



# INTELLECTUAL HISTORY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 23

2001

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## THE OTHER SIDE OF MEANING: GEORGE KUBLER ON THE OBJECT AS HISTORICAL SOURCE

The objects that men and women have made provide the most enduring trace of human activity extending back tens of thousands of years in every part of the globe. In a handful of locations, as in Europe or East Asia, traditions of collecting and connoisseurship developed around the preservation of particularly valued objects, creating in the process a document trail that helps tell the story of what was selected for preservation and why. Things provide a record of human action but for much of art history, documentation had come to substitute for the things themselves. This was a state of affairs that had long bothered George Kubler (1912-1996), a scholar of ancient American, colonial Latin American, and Iberian art and architecture. In 1959, while recovering in a rest home from tuberculosis and separated from his books, notes, and reference system, Kubler drafted a short conceptual piece exploring the role of objects as historical evidence. His manuscript appeared in 1962 under the title *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*.<sup>1</sup> Four decades later, the book remains in print, and it has been widely translated. It provides a foundational text for the cultural history of objects, to some extent because Kubler's perspective stood aloof from the main trends in the art history of his generation.

Notwithstanding, many art historians responded to the book with enthusiasm. James Ackerman, a prominent historian of Italian Renaissance architecture, has likened the influence of *The Shape of Time* to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, also published in 1962. Kubler did not have the wide influence outside his field that Kuhn's work enjoyed, but the response within art history and related fields indicates that scholars and students were hungry for a radical reconceptualization of the work they did.<sup>2</sup> Kubler's work was part of a larger critical trend in North American intellectual life rejecting a quest for nomothetic absolutes by focusing on the complexities of human behavior and expression. Kubler rejected functionalist explanations of both social organization and aesthetic activity as well as Kantian assumptions about the disinterested nature of knowledge. He was part of a growing movement that understood the production of knowledge as a historically situated activity intrinsic to the production of social organization.<sup>3</sup> Kubler challenged emphases within art history on masterpieces, style, and the genius of individual artists in part because the presumed universal standards embodied in these concepts were indefinable and obscured the specific historical relations that allowed aesthetic objects to appear and endure. *The Shape of Time* proposed three alternative concepts that required viewing art as the end result of repetitive organized activity: the prime object, replicatory sequences, and artist entrances. In what follows, I will sketch an intellectual context for Kubler's book, examine how the concepts Kubler proposed directed discussion of aesthetic objects towards production as a social process, and conclude with some observations on the book's continuing relevance for the study of visual and material culture.

Kubler entered Yale University as a freshman in 1930. After earning his B.A., Kubler worked briefly as a merchant marine, but then returned to Yale to earn his M.A. and Ph.D. He joined the faculty in 1940, teaching there the rest of his life. His most important teacher at Yale was Henri Focillon (1881-1943), a French cultural historian whose most

famous book, *L'An mil* ("The Year One Thousand"), reconstructed everyday life and culture in France at the turn of the last millennium. Focillon wrote on a wide variety of topics, ranging from Roman art to nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting. He viewed his work as an effort to trace the history of European societies through the objects that they had produced, often fine art but also crafts and tools. His approach was capacious rather than technical, and he challenged the assumptions guiding the work of most art historians.<sup>4</sup>

The courses Kubler took from Focillon as an undergraduate sparked his imagination and captured him for a career in art history, although, like his mentor, he would feel somewhat at odds with the direction of the field. By the time Kubler began his graduate studies, Focillon had started developing an art history department for Yale organized around his conceptions of cultural history. The department was formally launched in 1940, three years before Focillon's untimely death. The faculty for the new department consisted almost entirely of students who had worked for Focillon during the preceding decade. Even before he finished his dissertation on New Mexican religious architecture in 1940, Kubler joined the Yale faculty as the department's resident Hispanist, specializing in all aspects of Iberian and Latin American art and culture, including that of pre-Conquest Native American societies. He remained at Yale for the rest of his life.

The Focillon group at Yale stood apart from the traditions of connoisseurship and museum studies at the center of the Harvard approach to the historical study of art, as well as from the archaeological emphasis that marked the study of art at Princeton. The founding of the Yale art history program in the late 1930s made the school an oasis of French influence in the United States at a period when German scholars fleeing fascism increasingly occupied positions in schools across the country and were reshaping the discipline of art history in the United States along theoretical lines established in Germany during the preceding hundred years. The approach to the study of aesthetic objects articulated in *The Shape of Time* grew out of Focillon's teachings, the basic lessons of which were reinforced by the practical necessities of Kubler's primary areas of study. The book very consciously articulated a critique of connoisseurship, iconology, and stylistic studies—indeed of pretty much everything that defined the practice of art history in the United States in the mid-twentieth century.

The Focillon approach to art history treated all objects equally as potential evidence for how people thought and lived. No priority was to be given to so-called "masterworks" or great artists. Focillon equally dismissed stylistic grouping and interpretation. Stylistic analysis required creating what Focillon referred to as *la ligne des hauteurs*, a series of monuments, chosen because they facilitated a retrospective definition of cultural preferences of a geographic location or of a time period. A fuller examination of objects, however, often showed that stylistic unities did not go very deeply into the surviving material record, and indeed stylistic analysis inevitably required the exclusion of work and artists not clearly or comfortably fitting into the categories selected to define a style.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most heretical aspect of Focillon's method was his questioning of the priority given to meaning and symbolic expression in the interpretation of art work. Focillon did not deny that every object contained and conveyed meaning. Morphological analysis, however, got to the heart of what objects had to contribute to the historical record that was different from other sources. Every object had a distinctive shape that could be placed in relation to the shapes of other, related objects. In *La Vie des formes* (1934), translated into English by Kubler and Charles Beecher Hogan as *The Life of Forms in Art*, Focillon described form and shape as self-reproducing.<sup>6</sup> Focillon meant that a process of production

requires consistency and reproducibility. There may be variation in the process, but predictability and design predominate over improvisation. While Focillon's remarks were relevant to manufacture, much of the analysis in *La Vie des formes* takes organic form as a prototype for understanding how all forms emerge and develop. This led to criticisms that his morphological theory is vitalist, as if shape expressed a living, self-directed force.

Of all of Focillon's students, at least in the United States, Kubler was probably best situated to understand the most radical elements of the Focillon agenda. *The Shape of Time* synthesized ideas that Kubler had tested in Iberia and Latin America into a conceptual framework that did not eschew meaning as an important element of art, but considered it as one of several subsystems going into the production of any object. Systems theory, in vogue in the social sciences in the American university during the 1950s, offered him a way to model the production process as self-regulating and self-reproducing, while avoiding any implications that forms were Platonic realities.<sup>7</sup> Systems theory also allowed for Kubler to redefine the tasks of historians. Past events, he noted, could be considered "categorical commotions" that release signals in various forms, objects being one of the most commonplace. Interpretation is another stage in the perpetuation of the original impulse. Historians are less interested in the signal, he argued, than in the original events (20-21). The art object, in addition to being an event, is also the solution to a problem. The prime object is an original solution to a problem that introduces a new way of thinking about fabrication process and/or visual representation. The chain of solutions is what allows definition of the problems that occupied societies in the past. Explication of any individual art work is secondary to the task of reconstructing the chain. By shifting the focus to replicatory sequences of objects and their production requirements, Kubler reframed questions that had long occupied art historians, including that of the role and status of the artist. Valuations of masterpiece, style, and genius gave way to a framework organized around the historical reconstruction of what different societies understood and valued as productive activity.

The shaping of an object, viewed as a fabrication problem requiring the organization of various types of resources, meant to Kubler as he summarized his key argument that "the morphological problems of duration in series and sequence . . . arise independently of meaning and image" (viii). In Kubler's view, production process requires a fair degree of stability, even when a culture values innovation. Materials have to be produced on a regular basis that are suitable for the object's intended use. Design and production personnel have to be trained in specialized skills. For objects to be produced at an efficient and regular rate timed to satisfy demand, most activities must be standardized to take best advantage of equipment that is often expensive and useful only for limited tasks. The overlapping constraints implied that alterations in form would be minor and discrete, operating at a much slower pace than political, economic, or social change, though faster than the rate of linguistic change. The task for the cultural historian was to understand the various factors that allowed forms to reappear consistently as well as to identify the forces that introduced and promoted change.

Over time, a sequence of objects accumulated enough minor variation that a potential for major innovation became thinkable, generating the possibility for the emergence of a new sequence based on a reconfiguration of the object and its production process. Solving one problem usually generated new problems. Kubler noted that the Gothic cathedral developed around a focus on the interior and the question of how to provide uniform rhythm of supports with evenly distributed light and uninterrupted interior volume. The answers involved increasing the mass of the façade. Builders then had to figure out how to make that mass interesting, and the introduction of symbolic content was one obvious solution. That inno-



vation in turn put stress on the iconographic repertory available and led to an elaboration of religious imagery in various media (37).

“Style” within this production paradigm is a term that marks reproducible values. In premodern Europe or in post-Conquest Latin America, an atelier possessed a motif book that provided guidance for executing common forms. As medieval art historians have noted, motif books were distinct from iconographic guides. Motif books codified successful prototypes for common figures, such as how to present a kneeling male, which then could be applied to any number of situations. An apostle in awe of the Transfiguration could share the same formal characters as a martyr kneeling for his beheading, even though the iconographical and affective content would be very different. An iconographic guide indicated how to organize figures to convey common narratives, while the motif book provided guidance for executing the details.<sup>8</sup> Beyond that, each atelier would have its tested techniques for mixing colors, outlining and modeling figures, decorating background, painting finger nails, ears, and other details, all of which would be taught apprentices by example.

Since objects involved the organization of considerable resources, both labor and material, they present first and foremost a history of human desires, not simply a record of purposes and uses. Art history focuses on the value of objects for the societies that created them, Kubler noted, not the question of use, which belongs more appropriately to the subfield of material culture studies in anthropology. Art historians evaluate how desirable things that have survived were, and they mark that desirability through an assessment of the resources invested in making the object possible. The most valuable objects were those made to the exclusion of others, a general state that Kubler then used to define the field of the fine arts as it had emerged in Europe. The exclusionary process had created a hierarchy of values, which in turn demanded the investment of literary resources to justify and refine standards. That activity eventually developed into the field of art history, the practitioners of which, however, on understanding the most general terms of their labor could then step back from a primary focus on fine art to consider a broader range of material production.

Kubler wanted to move his field away from an exclusive focus on “fine art,” but he also wanted to assert the value of the particular skills art historians had developed for the social sciences in general, and archaeology and anthropology in particular. “All objects are both tools and works of art,” he noted later. “A reciprocal relationship—some are tools, some are works of art. But no tool is without some aesthetic meaning. No work of art is without some useful aspect. So it’s a graded series both ways, and the aesthetic component is never absent from the tool—all tools are residually works of art—and vice versa. . . . [the aesthetic component is] part of the emotional side of life. This I think has really been left out of the social science program.”<sup>9</sup>

Variations in form reveal a record of changing investments and values, a record that may exist, as is often the case with ancient American objects, independently of any other evidence. Kubler assumed that the objects that functioned as models for change are largely if not entirely missing from the historical record. He called these works “prime objects” because they introduce something original that alters future fabrication processes and launches a new replicatory sequence. Change will only be in a portion of the work, probably a small portion. Nonetheless, a new way of thinking visually has found material expression, flowing out of a new way of performing the production process. The distinction between Kubler’s argument and that of Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is intriguing. By denying that surviving work is in fact “original,” Kubler sought to strip masterpieces of the aura that surround

them with a provocative insistence that what is missing is more important, even if it would likely not be very impressive were a prime object by some stroke of luck to be recovered and confidently identified.

Reasons for innovation vary. An artist may be seeking a personal signature or a novelty that will distinguish his or her work from that of competitors. The artist may have undertaken a particularly difficult assignment, and the effort to effect a solution results in an innovation in production process. A prime object may be the product of accident, such as a mistake in a firing process. Focillon had written of the “failures that lurk in the shadow of every success” as persistent sources for inspiration.<sup>10</sup> Change was also frequently the result of cultural exchange between different societies, most often through conquest. In Mexico, Native American artisans had to learn Spanish production techniques and iconography in order to build the churches, palaces, and administrative buildings their rulers required.

Kubler intended the prime object to be an elusive category, for the concept challenges the primacy put on well-known masterpieces within art history. He insisted that the work of Cézanne, Picasso, or Pollock, for example, included not one prime object. The artists had created their masterpieces by working from models that are currently unknown.<sup>11</sup> Kubler likened prime objects to black holes, which at the time of writing *The Shape of Time* had only recently been demonstrated to exist in nature.<sup>12</sup> Prime objects, like black holes, cannot be seen, but one can measure their effects on what is visible, that is on what was produced and preserved (44). Everything we actually know and value is by definition deficient, if only because it is stripped from its originating context. The Ajanta caves in India are spectacular, Kubler noted, but the destroyed palaces that accompanied them must have been even grander (40).

The most important attribute defining a prime object is negative. It is not a masterpiece, not in the way that other art historians had described works by Giotto or Caravaggio as innovations that introduced new modes of representation. The prime object stands conceptually in opposition to masterpieces by insisting that in the course of production variations must emerge that spark the imagination of an artist/artisan to explore further. A prime object may have been nothing more than an artisan’s sketch, or it may just as likely be a botched canvas or casting. Its defining feature is not quality but the potential for changing value hierarchies by introducing a new formal trait that is then replicated, imitated, and made subject to further variations.

Kubler utilized his concepts of prime objects and replicatory sequences to put forward new interpretations of pre-Columbian art. In *Art and Architecture of Ancient America*, published in 1962, Kubler broke with previous conventions for narrating this history by showing the existence of distinct replicatory sequences for Mexican, Maya, and Andean art. Kubler’s survey of important architectural, sculptural, and ceramic forms found that formal problems related to preceding work in the local tradition and not to contemporaneous developments in other parts of the Americas. In attacking diffusionist theories of culture, Kubler gave priority to the relative autonomy of each culture and portrayed prehistoric Native American societies as more internally dynamic.<sup>13</sup> Noting that in classic Maya societies, the most intense and frequent state of formal visual innovation was found in mural paintings, Kubler argued that wall decoration rather than pottery provided the most important record for the development of Maya visual thought. Archaeologists had given priority to ceramic decorations, in part because there were many more pots than murals. Kubler argued that ceramic painting was more conservative and likely derivative of wall paintings. Murals had functioned as prime objects for ceramists who had imitated

forms of great interest and importance for their patrons. In focusing on vase painting, archaeologists had misread the history of Maya culture and misunderstood both its symbolic and pictorial systems.<sup>14</sup>

Within Kubler's scheme, the artist or artisan is a skilled craftsman competent in relevant production processes. His or her talent lies in achieving consistent effects that are pleasing and desirable to others. Finished product is what patrons value, but for an historian of production process, the halting steps by which a craftsman arrived at a merger of consistency and innovation is of greater importance. Anticipating criticisms of auteur theory, Kubler defined "genius" as a unity of disposition and situation that allows for productivity (8). The word like its counterpart "masterpiece" marks placement in a value hierarchy while obscuring the various types of socialization that made the individualized producer a focus for investment as well as the objects he produced.<sup>15</sup>

In European art history, innovation had become an independent value and thus had become important for the discussion of the succession of objects and their makers. Kubler noted that innovation was not valued in the same way in other aesthetic traditions, which did not however preclude steady change. Further, Kubler proposed the concept of the "entrance" to define what was feasible for an artist or artisan to do. Artistic temperament, even when it is a given within a particular production process, interlocks with the artist's position in a morphological sequence that establishes possibilities, expectations, and ambitions. Differences between artists are not "those of talent," which Kubler assumed is always in surplus of demand, but "of entrance and position in sequence" (6-7). Even within the European tradition, innovation was not a form of free improvisation. Morphological change could be plotted along predictable and explainable trajectories that undercut impressions that individuals effected ruptures.

Kubler proposed a schema whereby an artist's position could be noted in terms of its relationship to prime objects and the longevity of the replicatory sequence within which the artist worked, as well as in relation to the structure of social organization, a range of artist strategies, and the opportunities for investment and recognition. An artist who appears at the beginning of a replicatory sequence will be more likely to succeed if he concentrates on solving the various formal problems that stand in the way of heightened expression and predictable replication. An artist appearing in the middle of the sequence will be more likely to succeed if he takes the formal solutions that his predecessors have achieved and concentrates on intensifying the possibilities for personal expression. An artist appearing towards the end of a replicatory sequence faces the problem that both the formal and expressive capacities of a medium have been explored. To gain attention he must innovate through complication and exploring the limits, or even going beyond the limits, of both form and content.

The schema reworked the well-established archaic-classic-baroque trajectory. Kubler offered little new in and of itself, but he did propose a change in terminology. Early solutions, "technically simple, energetically inexpensive, expressively clear," should be called *promorphic* instead of primitive or archaic. Late solutions, "costly, difficult, intricate, recalcitrant, and animated," should be called *neomorphic* instead of decadent or baroque. Middle solutions would remain the classic examples of a replicatory sequence that unites affect, intellect, and form into a historically consistent configuration (55-56). Kubler's outline of the social structures within which artists/artisans work is more extensive but equally schematic and overlaid by consideration of whether the artist works in a provincial or cosmopolitan environment. The value of the

classificatory scheme remains heuristic in forcing attention onto how production processes viewed as unfolding across generations limit, and typically determine, what individual artists view as the most important problems to pursue.

Kubler was so intent on showing that production required regularity and predictability that he proposed that cultural history, not only in Europe but in other cultural zones as well, followed predictable 360-year cycles, divided into three 120-year subcycles, each representing the fresh, mature, and decadent versions of a cultural configuration (102-105). Each subcycle consisted of two 60-year semicycles, the first organized around introduction of an innovation and the improvisation it promoted, the second organized around its formalization, routinization, and ultimate exhaustion. Individual careers followed a 30-year trajectory, also divided into two semicycles of innovation and formalization. According to his calculations, a new cultural configuration emerged around 1790. Its second, mature phase had begun in 1910, with the transition to the formalized semicycle of this phase beginning roughly in 1960, in turn to give way in approximately 2030 to the improvisatory beginning of a final mannerist phase in a larger cycle that could be called “modernity.”<sup>16</sup> The chronology Kubler provides is “predictive” but has no explanatory value. By proposing a patently arbitrary timeline for cultural change, Kubler underscored that he had developed a model of aesthetic production as an internally driven system developing in relation to other social systems but autonomous.

*The Shape of Time* is a book that takes risks with its formulations. It is often subtle, but it is also heavy handed and impressionistic. Neither “meaning” nor “form” are defined. Kubler treats the categories as if they were self evident and mutually exclusive. The latter assumption is particularly troubling given that art and architectural historians had long discussed form as conveying ideological values distinct from iconography.<sup>17</sup> Even the key term “production” is unexamined. The examples provided in the text for the most part concern technical process, though the category as argued is fluid enough to take in other social relations. Rather than offer a theoretical system, the book was a provocation. At every turn, Kubler proposed ways of thinking about objects that largely inverted foundational principles of art history. It was as if he hoped that by changing all the values organizing the discipline to their opposites, art historians could become social scientists studying social data rather than humanists interpreting texts and monuments. In conversation, Kubler said that he wrote *The Shape of Time* to criticize art history from an anthropological point of view while his *Art and Architecture of Ancient America* criticized anthropology from an art historical point of view.<sup>18</sup>

Kubler understood that for the study of aesthetic objects to have genuine autonomy, that is to offer insights into aspects of human life that other disciplines cannot, objects as such had to remain independent of every description and interpretation. At base, the object offered a sensual relationship, which the art historian decoded in various ways, but interpretation should focus on sequences and the reconstruction of production requirements, both technical and social. Though long interested in semiotics and often applying its methods in his studies, Kubler nonetheless insisted that objects offer a view of the past distinct from and indeed more important than language-based traces. Like Focillon before him, Kubler acknowledged that all images and objects conveyed meaning, but in the absence of proper documentation, meaning was imputed rather than known.

Every object contains both what he called “self-signals” and “adherent signals” (24). In a painting, the self-signals are the colors, distribution of paint on a plane, illusion of space or solid shapes, while the adherent signals would involve subject matter, iconography, narrative reference, name of the painter, “a message in the symbolic order rather than



in an existential dimension" (25). Self-signals prove the existence of an object, and thus always point back to the formal, practical problems involved in production. Adherent meaning is a matter of conventional shared experience, usually relying on implicit rather than explicit knowledge. Lacking those conventions, interpretations project contemporary preferences onto the object (26). To confront the past then requires attending to the immediate relationship that the object as object requires and refusing all speculation about possible meanings. The task of the historian, as opposed to the critic, is to explore what is to be learned from a visual, tactile, spatial relationship that is in varying degrees independent of other contexts that can be added, but only to the degree that evidence exists (30-31). While forming was inherent to the existence of the object and endured as long as it did, meaning required records documenting the meaning process. Beyond that difficulty, insurmountable in many situations, meaning focused on only one aspect of an object, and overemphasis on the work as a text prevented seeing the object as a totality, functioning simultaneously in several distinctive modes. The historical understanding of objects, Kubler argued in *The Shape of Time*, required first bracketing the desire for a meaning, which in most cases remains beyond the possibility of knowledge.

Desire operates as both the linchpin and the bugaboo. To understand the circuits of desire in the past, Kubler insisted it is essential to remove from discussion the play of contemporary desires. This starts with the longing for masterpieces to enjoy and geniuses to admire. His insistence on prime objects, replicatory sequences, and artists' entrances was calculated to replace objects of desire with objects of knowledge, meaning positivities that could be defined and described in emotionally flat, preferably statistically grounded terms. Given, as he recognized, that aesthetics was inseparable from desire, the effort was bound to be misunderstood. Even as perceptive and enthusiastic a critic as Ackerman saw in *The Shape of Time* the beginnings of a strategy for deepening discussion of style and stylistic development, ignoring Kubler's position that the category of style can only reaffirm, never explicate a hierarchy of values. Ackerman's reworking of Kubler's argument was appropriate for a period in art historical study when attention was beginning to shift to the role of objects in the circulation of ideology and the construction of subjectivity.

Yet, Kubler's morphological emphases asserted not simply the importance but the priority of formal issues over ideological. The book, even if often cited, occupies an oblique relation to contemporary study of visual and material culture as it did to the art history of its own time. In concluding, I will indicate three areas in which *The Shape of Time* remains productively provocative.

First, the book balances the attention given to reception by reaffirming the importance of production and the institutions that define needs and desires in ways that shape the allocation of resources. The reproducibility of form entails as well the reproducibility of a social cadre, the privileges of which, whatever they might be, are based on knowledge claims that are simultaneously intellectual and technical. Their ability to reproduce the validity of their expertise is an important factor in the reproduction and valuation of social taste. Reception involves a struggle for resources that will determine the ability of particular groups to continue reproducing particular forms and the experiences they foster. Kubler's emphasis on fabrication as a social relationship reminds us that this struggle is not simply one of wills and ideas but rests on well-defined and vested interests, practices, and capabilities.<sup>19</sup>

Second, Kubler's emphasis on regularity as a necessary condition for successful shaping processes focuses attention on the habitual aspects of both production and reception. Ideology takes material form within this framework not as

a set of explicit ideas but as propositions primarily about how to fit experiences together into a structured sense of relationship that might also be called a habitus. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein noted that for many, though not all communicative cases, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”<sup>20</sup> In constructive activities, such as art, meaning is inseparable from form and crafting and there is no paraphrase possible. Meaning is built into the structure of the object as an object, that is as something to be sensually experienced, though the ability to exchange objects implies a whole way of living together because the practices are such that they cannot exist for a single occasion or situation.<sup>21</sup> Objects reveal forms of expression that bid their users to see, touch, feel, and exist in space in specific and replicable ways. The propositions rendered through objects provide more than systems of explanation or intellectual references. When objects are valued, they transform the sensory habits of the body. Kubler’s critique of the priority given to meaning makes sense as a criticism of efforts to reduce images and objects to explicit themes. The critique dissolves if the “meaning” of an object is taken first and foremost to be the forms of life informing it. Many of Kubler’s books after *The Shape of Time* addressed problems of meaning and interpretation, but he treated iconographical motifs as perceptual qualities taking form within the production process of a given class of objects rather than as fully independent symbolic systems transposable across different expressive forms.

Third, the focus of historical research for Kubler was patterns of behaviors found in replicatory sequences, never individual statements. The study of those patterns would help identify dispositions prevalent in a society, suggest how stable they were, and occasionally indicate sources for change. In reconstructing past forms of life, a focus on fabrication sequences could augment historical understanding of subjectivity by isolating tangible configurations of visual and manual intelligence as factors independent of, though certainly linked to, contemporaneous explanatory frameworks. The relationship of vision, dexterity, and cognition in the social life of the past, decoded through a sequence of replications “distributed in time as recognizably early and late versions of the same kind of action” (130), would become more visible and open to becoming a factor in historical explanation.

Any form of life includes a set of understandings about relationships, but on the other side of every possible interpretation were continuing performances of desire, anticipation, and response. Perhaps because of a shared substrate in French intellectual life, Kubler’s ideas echo much in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the phenomenology of perception and the relation of idea and feeling in the formation of “sense.” For the French philosopher, gesture created subjects who reached back out to the sources of perception with a reaction, the physicality of which articulated most clearly the meaning a relationship had engendered. What Merleau-Ponty called the “postural schema” was the foundation of consciousness, for without it there was no sense of being in relation. Consciousness and a sense of self emerged through interpretive performance of the actions of others.<sup>22</sup> With the passage of time, most evidence of the gestural component of social life vanishes along with the expressive forms created through sound and movement. Objects vanish for the most part as well, but their remains provide a trace, however skeletal, of gesture imprinted onto materials more durable than flesh. In answering the question of what aesthetic objects contribute to an understanding of the past, Kubler insisted that meaning was the “final question to be approached . . . The image is there, and one can endow it. One can give it meaning. Or one can relate it to the rest of experience, other experience.”<sup>23</sup> The historical, as opposed to the critical, question starts from

action, not ideology. In the case of objects, it starts with how shaping or forming practices were learned, transferred, augmented, and diminished in continuous efforts to feel a coherent relationship with other humans and with nature.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962). All subsequent page references to this book will be given in parentheses in the text of the essay. For background on the writing of *The Shape of Time*, see George A. Kubler, "Art Historian: George A. Kubler," interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith and Thomas F. Reese, March 27, 28, 29, 30, and November 18, 19, 20, 1991 (Art History Oral Documentation Project, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 2 vols., 292-310. The most extensive published analyses of *The Shape of Time* can be found in William H. Bossart, *The Language of Creativity* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1986), 168-91; Thomas F. Reese's introduction to Kubler, *Studies in Ancient American and European Art: The Collected Essays of George Kubler*, Thomas F. Reese, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xvii-xxxvi; and Reese's introduction to the Spanish-language edition of Kubler's book, *La Configuración del tiempo: Observaciones sobre la historia de las cosas* (Madrid: Editorial NEREA, 1988), 13-50. Reese has written an excellent intellectual biography of Kubler, which when it is published will be an important contribution to understanding mid-twentieth-century shifts in history and the humanities.

<sup>2</sup> James S. Ackerman, "Art Historian: James S. Ackerman," interviewed by Joel Gardner, March 19, April 15, 22, May 13, 22, 29, June 12, and November 18, 1991 (Art History Oral Documentation Project, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 106. Ackerman was an undergraduate at Yale from 1938 to 1941, taking classes from both Focillon and Kubler. He spoke on Focillon at Yale in Ackerman, "Art Historian," 25-31.

<sup>3</sup> For a later comment on the epistemological shifts of the late 1950s and early 1960s, see George Kubler, *Aesthetic Recognition of Ancient Amerindian Art* (New Haven: Yale, 1991), xvi, 111.

<sup>4</sup> Kubler wrote on Focillon at Yale in "The Teaching of Henri Focillon," in Kubler, *Studies in Ancient American and European Art*, 381-85, and spoke at length about the same subject in Kubler, "Art Historian," 61-119, 136-38. He also provided a sketch of art history programs at Yale prior to Focillon in "Arts at Yale University," in *The Early Years of Art History in the United States: Notes and Essays on Departments, Teaching, and Scholars*, Craig Hugh Smyth and Peter M. Lukehart, eds. (Princeton: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, 1993). René Huyghe's *Dialogue avec le visible* (1955), a book also shaped by the Focillon legacy, strongly influenced Kubler's speculations on the epistemological foundations of art history. The literature on Focillon is in French or Italian. See *Henri Focillon: Textes et dessins* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1986) and Maddalena Mazzocut-Mis, *Forma come destino: Henri Focillon e il pensiero morfologico nell'estetica francese della prima metà del Novecento* (Firenze: Alinea, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Kubler cited as among the most important studies of style influencing the art historians of his generation: Friedrich Matz, *Geschichte der griechischen Kunst* (Frankfurt: V. Klostermann, 1950), Alois Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie* (Vienna: K.K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1901-1923), Heinrich Wölfflin's *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (München: H. Bruckmann, 1915). The latter two books were particularly important texts for the formation of modern art history. Wölfflin's book is available in English as *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1950). See also Wölfflin, *The Sense of Form in Art: A Comparative Psychological Study* (New York: Chelsea Publications, 1958), and Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Kubler also cited Meyer Schapiro, "Style" (in *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory*, A. L. Kroeber, ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953], 287-312), as a contemporary effort to develop a theory of style. Kubler had a negative evaluation of Schapiro's approach and offered his own alternatives in "Towards a Reductive Theory of Style," in Kubler, *Studies in Ancient American European Art*, 418-23. Ernst Kitzinger was among the first art historians to shift questions of style to studies of patron preferences in a manner that paralleled Kubler's arguments about production and form without, however, abandoning the concept of style. Kitzinger had noted that Roman art after 200 A.D., for example, was typically described as rigid, thus reflecting the militarization and increasing social rigidity of the late Empire. These attributes were derived from social or political history, and in reality no original insight whatsoever had been gained from the study of objects. Kitzinger proposed shifting focus from iconography to the decorative elements where there was more freedom for stylistic improvisation. See Kitzinger, "The Mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo: An Essay on the Choice and Arrangement of Subject," *Art Bulletin* 3 (1949), 269-92; "On the Interpretation of Stylistic Changes in Late Antique Art," *Bucknell Review* 15/3 (December 1967), 1-10; and "Style and Its Meaning in Early Medieval Art," transcript of an interview of Kitzinger by Richard Cándida Smith, February 18, 23, 24, 25, May 31, and June 1, 1995 (Art History Oral Documentation Project, Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1997), 193-231.

<sup>6</sup> Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942; republished in 1989, New York: Zone Press).

<sup>7</sup> In *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), Jerome Bruner summarizes the role of systems theory in shifting attention away from internalist concepts such as "meaning" to the study of signals and the information they carry. See pp. 1-11. For a history of systems theory, see Robert Lilienfeld, *The Rise of Systems Theory: An Ideological Analysis* (New York: Wiley, 1978). An influential statement of systems theory by one of its protagonists can be found in Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General Systems Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York: Braziller, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> See Hugo Buchthal, *The Musterbuch of Wolfenbüttel and its Position in the Art of the Thirteenth Century* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaft, 1979), for an analysis of a motif book and what it reveals about the production of medieval German art.

<sup>9</sup> Kubler, "Art Historian," 320.

<sup>10</sup> Henri Focillon, *Art d'Occident* (Paris: A. Colin, 1938), p. 188; cited in *The Shape of Things*, 48-49.

<sup>11</sup> Kubler, "Art Historian," 568.

<sup>12</sup> "At this distance from that book I think of prime objects more and more as black holes [laughter]—black holes of immense energy, but it is really invisible. Perhaps we don't have any prime objects. We only have reflections of them" (Kubler, "Art Historian," 330).

<sup>13</sup> George Kubler, *Art and Architecture in Ancient America* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962), 3.

<sup>14</sup> George Kubler, "Precolumbian Mural Painting," in *Studies in Ancient American and European Art*, 256-62. See also George Kubler, *The Town Calendar* (Hartford: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1951).

<sup>15</sup> For important statements criticizing the concept of the creative figure, see Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977); Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Screen 20/1* (Spring 1979): 13-33; Adam Richardson, "The Death of the Designer," *Design Issues 9/2* (Fall 1993): 34-43; and *Theories of Authorship*, J. Caughie, ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> The periodization scheme was largely lifted with little alteration from Hyppolite Taine's nineteenth-century studies of Italian, Dutch, French, and English painting and literature. See Hippolyte Taine, *Philosophie de l'Art*, 2<sup>e</sup> éd. (Paris: Librairie Germer Baillière, 1872), 19-61, for a general statement on periodization in European art, the phases and sources of change and its relation to the early and mature phases of individual artist careers.

<sup>17</sup> Two prominent examples were Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991; originally published in Germany in 1924) and Rudolf Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London: Warburg Institute, 1949). Both texts were important for iconological study after World War II.

<sup>18</sup> Kubler, "Art Historian," 310.

<sup>19</sup> *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), a valuable book by John A. Walker and Sarah Chaplin, devotes about half a dozen pages of 216 to issues specific to production. In the chapter entitled "Production, distribution, and consumption model," the issue is quickly shifted to reception as a form of production, an entirely legitimate concept but which nonetheless ignores the particularities of fabrication processes.

<sup>20</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §43.

<sup>21</sup> Rush Rhees, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 138.

<sup>22</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relation with Others," in *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 117-18; "The Primacy of Perception," in *The Primacy of Perception*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Kubler, "Art Historian," 565-66.

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