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Philip Sohm, *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 327 pp., 21 black-and-white illus., $85 US.

Sharon Gregory

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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ries, activities or services, raising money for intangibles remains difficult, despite persistent indications that operating budgets for museums and other cultural institutions will be cut first by governments when the tax base shrinks.

A Museum on the Verge confirms what is common knowledge. Abt's long-term study allows readers to see the same financial dilemma appear and reappear, to hear their own arguments for increased arts funding, and to marvel at how easy it is to avoid creating alternative approaches to museum financing. What Abt is not able to explain fully is why, despite comparisons by its Director to the disparity in the size of endowment funds at other American museums as early as 1948, the DIA could not resolve the problem. By 1998, the DIA's endowment was $40 million: the Cleveland Museum of Art's endowment was $330 million. Although Abt introduces sociologist Paul DiMaggio's thesis of submuseums with their own agendas within the larger institution as the reason for the lack of a "coherent core of undivided purpose that economists call a 'utility function' " in the introduction (p. 26), by the end of the book, this argument gets lost. It also seems an inadequate explanation for a century of operating budget crises at this one institution. Abt does not mention at all the possibility of deaccessioning, tricky as the concept is, as a means of raising money for an endowment or as leverage in a fund-raising campaign. Given the DIA's current cash predicament and recent art market prices, the sale of a few major works, the DIA's capital, would provide a nice nest egg. Then again, producing sufficient or dependable income from that nest egg might be very difficult in today's investment climate.

The implications of Abt's analysis are chilling for Canadian art museums. The majority are government funded for operating purposes. Like their counterparts in the United States, thanks to private money, most have increased their physical plant, collections and exhibition programmes in the past twenty years, but operating cost budgets have not kept pace. In Canada, we are just beginning to understand the need for extensive private patronage exclusively for operating costs. For example, it is only within the last five years that the Foundation of the National Gallery of Canada has begun to raise money for an endowment and to solicit funds for projects unrelated to capital bequests or special events. We can only wish our art museums fortitude, good fortune and wise investment strategies in this endeavour.

Reesa Greenberg
Montréal, Québec

Philip Sohm, *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 327 pp., 21 black-and-white illus., $85 US.

Philip Sohm's *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy* is an important new book that helps to illuminate the origins of the descriptive vocabulary of artistic style in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Art historians are inclined to take the idea of style for granted: we rely on the notion of artistic style to classify and attribute works of art to individual artists and to periods and regions. But, as Sohm points out in his witty introduction, the word "style" itself is a slippery one, "a term of convenience with no stable meaning beyond the one that a writer wants to give it for some strategic purpose" (p. 1). The inadequacies of language to describe works of art, and the style thereof, has caused frustration and unease in recent years, to the extent that at least one well-known art historian has envisioned a history of art freed of the terminology of style altogether.[1] For Sohm, the very semantic mutability of style is what makes it so compellingly rich: a site of "receptive ground onto which writers [can] project their personal views" (p. 3). His aim is to show, with the aid of twentieth-century theories of language, how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers developed definitions of style as a means of establishing their own allegiances (personal, social or regional); how the writers' agendas imposed meaning on style; and how their definitions revolved around unstable and fluid semantic boundaries.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, "Style and Language", Sohm sets out the linguistic framework and boundaries of his investigation of the vocabulary of style. He begins in his first chapter with a discussion of debates over style in the seventeenth century, when critics argued extensively about what constituted the correct or supra-style, and polemicized the numerous deviations from the true path as signs of moral and social corruption. He aims to show ways in which style was made to embody philosophical, personal or political values, through the use of highly charged terms related to gender and national or personal character. As he argues, one of the benefits of the endless debates and style mania of the Seicento was that critics became increasingly sophisticated in their description of style. Giorgio Vasari, writing in the mid-sixteenth century, used over half of the 200 stylistic adjectives Sohm has compiled in his Appendix, but after that few new ones were added until the seventeenth century, when the adjectives used nearly doubled.

In his second chapter, Sohm begins to engage more closely with the problem of how language captures, or attempts to capture, artistic style. Because language refers in the first instance to language itself, and only secondly to its subject, he argues that it is necessary to examine the literary preconditions,

the linguistic structures that constrain the critic. For example, while Giovanni Pietro Bellori believed himself to be writing about works of art in a plain and transparent style, devoid of metaphorical embellishments, recent studies have indicated that his literary style is full of elaborate rhetorical conceits and digressions. As Sohm shows, the most frequent writers about style were actually artists themselves, who had access to "shop-talk" or insider's knowledge, and so tended to describe artworks with a well-developed technical vocabulary, one which was sometimes rather opaque to the layman. However, Sohm argues that all writers about style were constrained by the reliance upon binaries (such as *ars*, an overarching theoretical model or code, versus *ingenium*, the artist's own individual talent or inventiveness that deviates from the code) and upon the ambiguity of metaphor.

In Part II, "Definitions of Style", Sohm engages directly with definitions of style provided by four critics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Giorgio Vasari, Nicolas Poussin, Marco Boschini and Filippo Baldinucci. He argues that, because each author relied on a different theoretical or literary tradition, and because each narrowly defined style itself in terms of his own favourite style, they were unable to reach a consensus about style. For Sohm, their varying literary strategies signal the inherent instability of style, despite their determination to stabilize or fix the notion of style. This is the most important section of the book, and on the whole it is highly informative. His discussion in Chapter Seven of the methodology of Baldinucci's 1681 *Vocabolario Toscano dell'arte del disegno* is especially illuminating (pp. 176–84), as is his analysis of Baldinucci's underlying political motivation for writing the dictionary. Sohm convincingly argues that Baldinucci's definition of style (*maniera*), as a mode of working by artists which restrains them, preventing them from accurately copying nature or freely manipulating their own personal styles, was underpinned by his need to prove that his profession (connoisseurship) was based on a firm footing. The fourteen different styles that he defines seem also to have been intended to show that style was primarily a curatorial tool for attribution and classification.

Also very interesting is Sohm's discussion of Nicolas Poussin in Chapter Five. Poussin borrowed from the historian Agostino Mascardi a distinction between *maniera* as a normative style of shared cultural tendencies, and *stile* as an individual artist's talent or style; however, Sohm argues that while Mascardi privileged *stile* (talent for him dominates art), Poussin inverted Mascardi's argument by suppressing individual style. Poussin's articulation of this distinction was, Sohm suggests, an important development, but unfortunately it was largely ignored by later critics. He also argues that Poussin's theory of pictorial modes empowers artists "to choose and manipulate their own styles" (p. 142) and that the modes are a fundamental departure from the preferred contemporary definition of styles according to primarily regional criteria.

The chapter on Marco Boschini is an interesting follow-up to Sohm's earlier book *Pittoresco: Marco Boschini, His Critics and Their Critiques of Painterly Brushwork in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Venice* (Cambridge and New York, 1991). The chapter contains an extended discussion of the discourse on the *macchia*, the notion of sketchy brushwork which for Boschini defined style in painting. Sohm argues that Boschini is unique amongst the four critics whose definitions of style he discusses in acknowledging and indeed emphasizing the role played in style by the artist's hand, rather than privileging intellect, judgement or taste.

This second part of Sohm's book begins with a chapter on Giorgio Vasari. He is correct to insist that Vasari was the first writer on art to realize that art history was "a separate literary genre with its own unique textual and historical demands" (p. 86). As is well known, Vasari's *Lives* are mainly a series of biographies of artists from Cimabue in the thirteenth century up to the mid-Cinquecento, set into a historical framework that the author lays out in three prefaces.[2] The prefaces divide the history of Italian art into three periods, corresponding roughly to the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; Vasari sees art consistently improving in stages during this time frame. Vasari discusses style (or *maniera*) throughout the *Lives*, but Sohm believes that his definition of general style is to be found in the prefaces, especially the Preface to Part Three, which mediates between the Quattrocento and the Cinquecento, and that the biographies are instead concerned with individual artists' styles (p. 87). This assumption, and the conclusions Sohm comes to about Vasari's definition of style, seem to me somewhat problematical.

Vasari begins his third preface by outlining five "things"(*cose*) – *regola*, *ordine*, *misura*, *disegno* and *maniera* (rule, order, proportion, design/drawing and style) – that artists of the Quattrocento contributed to art, and which helped enable later artists to achieve perfection. Sohm makes some highly interesting observations about this passage, for example connecting its terms of reference convincingly to a similar list of six terms provided by Vitruvius. I am less convinced by his proposal of an especially close association of Vasari's list with that found in Agnolo Firenzuola's 1548 treatise on female beauty (*Dialogo della bellezza delle donne, intitolato Celso*), although admittedly it may have been a source for him.[3] Firenzuola closes his discussion of grace and charm by saying that no movement should be without "*regola*, *modo*, *misura*, *disegno*", and Sohm asserts that these qualities "are virtually those terms presented in exactly this order by Vasari to describe the five parts of beauty" (p. 101). However, it should be noted that Vasari does not profess to be describing the "five parts of beauty", a claim that would help to

support the connection with Firenzuola, but rather five things or qualities that helped art progress.

Vasari's passage certainly emphasizes beauty. He concludes that "style then became more beautiful, because it used the frequent copying of the most beautiful things, and by combining the most beautiful parts, whether hands or heads or bodies or legs, then produced a figure with all possible beauties, putting them to use in each work for all the figures; this is what is known as a beautiful style".[4] Sohm is apparently the first scholar to seize on the fact that Vasari uses the past tense throughout this entire passage, while English translators have always rendered it in the present tense. As he says, this means Vasari recognized that style has a relative value, which can be redefined to fit changing artistic practices – that the theory of style was itself subject to historical change (p. 106). But, according to Sohm, Vasari's definition of style is all indirection. It defines only what style was for the Quattrocento: "Style *was* design and imitation, but he does not tell us directly what it is now" (p. 108). Sohm correctly observes that Vasari goes on to say that the qualities Quattrocento artists lacked, but modern artists had, were license to alter proportions and grace. Sohm believes that this emphasis on license, and rejection of proportion, is further proof that Vasari structured his analysis on Firenzuola, who also suggested that beauty is a transcendent quality outside the bounds of measure (p. 110).

I have a few comments to make about this part of Sohm's analysis. First, I am not sure that he has added much to our understanding of what this passage actually means. Vasari clearly states that the five things he describes were qualities added to art and architecture by Quattrocento artists, and that Cinquecento artists in turn added license and grace (as well as finish, boldness and copiousness of detail). The importance of license for the Cinquecento, and Vasari's emphasis on it, has been amply discussed by David Summers, Patricia Rubin and Robert Williams.[5] Second, Vasari need not have read Firenzuola to find arguments rejecting measure and the rule of proportion, for Michelangelo seems regularly to have argued in favour of license. As Vasari records, Michelangelo claimed "it is necessary to have the compasses in the eyes and not in the hand, for the hands work but the eye judges".[6] Finally, I think Sohm errs in believing that Vasari is attempting to define "style" *per se*, and that he restricts his definition to a past style. Rather, he is defining what he believes constitutes a fine or beautiful style. His conception of a fine style as based on selective imitation is not restricted to the fifteenth century but holds true for the sixteenth, as well. Vasari reinforces this point in several artists' biographies. For example, he tells us that Michelangelo "greatly loved human beauty for the sake of imitation in art, being able to select from what was beautiful the most beautiful, for without this imitation one cannot make something perfect".[7] The importance of selective imitation is emphasized again in the Life of Titian, where Vasari asserts that "whoever has not drawn enough and studied select ancient and modern works cannot do well by skill alone, nor enhance the things he copies from life, in order to give them that grace and perfection that art adds to nature, as nature usually produces some parts that are not beautiful".[8] Vasari makes no claim to be a theoretically rigorous author (Sohm acknowledges this), and the *Lives* are not altogether logically structured. Therefore, the reader must address not only theoretical comments in his prefaces, but also the occasional theoretical commentary scattered throughout the biographies themselves. In many cases Sohm has, admirably, done this, but he has sometimes missed important passages that bear directly on his topic of style or styles.

If the excerpt from Vasari's third preface does not address style in general, but "beautiful style", we need to ask if Vasari names other additional types of commonly used style (as opposed to artists' individual styles). In fact, he defines at least one other style – "grand style" – though we need to look outside the three prefaces for his definition. In the 1568 revision of his biography of Michelangelo, Vasari claimed that Michelangelo's aim in the *Last Judgement* was to show "the perfect and most well-proportioned composition of the human body in many diverse attitudes; not only this, but also the effects of the emotions and the satisfactions of the spirit; it being enough for him to excel in that part in which he has always been superior to all artists, and to show the way of the grand style and of the nude ..."[9]

In this passage, Vasari implies (as Poussin later states more explicitly, in his articulation of the modes of painting) that there are different styles in which an artist may choose to work, including the "grand style", whose aim is to depict the emotional and spiritual dimensions of human life through the nude human body. Working in this style, Michelangelo "left aside all the charms of colour, the caprices and the delicate and exquisite fantasies that many other painters, not without reason, have not neglected".[10] These qualities presumably belong more properly to another style entirely.

Sohm's chapter on Poussin sensitively examines the painter's theoretical comments on style and modes as they related to his works and methods as a painter. He does not attempt to do the same for Vasari, tending to remark on the latter's painting style only disparagingly, with brief dismissive comments, such as: "Vasari sought grace, which was style for him, and wound up with affectation and mannerism"; or "Vasari saw the monotonous results of Perugino's stereotyped figures, but also fell victim to formulaic excess when he adopted some of Michelangelo's contortions" (pp. 85, 91). His apparent lack of appreciation for Vasari's paintings is evident from his assumption, shared by many scholars, that Vasari was a slavish imitator of Michelangelo.

For example, Sohm asserts, highly problematically, that Michelangelo was blind to his own style, believing it to be natural, not artificial, and adds: "Vasari agreed with Michelangelo because, as his facile imitator, he held Michelangelo to be timeless, transparent, and hence styleless" (pp. 161–62).[11] As Patricia Rubin and David Franklin have recently argued, Vasari was, or believed himself to be, much more personally committed to imitating the style of Raphael than that of Michelangelo.[12] Indeed, he several times warns his fellow artists not to try to do the impossible, and imitate Michelangelo, whose personal style was beyond their abilities.[13]

It seems important to point these things out because Sohm's stated project is one of careful reading, analysing semantic structures to determine "how traces of a writer's biases are embedded in the writer's diction and metaphors" (p. 3). I am not convinced that he has read Vasari carefully enough. This should not, however, distract the reader from the many other excellent parts of this book. The chapter on Vasari also contains, for example, a trenchant and amusing section on "*Maniera* and Mannerism" (pp. 87–97). Sohm recounts how Vasari's (often contradictory) use of *maniera* became the basis for twentieth-century studies of Mannerism, even though the concept of Mannerism as a period style did not exist until the seventeenth century. Sohm's forthcoming study on "Baroque Mannerism", which will explain how the concept of mannerism was developed by Seicento critics seeking for a means to criticize trends in contemporary painting, will be a welcome antidote.

Yet another thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion lies in the concluding chapter. Much of Sohm's interpretation of early modern Italian critical writing on style is indebted to more recent literary theories, especially those of Jauss and Iser on indeterminacy. In his final chapter, Sohm admits that indeterminate style might sound "precariously modern" (p. 185), but suggests that his preceding chapters contain many examples that warrant closer inspection. Though entitled "A Conclusion on Indeterminate Styles", the chapter is really more of a digression, not unlike the 1636 treatise by Agostino Mascardi ("Digressione intorno allo stile") that forms his starting point. Sohm here provides a fascinating examination of early critics' acknowledgement of the difficulties of defining style, and their use of deliberately vague phrases such as *non so che* ("I don't know what") to suggest style's elusiveness. His discussion of *vaghezza* ("elegance" or "charm") is especially cogent, because, as he points out, lexicographers believed the term was actually derived from the verb "to wander" (*vagare*), as though elegance, and other qualities of style, were frequently thought to be hard to get hold of, and possibly even completely disorienting (pp. 194–200).

Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy is undoubtedly intended for specialists in Italian Renaissance and Baroque art, who will certainly benefit most from the Appendix, a list of some 200 stylistic terms used in Italian art criticism between 1550 and 1750 (these terms are not defined, though many of them are used and discussed elsewhere in the book). But Sohm writes (dare one say it?) with such style, and with such clarity, that his book is likely to be found accessible and engaging by scholars well beyond this restricted field. It is important reading for all who wish to understand the development of the theory and criticism of style, and its often frustratingly subjective nature.

Sharon Gregory
St Francis Xavier University

Notes

1 Svetlana Alpers, "Style Is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. B. Lang (1979; 2nd edn, Ithaca, New York, 1987), 137–62. Sohm takes Alpers to task in his Introduction.

2 Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori nelle redazione del 1550 e 1568*, Rosana Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, eds, 6 vols (Florence, 1966–87). Vasari's *Vite* were first published in Florence in 1550; then in an amplified and revised edition (Florence, 1568). The edition cited (hereinafter Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*) contains parallel passages from the two editions, enabling comparison between them.

3 First proposed by Sohm in "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly*, XLVIII (1995), 759–808.

4 Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*, IV, 4 (Preface to Part Three): "la maniera venne poi più bella dall'avere messo in uso il frequente ritrarre le cose più belle, e da quel più bello, o mani o teste o corpi o gambe aggiugnerle insieme e fare una figura di tutte quelle bellezze che più si poteva, e metterla in uso in ogni opera per tutte le figure, che per questo si dice esser bella maniera".

5 David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton, 1981), 368–79; Patricia Lee Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History* (New Haven and London, 1995), 236–41; Robert Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Italy. From Techne to Metatechne* (Cambridge and New York, 1997), 29–72.

6 Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*, VI, 109 (Life of Michelangelo): "bisognava avere le seste negli occhi e non in mano, perché le mani operano e l'occhio giudica". Sohm notes on p. 112 that "Vasari probably learned to be skeptical of [Quattrocento artists'] consummate ideals from Michelangelo".

7 Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*, VI, 112 (Life of Michelangelo): "Amò grandemente le bellezze umane per la imitazione dell'arte, per potere scierre il bello dal bello, ché senza questa imitazione non si può far cosa perfetta..."

8 Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*, VI, 164 (Life of Titian): "chi non ha disegnato assai e studiato cose scelte, antiche o moderne, non può fare bene di pratica da sé né aiutare le cose che si ritranno dal vivo, dando

loro quella grazia e perfezzione che dà l'arte fuori dell'ordine della natura, la quale fa ordinariamente alcune parti che non son belle".

9 Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*, VI, 69 (Life of Michelangelo): "Basta che si vede che l'intenzione di questo uomo singulare non ha voluto entrare in dipignere altro che la perfetta e proporzionatissima composizione del corpo umano et in diversissime attitudini; non solo questo, ma insieme gli affetti delle passioni e contentezze dell'animo, bastandogli satisfare in quella parte – nel che è stato superiore a tutti i suoi artefici – e mostrare la via della gran maniera e degli ignudi ..."

10 Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*, VI, 69 (Life of Michelangelo): "attendendo a questo fin solo, ha lassato da parte le vaghezze de' colori, i capricci e le nuove fantasie di certe minuzie e delicatezze, che da molti altri pittori non sono interamente, e forse non senza qualche ragione, state neglette".

11 Sohm believes that Michelangelo thought his art to be natural, not artificial, on the basis of a statement by Cosimo Bartoli, in the *Ragionamenti accademici di Cosimo Bartoli gentil'huomo et Accademico Fiorentino sopra alcuni luoghi difficili di Dante, con alcune inventioni et significanti* (Venice, 1567), about what Michelangelo thought constituted "good art", Sohm admits in note 99, p. 264, that "Michelangelo did not identify his own art as that which is 'good,' but this may be assumed". One needs to exercise additional caution in assuming that Bartoli was accurately recording Michelangelo's opinion. The assertion that Vasari did not recognize style in Michelangelo's art is unsubstantiated, and questionable.

12 Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 357–401; David Franklin, *Painting in Renaissance Florence 1500–1550* (New Haven and London, 2001), 229–49.

13 For example, Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*, IV, 206 (Life of Raphael): Raphael "si diede non ad imitare la maniera di [Michelangelo], per non perdervi vanamente il tempo, ma a farsi un ottimo universale ... E se così avessero fatto molti artefici dell'età nostra, che per aver voluto seguitare lo studio solamente delle cose di Michelagnolo non hanno imitato lui né potuto aggiugnere a tanta perfezzione, eglino non arebbono faticato invano né fatto una maniera molto dura, tutta piena di difficultà, senza vaghezza, senza colorito e povera d'invenzione".

Eckart Marchand and Alison Wright, eds, *With and Without the Medici. Studies in Tuscan Art and Patronage 1434–1530*. Aldershot and Brookfield, Ashgate, 1998, 187 pp., 52 black-and-white illus., $84.95 (U.S.) cloth.

To anyone versed in the art of the Italian Renaissance, such names as Sassetti, Strozzi and Tornabuoni bring to mind fresco cyles and altarpieces painted by some of the most famous Tuscan artists, not to mention sculpted marbles, if not also bronzes, palatial residences and country estates. They also evoke one name in particular: de' Medici. The book under review recognizes the obvious, that the politically astute and uncommonly wealthy de' Medici family was an extremely important patron of the arts in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Florence, so much so that its illustrious members influenced the manner in which their business associates commissioned works of art. Certainly, Lorenzo il Magnifico's conversation with Filippo Strozzi depreciating the puny residence the latter was supposedly envisioning in Florence is so well known as to require no further commentary.[1] Given the obvious, the editors of this book pose a couple of provocative and interrelated questions on page 1: first, to what extent was the Medici family an arbiter of taste in Florence and Tuscany during the period from *circa* 1434 through *circa* 1530 (acknowledging the lacunae marking the periods of the Florentine Republic), and secondly, to what extent was it possible for Florence's moneyed élite to adopt, embrace and, more to the point, publicly manifest an anti- or simply "non-Medicean stance"?

Initially, the contributors presented their avowedly provisional findings at what the editors describe on page 2 as an "informal Study Day at the Warburg Institute in May 1996". With the exception of Amanda Lillie of the University of York, all contributors to this volume were living and working in London, England, when the "Study Day" occurred: Kate Lowe at the University of London; Eckart Marchand at City University; Michelle O'Malley at the Royal Academy of Art; Ruth Rubinstein at the Warburg Institute; and Alison Wright at University College. Hence, this book reflects the rather felicitous circumstances that enable a respectable number of art historians living in proximity to one another to carry out research on Renaissance Tuscany, with special emphasis on issues of patronage that necessarily involve the Medici family. Furthermore, it is entirely fitting that this book concerns art and Medici patronage, given that Sir Ernst Gombrich lived and worked in London when his important article of 1960, "The early Medici as patrons of art: a survey of primary sources," appeared.[2]

At the risk of fixating on scholarly geography, as an inhabitant of the "other" London – or of what I like to term the great simulacrum – I can safely state that the interests of colleagues concerned with Renaissance art working nearby, both in Canada and in the United States, would not preclude a book of this nature. Of course, the specifics would differ, for scholars in North America are not necessarily delving as deeply as our counterparts in the British Isles into documentary evidence regarding villas, nunneries and collections – the essential subject matter of the book under review – but the basic lines would not be so different. My point is that the interests of this group of