986: 31). Because artifact style was conceptualized as expressive – expressive of a maker’s mind, of a world view, of a historical entity – the use of style by culture-historians was a straightforward attempt to read history from style, to read history from stylistic description, and – as Sauerländer (1983) has suggested – “stilus” and “chronos” intersected. We have come to appreciate, however, that “expression is not the (only) cause of style,” even if expression could be easily identified with any well-defined historical entities (Davis, chapter 3, this volume: 24). Style, we have learned, is more than expression (more than time, more than history); but as conceived by most culture-historians, style-as-expressive was seen as the explanation for similarities among artifacts. In this view, style matters simply because it has explanatory value (see Davis, chapter 3, this volume: 23).⁷

From the rootedness of style inquiry in culture-history, and thus in the history of our archaeological practice, it is not surprising to see – despite subsequent reconceptualizations of the archaeological record and of the uses of style in archaeology – the persistence of attempts by archaeologists to try to account for “similarity-relations” that appear to obtain among artifacts and cultural products. As Davis (chapter 3, this volume) points out, we have remained “forever hopeful” that such similarity-relations may be taken as evidence for historical and cultural relatedness of artifacts – and, by extension, of their makers – so that we might read history, if not culture, from style.

Style and the New Archaeology

With the challenges of the “New Archaeology” to culture-history, the archaeological record came to be conceived in new ways; the kinds of style that archaeologists described were more oriented towards the recording of analogous, rather than homologous, similarities (see Dunnell 1982), and thus the *alternatives* being considered that might account for variation in the archaeological record are different from those considered by culture-historians. But as this New Archaeology emerged with a concept of culture-as-adaptive-system as its core guiding concept, a particular view of material culture and artifacts was to accompany the culture concept – a view that would strongly influence the concept and especially the use of style in

archaeological inquiry. This view would continue to emphasize the primacy of artifacts and of pattern-recognition as central to the new objective: the explanation of cultural processes (that was to replace the chronicling of culture-history).

There is no doubt that the cultural evolutionary views of Leslie White had a deep influence on the New Archaeology's concept of culture-as-adaptive-system (Binford 1965; Leone 1972). In these systemic views (of White and New Archaeologists), the artifacts made and used by humans were cultural products in the sense of being outputs of cultural and behavioral systems. Although material culture was certainly considered to have been used somehow in the now-extinct cultural systems, the participation or active role of artifacts was not the emphasis of inquiry; rather, material culture was more often thought about as adaptive components of a functioning cultural system.

Archaeological correlates for various cultural subsystems (e.g., technoenvironmental) or processes (e.g., population growth, urbanization) were expected to be identified. From the patterning of archaeological data, the "artisanal activities" – such as stone tool-making or basket-making – could not only be identified, but could be used to make analogical inferences about the functioning of these activities within the wider cultural system. In the vocabulary of the adaptive-systems approach, patterns in archaeological data could be treated as coded information about variability in and the functioning of past cultural systems.

Thus, stylistic – or any other – patternings in artifacts and archaeological materials were conceived of as cultural products that comprise codes for *us* to read. From this, it followed that there was a methodological emphasis on strategies for pattern-recognition, because the patterns are said to inform us about style, its spatiotemporal contexts, and its role in the cultural system. By implication, style is taken to be an inherent property of (certain) archaeological materials to be "discovered" by us. Sackett, for example, has been quite explicit about this: style is a passive aspect of material culture that *speaks to us* about such things as social groupings or ethnic geography. He has advocated viewing style from the "outside," as an analyst; he once stressed that his goal was to identify style rather than to explain it (Sackett 1977: 372; see also chapter 4, this volume).

The logic that has allowed us to accept the idea that artifact patterns are readable and can speak to us about the past in ways that culture-historians never thought possible involves at least three implicit assumptions. First, it has been assumed that variation in artifacts, including stylistic variation, can be considered *as if* it were a language; recall Miller's suggestion (1983) that language had become the acceptable anthropological medium for elucidating the "other." That is, patterning as language is a patterning that can be read, as if it were a language to be decoded or a text to be translated. Second, material culture traits are treated as products of extinct cultural systems more than as active participants produced and used by different human actors. As products of specific,

potentially identifiable cultural subsystems, artifacts are thus material correlates; as such, they *reflect* various sociocultural phenomena. If, as was postulated, artifact style is referable to the "social context of manufacture and use" of an item (Binford 1965: 208), once artifacts are characterized in terms of their stylistic patterns these patterns can be said to reflect certain sociocultural phenomena (such as ethnic groups or post-marital residence patterns) or certain stages in the evolution of cultural systems (such as craft-specialization or tribalization). Although, as will be discussed below, we have moved into new conceptual terrain from that of the New Archaeology, it is relevant here to discuss in more detail the analytical and interpretive implications of the approaches developed during the productive years of the New Archaeology.

Some analytical implications

One of the primary proposals of the New Archaeology to counter the skepticism and antiquarianism they perceived traditional archaeology to be (Wylie 1981) was the theoretical proposal that cultural phenomena must be understood in materialist (not mentalist) terms. And one of the unifying aspects of the New Archaeology was its insistence upon a testing program (a hypothetico-deductive strategy) that invited methodological elaborations in order to make compelling linking arguments between hypothetical statements about the past and the data that could inform on the past.

As is well known, what accompanied this methodological emphasis was a shift in the concept of culture to the adaptive-systems approach. The *analytical consequence* of this view was the notion that there were behavioral and thus material (i.e. archaeological) correlates to the different subsystems. As early as 1965, archaeologists were advised to "partition our observational fields" (Binford 1965: 207) in order to gain access to the different axes of variation in the archaeological record and, by extension, of the past cultural systems.

The Binfordian programatics of the early 1960s (e.g. Binford 1962, 1965) set a certain polemic tone and an advocacy style (Salmon 1982) for archaeological research. The directives called for eradicating one approach (normativist), and replacing it with another specific approach (the systemic). At the operational level – i.e., how to analyze the archaeological record – the directives were that we search for what Binford called "formal variability" (more properly, formal variation).⁸ Despite the attempt to eradicate normativism in archaeological analysis – e.g., the assumption that people held certain shared ideas about how to make and use artifacts – the call for the study of formal variation paradoxically advocated and stimulated the archaeological study of style – which had been a centerpiece of traditional archaeology – in the New Archaeology.

However, as Wobst (1977) points out, it was only *residual* formal variation that was stylistic: "formal variability that relates to the social contexts of manufacture and use *other than*

that related to function" (Binford 1965: 208, emphasis added). Despite Wobst's pertinent critique (1977) of this residual concept of style, he (and others, including myself [Conkey 1978a]) retained the phrase and the object of study – "formal variation." Thus Wobst's 1977 concept of style was stated to be "that formal variability that is related to the participation of artifacts in the processes of information exchange" (Wobst 1977: 321).

These concepts of style are characterized by considering formal variation *as if* it were equivalent to style.⁹ This was an appealing methodological way to deal with the complexity, "elusiveness" and mentalist (normative) aspects of style. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see what we missed by conceptualizing and using style and formal variation as equivalents, *as if* formal variation were style. For example, this tends to bypass the inquiry into the production processes that brought the formal variation into existence in the first place. Pattern-recognition studies were favored over those of pattern-generation. And, concomitant with this emphasis on patterns in the archaeological record as the immediate subjects of analysis, we too easily overlooked the contexts within which the variation arose, how the artifacts in question were used, and that they were part of the production of meaning to prehistoric peoples just as much as being a part of the way *we* produce meanings about the past. Although analogous similarities were sought through the study of style, the study of formal variation provided primarily *decontextualized* analogues for particular – especially social – aspects of human behavior.

Analytical priority, then, was given to the search for formal variation, and certain attributes of formal variation (e.g., non-functional ones such as painted designs on ceramics) became archaeological correlates of past behavior (e.g., stylistic behaviors operant in the social subsystems of artifact manufacture and use). What promoted this analytical priority of "formal variability"? Certainly the archaeological uses of style were embedded in the systematic concept of culture which, analytically, was subject to a methodological dissection into subsystems, each with its own archaeological correlates. Style was separated from function; the technological domain was separated from the social, and from the ideological (see note 8, below).

But above all, formal variation had analytical priority because it was perceived as a way to access social groupings or social units (such as post-marital residence units) that were thought to be reflected by patternings in the archaeological data. Thus we could "know" prehistoric social life, and the limits on interpretation imposed by traditional archaeology could be transcended. Social groups, social boundaries and social interactions were considered knowable and given considerable research priority; stylistic analysis and the use of style was in the service, not of chronologies, as with traditional archaeology, but of this version of social anthropology.

To view style as formal variation reinforced that long-standing belief (see above, page 8) in the production of cultural materials as artisanal activity, and the belief that style

is inherent in materials: if we just "partition our observational fields," that which is stylistic and which will inform on social contexts can be "discovered." We could do more than read a history of objects from style; we could read "group" from style. Style was necessarily the index or symptom of a social entity. These notions were part of an extremely optimistic and productive period of archaeological research.

Style, function, and communication

One of Binford's concerns (e.g., 1965) about normativism as an account for human behavior was its very logocentricity (although he did not use this term; see above, page 7). To normativists (as described by Binford 1965), the source of cultural behavior, including stylistic expression, was to be found in a single, undifferentiated source, which was ideas or norms about how to do things (for an original critique of normativism, see Aberle 1960). Although, as will be indicated below, normativism did not "go away," the sources for style in archaeological materials became increasingly more specific and processual aspects of human behavior: social interaction, social communication, social "marking," social comparison.

But certain aspects of normativism are retained, which is not, I would argue, a bad or naughty thing. To the extent that we recognize that style *is* a way of doing things and that there are parameters or limits on the design process, there is a normative component to anyone's concept of style. Certainly normativism took on a more active aspect in the 1970s. It was defined specifically as cultural processes, such as enculturation and acculturation. It also became more complex and less monolithic. For example, we recognized that there could be different *levels* of patternings because the contexts for learning or being exposed to "ways of doing things" could be varied – from the individual or household level to the regional (e.g., S. Plog 1980, 1983; in Flannery 1976; Lechtman 1977; Whallon 1968).

And, more than being enculturation or acculturation, style came to be defined as having a function, and one that was in the domain of cultural information and communication systems. There is an expanded approach to style here, which conceives of style as *more than* formal variation and *more than* a code to be deciphered by archaeologists about social contexts: style, decoration, and stylistic forms are viewed *as* communication, as social marking, as cultural signals at work in certain social contexts.

Style and communication

Yet when these concepts are used in archaeological analysis, it is usually from the perspective of style *as if* it were communication, *as if* it were social marking. This is only a subtle difference – between style *as* communication and style *as if* it were communication – but the latter usage has several important implications. First, the "as if" approach generates a certain kind of analysis in which a questionable literary metaphor is perpetuated. This metaphor promotes a methodological dependence upon "reading" the data and its