

STYLE IN THE ART THEORY OF EARLY MODERN ITALY

When Giorgio Vasari invented the new literary form of art history, he attempted the first definition of style because, he believed, style gave structure to history. Artists signaled, with style, essential information about themselves and their place in history: their character, their political alliances, their ideas about art. However, these signals, being visual and embedded in mimetic forms, were inherently ambiguous and divergently interpreted even by the most visually literate audiences. For Vasari, and for later art writers working in his shadow, style slipped through their verbal nets.

In this study, Philip Sohm explains the verbal strategies for defining style and why they usually met with failure. He explains discussions of style from Vasari to Baldinucci, showing the linguistic dimensions of visual perception and how concepts of language shaped ideas of style.

Philip Sohm is Professor of the History of Art at the University of Toronto. The author of *Pittoresco: Marco Boschini, His Critics, and Their Critiques of Painterly Brushwork in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Venice*, he has contributed to the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, *RES*, and *The Renaissance Quarterly*, among other publications.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I didn't intend to write this book. Much like my previous one, *Pittoresco*, it stuttered into existence accidentally as I tried to map the linguistic world of early modern art critics. The reader of this book can glimpse that imagined book buried in various sections, such as "Misprision by Nomenclature" (in Chapter 5) and "Lexical Fields" (in Chapter 7), where I argue that a writer's concept of style is contained in (and limited by) his or her particular vocabularies. I had intended to show, for example, how a critic who admires depictions of moving figures might supplement the standard artistic lexicon with terms borrowed from treatises on dance, comportment, and horsemanship. Several years ago, however, as I prepared to write just such a book during a research leave at the Institute for Advanced Study, I tried to explain it to my colleagues there. What became distressingly clear was that a book on stylistic terminology could not be written without first broaching the subject of style itself. This proved more difficult and fascinating than I had anticipated and somehow led to this book on the competing concepts of style.

At the Institute for Advanced Study, Nicholas Adams, Noberto Gramaccini, Jack Greenstein, Irving Lavin, Marilyn Lavin, and Alessandro Nova were especially helpful as I turned to the substance of style instead of just its accidental properties. Their tolerance in listening to my inchoate thoughts, as well as their comments on my lectures and writing, proved to be of enduring importance. I have been similarly fortunate at the University of Toronto in having a brilliant group of colleagues working on Renaissance and Baroque art and architecture: McAllister Johnson, Matt Kavaler, Michael Koortbojian, Evonne Levy, Alex Nagel, and Alina Payne. Sometimes without knowing it, by challenging me with their own work, and sometimes by patiently commenting on my own, they encouraged me to question my own certainties.

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