

Chapter 1

Vision Has an Art History

■ I

The American painter Barnett Newman once said that an artist gets from aesthetics what a bird gets from ornithology—nothing. The editor of *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Michael Kelly, has extended Newman's observation to include art historians, archaeologists, and other students of culture in its widest sense. Aesthetics must be as useless to all of these scholars as ornithology would be to a bird unless, Kelly went on to say, "their research involves art created in periods when aesthetics was still considered relevant." According to *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, the period when aesthetics was considered relevant began in the eighteenth century and as "a European development that has not been duplicated anywhere else."¹

Aesthetics in this sense emerged when ancient Greek theories of poetic aptness (to single out Aristotle's main concern) and Roman and Renaissance practices of rhetoric and decorum were absorbed into Alexander Baumgarten's specification, in his *Aesthetica* of 1750, that aesthetics should be "the science of the beautiful." Nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers inherited this synthesis of ancient and modern interests. For them the wide problems of *aisthesis* or "animal and human perception" (problems not limited to the interpretation of art in the modern Western sense) became a philosophical study of the particular *aisthesis* of

“art in its natural and cultural contexts,” to use Kelly’s phrase. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as we will see in Chapter Three, a high formalist ideology of art attributed aesthetic aspects to a particular class of man-made things, albeit a wide swathe of them; the aesthetic ideology of high formalism did not limit itself to artifacts made in the period during which its terms for aesthetic aspects had been created. But in recent years philosophical aesthetics has tended to endorse Newman’s point and Kelly’s elaboration. Backing away from the universal application of aesthetics promulgated by high formalists, it takes aesthetics to be relevant to Euro-American artists in the later modern era (and perhaps *only* to those artists) because their work can be explained in aesthetic terms.

Such explanation is warranted, in turn, because aesthetic ideologies have constituted part of the specifically visual-cultural context within which later modern Euro-American arts have been made, and within which they could be understood to be beautiful, worthy, illuminating, or challenging. To be aware of aesthetics or to have a philosophy of art has been a substantial aspect of what it has meant to be a later modern artist. Outside this particular context, however, visual and other modes of culture arguably do not have a specifically *aesthetic* aspectivity. Except in the cultural tradition rooted in the eighteenth-century European development of aesthetic philosophy, aesthetics does not seem to have constituted an aspect of formality, stylisticality, or pictoriality in visual culture in the senses to be developed in the chapters of this book. In other words, it has not been a historical visibility. For most makers of paintings, sculptures, and other items of visual and material culture outside the European tradition, aesthetics has been, as Newman said, as ornithology to the birds: though the birds might well be studied ornithologically, *they* do not see themselves ornithologically. And it remains an open question what they *do* see when, for example, they interact with objects in their visual world—even objects that they themselves have made.

I will not try to defend this line of thinking—an arguable and much-argued one—in substantive terms. This is not a book about art and aesthetics. I begin instead by noting a foundational consideration, perhaps quite an obvious one, about the very fact that if *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* is correct in its history (and let us assume that it is) aesthetics provides the cultural context of *art*. Strictly speaking it is true that art must have culturally-recognized aesthetic aspects; culturally-constituted aesthetic aspects make art. For this very reason, however, we might feel we have learned little analytically about art *or* aesthetic aspectivity in identifying this cultural context. Certainly the cultural context of art is the art-context. But effectively this statement is vacuous.

Again, I will not try to decide substantively whether art should be defined in terms of culturally-constituted aesthetic aspects. Provisionally it might be said that aesthetic aspects must be necessary for art but are not sufficient for it insofar as things *other* than art can be aesthetic, even (indeed especially) within the ideology of the aesthetic developed in European philosophy since the eighteenth century. For the concept of a visual-cultural context—in this case, of an aesthetics that defines art—seems to need further analysis as well. So far it might seem that we have not learned much (beyond the crushingly obvious) about how art looks or what it looks like, aside from being able to say that “this work looks to be art . . . it looks like art; it has aesthetic aspects.”

Still, in an important sense this last statement is *not* tautologous. It addresses a substantive self-evidence—something materially visible and recognizable—in the particular things in question. It does not amount merely to adding the obvious analytical label “aesthetic” to “art.” Evidently there are things that art looks like in our context (even or especially if it is a “European development that has not been duplicated anywhere else”) that we can readily recognize. More important, there are things in our context that we readily recognize to be art because they are sufficiently like it in relevant respects—even though they may not “look like art” in every respect.

What is this form of life in which this likeness can be seen? Setting aside the question of art, how do we move from situations in which certain aspects of things (here the aspect we call “aesthetic”) have not dawned on us to the different situation in which they *have* dawned on us? Is it necessary to make a new kind of thing? Or simply to see the same old things anew? Because aspects of any kind are constituted in perceptual awareness, these must be aesthetic questions in the ancient etymological sense. They are questions of the animal and human sensory awareness of things in the world, and this even if the European aesthetics of art since the eighteenth century has dealt only with a particular swathe of objects in terms of a particular kind of aspect that they have come to possess. When applied to such objects as paintings, sculptures, and so on, they are questions, that is, of the history and cultivation of vision.

■ 2

The notion that “vision itself has its history,” to use the words of Heinrich Wölfflin (Fig. 1.1), has been one of the longest-lasting and deepest-seated principles of art history, even if it has sometimes been somewhat subterranean. As Wölfflin went on to say, “the revelation of these visual



Figure 1.1.
Heinrich Wölfflin
(1864–1945) in 1930.
Photograph by F. Wasow.
Private Collection,
San Francisco, California.

strata must be regarded as the primary task of art history.”²² According to this proposal, styles of depiction—culturally located and historically particular ways of making pictorial representations—have materially affected human visual perception. They constitute what might literally be called *ways of seeing*.

If it is correct, this hypothesis implies that art history should occupy a central place in virtually any study of human forms of life. For any such study will be likely to address the role of human visual perception. Certainly the principles of art history, as identified by Wölfflin himself or by later art historians like Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich, would have immediate relevance for research in arenas as diverse as anthropology, psychiatry, and ophthalmology. (Here and throughout I do not conflate art history and *aesthetic* inquiry, even though art historians are often interested in the art in the artifacts they study and many of the questions addressed in this book are problems of *aisthesis*—that is, of perceptual awareness and judgment. By art history I simply mean historical investigation of the interrelations of configuration, style, and depiction in artifacts, regardless of their origin or status as art in a modern Western sense.)

Stated this way, however, the implausibility of the claim that vision has a history seems equally clear. Psychiatry and ophthalmology have little to do with art history, even though they have occasionally used art and pictorial representations in their investigations. For its part anthropology has often criticized art historians for their overreliance specifically on Western aesthetics. It seems reasonable to suppose that human visual perception affects pictorial representations made by human beings. After all, human observers must be able to see pictures in order to use and interpret them. But it is more difficult to demonstrate that these depictions, the historical modes and media of their configuration and their cultural forms and styles, organize the seeing itself.

We can eat foods prepared in many different ways according to the canons of taste and the styles of preparation developed in different cuisines. But has digestion been shaped historically by these styles? Does it work in different kinds of ways when we eat different kinds of cuisine? In treating disorders of digestion (ulcers, say) must we know what culinary styles have been ingested in each case? We might conceive a circuit that interconnects natural human digestive processes and particular cultural styles of preparing food in a recursion or feedback loop of some kind. Indeed, a recursion or feedback loop seems to operate when we use pictures, for in seeing a picture we must see it as having configurative, historical, representational, and cultural styles, what I will call “forms of likeness.” But does this mean that the seeing itself has been pictorially

stylized or becomes stylized in the activity of seeing the picture? What would it mean to suppose that seeing has styles—styles reflected in configurative practices (that is, in ways of making and arranging the elements of an artwork or a picture) if not actually derived from them?

Questions along these lines have been asked ever since art history achieved its theoretical definition in the early twentieth century, and they continue to occupy me in this book. They have been especially pointed when the conceptual models of art history have been associated (by writers including Wölfflin, Panofsky, and Gombrich) with discoveries in anthropology, psychology, and biology about the nature of vision.

Oddly enough, however, a recent shift of art history into the study of so-called visual culture (best regarded as an *expansion* of art history into the study of visual culture) seems to presume that the questions have been settled. According to visual-culture studies, it is true *prima facie* that vision has a cultural history. Therefore the historical dimension of vision—and particular histories *of* vision—must become our object of inquiry whether we are art historians or ophthalmologists. In turn (at least according to some accounts of this matter) typical art-historical interests, that is, interests in the configuration of artworks, in the style of artifacts, and in the iconography of motifs, should apply to *all* of the domains of human life that involve vision, entirely regardless of the activities or artifacts in question. For all domains supposedly have a cultural history of vision or ways of seeing. Conversely, our art-historical understanding of the constitution of vision in culture (that is to say, our understanding of visual culture) must be applied to specifically art-historical objects such as artistic styles, even though some styles (as we will see in Chapter Four) are not wholly cultural entities. In these respects the study of art history and the study of vision equally dissolve into the investigation of visual culture. Or so we might be led to think.

But despite the emergence of visual-culture studies as a categorical solution to a long-standing theoretical problem, the question of the relation of vision and culture (a definite relation seems to be assumed in the very term *visual culture*) has not been settled. With the expansion of art history into visual-culture studies, the question has simply become more urgent. It concerns a greater range of objects and their attributes than would have been addressed by an art historian like Wölfflin, though Wölfflin's famous dictum, quoted at the outset, must count as a founding proposition of visual-culture studies.

As I see it, the question of vision and culture requires art historians to adopt something like the general theory sketched in this book. Properly stated, and despite the anti-art-historical rhetoric of some propo-

nents of visual-culture studies, the general theory of visual culture *fulfills* long-standing art-historical interests rather than just replaces them with entirely different concerns. To be sure, much of what passes for visual-culture studies is simply a sociology of multifarious technological practices and cultural productions in the domain of human activities and artifacts meant to be seen. Its general theory, if any, is simply a sociology of culture that happens to be visible. I am interested here, however, in a general theory of visual culture as such—in the intrinsic relation between vision and culture, if any there be, that is implied by the very term *visual culture*. That term must needs be vacuous unless it can be explicated in substantive terms.

Therefore I address the concept of *visuality*, or what I will call the “culturality of vision.” If it is not to be vacuous, the concept of *visuality*, the specific theoretical basis of a visual-culture studies that makes good on the claim implied in its own name, cannot simply *assume* the culturality of vision. It must give substance to that concept—biological, psychological, social, and historical substance. At the very least, it must address two questions that are complementary, though analytically quite distinct. First, what is cultural about vision (Part Two)? Some things are cultural about vision. But not everything. And second, what is visual about culture (Part Three)? Clearly some things are visual in culture, or visible as culture. But again not everything—even when the “visual dimension” of an artifact and a way of seeing it seem to be involved.

As we will see, it is for these very reasons that the intersection of vision (and visibility) and culture (and visible culturality) must be treated as a historical phenomenon. Stated another way, vision is not inherently a *visuality*. Rather vision must *succeed* to *visuality* through a historical process. The recursions of this succession are not well understood analytically, let alone neurologically, as actual or functional operations of the visual cortex and of higher (cognitive) processing. But a general theory of visual culture should attempt to map them in a way that might guide further investigation into the salient material processes. This investigation must (and will) be conducted by neurologists, psychologists, and anthropologists rather than art historians. But if art historians cannot guide it, then the theory of visual culture is empty.³

In this book I make several interrelated proposals about visual culture and the historical succession of vision to *visuality*. Given what I have said, and despite the foundational neurological and psychological explorations that must be waiting in the wings, it is not surprising that my proposals are partly art-historical propositions—that they rely on art-historical concepts.

The most important proposal modifies Wölfflin's claim. Vision can sometimes succeed to culture in the full sense implied in the theoretical notion of *visuality*. But it need not *always* do so. The succession occurs in complex relays and recursions of recognition in the kind of circuitry or feedback loop that I have already mentioned. These relays are inherently historical. They vary in an agent's experience. They differ between agents. They take time. They require work. And they are not inevitable: they can fail. Sometimes, in fact, they can *only* fail. Strictly speaking, then, there is no such thing as visual culture, at least if that term designates an agent's fully achieved horizon of commonality with members of his or her social group. Nonetheless we must accept that the unpredictable work of partial succession to *visuality* (and parallel cultural successions in other sensory channels) is the main activity of social life as it interacts with human proprioception (see Chapter Ten). Indeed, the recursion of sociability in proprioception might be *defined* as culture. One succeeds to visual culture in the course of one's history: one is not endowed with it. But what is this history? How does it take hold in proprioception?

To summarize the overall argument laid out in the next nine chapters of this book, vision is surely the chief natural context in which we encounter and experience the fine arts of painting and sculpture, the so-called decorative arts, and so on—visual culture in a strictly tautologous sense. Virtually by definition, *visuality*, as we will see in the succeeding chapters, must meet and match the perceptual—the aspective—face of visual culture. And sometimes it also *makes* it. What is visible becomes cultured in *visuality*; as we will see, an appropriately educated Egyptian beholder, for example, saw apposite differences between hieroglyphs and portraits (see Fig. 7.2) even though they often deployed the same outlines and shapes. And *visuality* has usually cultured what becomes visible; despite what could be their identical outlines and shapes in many cases, the hieroglyphs and portraits have been assigned—have succeeded to—recognizable respects of notation and depiction respectively. The history of the succession of vision to *visuality*—its relays, recursions, resistances, and reversions—is my main topic. But this topic requires me to investigate a set of analytically distinct successions that constitute the feedback loop of vision and *visuality* just mentioned; that is, the complex relay or recursion of vision *into* *visuality* and vice versa. In particular, the formal, the stylistic, and the pictorial aspects of sensuously configured things, as I will put it, are mutually “interdetermined.” Within a form of life, people can use the formal aspects of configuration to see its emergent stylistic aspects. They can use these stylistic aspects to see emergent depictive aspects. And they can use these depictive aspects to see emergent formal

and stylistic aspects—and so on, in recursion after endless recursion. For this very reason the succession of vision to visuality can be described, at least in part, as the history within which formality, style, and pictoriality come to be recognized in artifacts—to be seen or *visibilized*. I will consider the vicissitudes of these successions (including their disjunction, resistance, and failure) in the following chapters: formality (the apprehension of sensuous configuration in artifacts) in Chapter Three, style and what I will call “stylisticality” in Chapter Four, and pictoriality (the emergence of depiction in what I will call the “iconographic succession”) in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight.

In the domain of artifacts meant to be seen, form, style, and depiction are visual phenomena; they are visible in those artifacts. But culture does not require visual or visible manifestations. In the end, then, the cultural-ity of vision, or true visuality, is not—or at least not exclusively—a visual phenomenon. Certainly it is not wholly visible. This result (explored in some detail in Chapters Nine and Ten) may seem paradoxical to some readers, art historians not least. The visualist prejudices of art history have been carried into visual-culture studies, and they encourage us to believe that its primary object of study must be *visual* artifacts and ways of *seeing* them in the past and present. But one of the most striking and consequential propositions of the general theory of visual culture is that forms of likeness in my sense are not entirely a matter of sensuously apprehended morphology, of the visual and visible “look” of things. Forms of likeness that go beyond the visual and the visible (indeed, that go beyond the sensuous in *any* sensory modality or medium) constitute the historical identity of form, style, and depiction, even as the visible vicissitudes of form, style, and depiction constitute the culturality of vision, or visuality. This succession is the most general recursion that I will explore in this book. It explains why vision has an *art* history, as Wölfflin probably should have said.