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Heinrich Wölflin’s Classic Patterns of the Renaissance

This essay examines Heinrich Wölflin’s patterns of judgement in his pioneering art-historical study Classic Art, first published in 1899. By using the anti-historicist concept of the “classic”, he systematically withdraws the art of the High Renaissance from historical change in order to erect it as a protective shield against the transience of unclassic modernism and contemporary life. This proto-structuralist act of creating order by means of pattern comparisons in the timeless realm of beauty conceives the art historian as both an intellectual aristocrat with artistic ambitions and a conservator of the eternities of classic art.

Keywords: Heinrich Wölflin; structuralism; organic artwork; classicist aesthetics; High Renaissance art; patterns of judgement

A pattern is a structure that is characterised by repeated or parallel occurrences. It is a way of thinking, shaping, or behaving; a sequence of actions characterised by uniform repetition (i.e. reproduction). A pattern can exist in different instances of similar objects, so that after recognising the pattern, these can be grouped in a taxonomy, a classificatory system, a judgement scheme, or a matrix. A pattern can also be a formalised characteristic that is conserved or reproduced in repetitions of a larger context. The repetitions can be spatial (e.g. fabric patterns) and/or temporal (e.g. behavioural patterns) or reproductive (e.g. templates).

The perceptible properties of patterns are characterised by a minimum of repetition (periodicity) and symmetry. Patterns are iterative; they have repetitive structures and are therefore recognisable. A pattern is distinguished by formal abstraction, which makes it stand out particularly sharply as a contrasting structure. Contrasts that are as pronounced as possible, for example in the colour scheme, and lines that are as straight and symmetrically arranged as possible, ensure the highest recognisability of a pattern, as illustrated by the exemplary model of the black-and-white chequerboard pattern. In this respect, the pattern is structurally homologous to the scheme, where the same applies: the simpler, the better applicable. A comprehensive and homogeneous pattern creates a horizontally-vertically structured order grid that, precisely through its presumed partiality, points to the claim of totality of this all-embracing establishment of order, which does not tolerate any deviation from the norm.

In addition, the pattern is an opponent to the (individually designable) ornament, but after iconoclasm it becomes the ornament itself and claims to pattern the surface so jointlessly and smoothly that it stays intact. Classic patterns are those that clearly and firmly demarcate themselves through the contour line from the outside world, which is always threatened by dissolving into entropy. These patterns can serve as a protective shield against the chaos of an ornamental excess tending towards self-dissolution in the flood of unmanageable – due to a lack of structure – and unrecognisable details. Patterns are reproduced more or less mechanically, not only on the loom or in carpet manufacture, but also in art judgement in the automatic (even uncon-
scious) application of normative, supra-temporal aesthetic categories.

Classically Structured Art

The comparison of patterns ideally leads to the recognition of structures, which hold supra-temporal validity. The structural patterns of classical aesthetics in their systematic treatment are ahistorical; the individual work of art, as well as the form created by the artist, instead are due to historical change (like fashion), and thus are subject to transitoriness. In this sense, I would like to elaborate the classic structural patterns of aesthetic judgement in Heinrich Wölfflin’s work, with particular reference to his 1899 book Die klassische Kunst (Classic Art). Looking back on his second major art-historical publication after his habilitation thesis, Renaissance und Barock, Wölfflin later claimed to have gone “beyond the individual characteristics of the artists to a systematic overall presentation of the essence of classic style”.

As stated in the preface, the intention was neither to consider “art as the emanation of various individuals as personalities”, nor to reduce the work of art in a cultural-historical perspective to “a product of differing historical circumstances and national peculiarities” that could only be “illustrative of the history of civilization”, but rather a genuinely aesthetic questioning, in which the “artistic content”, which “follows its own inner laws”, and the grasping of general characteristics of the “style as a whole” (“des Gesamtstils”) were to stand in the foreground.

No external influences on the work of art in the sense of Hippolyte Taine’s theory of milieu and temperament were to be admitted, but rather the “inner structure” that constituted the “essence” (“Wesen”) of the work of art or the style of an epoch, as can be shown in Wölfflin’s description of Michelangelo’s concept of form: the grasp of form and clarity of inner vision which he possessed are absolutely without parallel; there are no tentative gropings after expression; he gives everything he wants with the very first strokes, so that his drawings have a penetrative quality. They are, as it were, saturated with form. The inner structure, the mechanics of movement have been expressed to the very last detail [...].

According to his introduction to Classic Art, Wölfflin wanted to provide readers with a “standard of judgement” (“Wertmass”) that was increasingly threatened in his time. This standard should enable them to pass evaluative aesthetic judgements that would provide orientation in the confusing field of Renaissance art.

Structuralism avant la lettre

In Classic Art, Wölfflin as a proto-structuralist employs dichotomous formal and structural comparisons, and operates with contrasts and confrontations of Quattrocento and Cinquecento works of art. In the diachronically structured first part, the book, which Wölfflin himself admitted was not very suitable for a broader audience, in fact works quite well as an introduction to the Italian Renaissance, as claimed by the subtitle. The synchronous second part offers systematic insights into the structural conditions of Italian Renaissance art by coming up with startling “antitheses” that serve to exemplify general structural laws. The book is also characterised by an ingenious image arrangement, not only in terms of page layout, but also in terms of the photographs chosen for illustration. It is interspersed with “double projections” on opposite pages, which are designed to enable the reader to follow the dichotomous argumentation of the text in a comparative viewing of the artworks as well.

Wölfflin’s modus operandi is clearest in his juxtaposition of Ghirlandaio’s fruit bearer from
the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist in S. Maria Novella and Raphael’s preparatory drawing for his water bearer in the Vatican’s Borgo Fire in order to illustrate the genesis of a potent sense of form resulting from a new sensibility towards the body (fig. 1):

The Quattrocento enjoyed the highest degree of charming movement in agile, hurrying figures: not for nothing is this motif to be found in all the artists of the time. The angel hastens with his candle, and the servant-girl, bringing wine and fruit from the country to the woman in childbed, rushes in at the door, her clothes blown by the wind into crisp, rippling folds (fig. 166). This figure, so highly characteristic of the age, has its Cinquecento counterpart in the woman carrying water in the Fire in the Borgo (fig. 167): the contrast between the two figures embraces the whole difference between two conceptions of form. This woman carrying water, striding along, calm and erect, her strong arms bearing the load, is one of the most splendid creations of Raphael’s mature and virile sense of beauty.

Using the assassination of Saint Peter Martyr as another example, Wölfflin explains the law of concentration on the essentials: such concentration is achieved through simplification and hierarchisation, both inherent to classic art (fig. 2). While the Quattrocentist in the London National Gallery version of the theme, which Wölfflin attributes to Gentile Bellini (it is presently attributed to Giovanni Bellini), “spells out the story” paratactically and without any recognisable semantic hierarchisation, Titian “starts...
with the assumption that two analogous scenes cannot possibly be represented side by side. The assault on St. Peter must be the principal motif, with which nothing can be allowed to compete." Therefore Titian has presented the story "in its classic form".10

Confrontative Contrast Patterns

In the systematic second part of the book’s chapter devoted to “The New Pictorial Form” (“Die neue Bildform”), Wölfflin developed the familiar contrast patterns that – assigned to the art of the Renaissance and the Baroque, respectively – were to become a hallmark of his Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst (Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art).11 The chapter introduces the contrasting terms linear vs. painterly, plane vs. recession, closed form vs. open form, multiplicity vs. unity, and clearness vs. unclearness. If, in the Principles of Art History of 1915, the Baroque is Wölfflin’s aesthetic favourite, his artistic ideal in Classic Art of 1899 still was the High Renaissance.

Following the disposition of Winckelmann’s Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums (The History of the Art of Antiquity) of 1764, Wölfflin’s stylistic analysis follows a double course: "In order to be more sure of reaching this goal" – that is, the identification of epochal styles and the comprehension of general features of stylistic

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2a – b Heinrich Wölfflin, Die klassische Kunst: Eine Einführung in die italienische Renaissance, Munich 1899, 270–271

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change – “the first – historical – section has a systematic one as its counterpart, which is arranged according to concepts and not according to personalities, and this second part is supposed to give, at the same time, an explanation of the phenomenon.” The term “counterpart” (”Gegenprobe” in German, which more accurately translates as “cross-check”) conceals the methodological problem of circular reasoning: since it was already clear in the first part which systematic concepts were to be exposed in the second part, the individual-work analysis naturally leads to the desired structural generalisation. Subtraction, reduction, and abstraction are formal strategies that Wölflin repeatedly employs in his structural analysis in order to keep his system coherent and intact.

Wölflin refers in *Classic Art* repeatedly to Adolf von Hildebrand, whose 1893 essay *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (The Problem of Form in the Visual Arts) had already developed a kind of structuralist analysis that conceived the constitution of meaning in the work of art through the matching of dichotomous contrasts. According to Wölflin, the structure can only be uncovered in a direct comparison of the different relations of formal patterns; only the contrast to the past lets crystallise the growth in absolute size, the novel filling of pictorial space, the differentiation and hierarchisation of pictorial elements in the Cinquecento. In contrast, the art of Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Luca della Robbia, Benedetto da Maiano, Antonio Rossellino, and many other Quattrocentists is naively fixed on content – formally “gimmicky”, operating with cheap theatrical calculations and thus overstimulating the viewer.

Proximity to life, richness of detail, and naivety are treated in the first part of the book in the chapter on “Antecedents” (”Vorgeschichte”) and subsequently repeatedly invoked as a contrasting foil. In this juxtaposition, however, Wölflin, as Regine Prange has shown, conceives of stylistic categories “not so much as mutually displacing stages of a historical process”, but “rather as necessarily interconnected aspects of a normative whole”, which “sets itself apart from still immature design methods as found in the Quattrocento”. The exaggerated abundance of detail, but above all the realism of the mode of representation in the artworks of this period seems to urge the viewer to escape in a regressive classicism that obscures its historicist reference and historical withdrawal, called “classic” rather than classicist.

### The Organic Whole

From the direct comparison of Quattro- and Cinquecento works, Wölflin derives his ideal of classic art as a necessarily self-contained, organically animated wholeness – an ideal that coincides with Alberti’s *concinnitas*, the harmony of the individual parts and the whole, as Oskar Bätschmann has argued. This explains why the “joints” (”Gelenke”) of sculptures play such a surprisingly important role in *Classic Art*: They guarantee the cohesion of the parts in the whole and thus the necessary unity of the organic work of art, in terms of both a morphological regularity of the artwork in itself and the role corporeality plays in its perception. In the “visual syntax” Wölflin employs in *Classic Art*, the joints are the conjunctions and links, as becomes clear only in the German original’s “Schönheit ist Klarheit der Charniere”.

Wölflin explicitly cites Alberti as a classicist *avant la lettre* in order to mark the difference between the latter’s conception of classicism derived from rhetoric and the specificity in visual art that Wölflin wants to present in his book instead: “This essential character of classic art had already been presaged by Leon Battista Alberti when, in a much-quoted sentence, he defined perfect beauty as a condition in which the slightest alteration would detract from the beauty of the whole. He defined it in words, but here we...
have the idea made manifest." This conception of the work of art as a product of balance between its parts and the whole – which can in the last instance be traced back to Goethe’s theory of nature – is based on the idea of lively styles that at the same time follow an inner functionality, logical as it were, and that have to fulfil a single (functionally necessary) main task.

In his 1893 essay Die antiken Triumphbogen in Italien: Eine Studie zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der römischen Architektur und ihr Verhältniss zur Renaissance (The Ancient Triumphal Arches in Italy: A Study on the Development of Roman Architecture and Its Relationship to the Renaissance), Wölfflin had already developed a structural-analytical approach to style based on the architectural morphology of a number of triumphal arches, which allowed for synchronous structural comparisons over long periods of time. According to this comparative approach, the late antique decline of form, for example, can be found typologically in Italian Mannerism. From a structural point of view, the “Arch of Septimius Severus in its profiling” (“in seiner Profilbildung”) and the “style of Michelangelo” can be paralleled just as easily as the Arch of Titus and the Palazzo della Cancelleria. As in the development from the Quattro- to the Cinquecento in Classic Art, Wölfflin in his essay states that in antiquity a process repeats itself “in almost typical purity” (“in fast typischer Reinheit”) in every artistic development. Styles inevitably progress from linear to painterly and to the contrast of masses of light and shadow. Furthermore, Wölfflin argued, “in place of similar forms […] differentiated forms appear; instead of coordination, subordination; instead of loose coherence, a whole, where every element is an integrating component.”

This “economy of the whole” (“die Ökonomie des Ganzen”), with its simplification of lines, becomes the dominating standard of pattern formation and can be traced back to the “relationship of the proportions presenting themselves to the eye in the whole and in the individual parts”. It is striking that these stylistic developments take place in a kind of autogenerative metamorphosis of form that seems beyond the architect’s control. Wölfflin highlighted in his structural analyses that Vasari’s developmental scheme of the germination, blossoming, and decay of art manifests itself both in Roman antiquity and in the Renaissance. In this “course of development” (“Entwickelungsgang”) of art, which implies the idea of a metamorphic genesis of style reminiscent of the morphological ideas of Goethe, art has a life of its own – independent of its creator. Metamorphosis is the exact opposite of revolutionary disruption; it unfolds almost imperceptibly in seamless transitions. Wölfflin considers these transformations of form and the morphological genesis of style to be fundamental principles of classic art.

Wölfflin’s Methodological spiritus rector

The dedicatee of Classic Art was also, in a certain sense, its spiritus rector: Jacob Burckhardt’s letter to Wölfflin of 5 October 1896 prompted the impulse to change the latter’s plan of a Raphael monograph into a wider, more systematic study:

Now, however, the ‘Classic Style’. […] Fusion of the undertaking with the new book about Michelangelo? You know infinitely better than I that not a single aesthetic question of that time cannot be linked to him. But now you are supposed to burden yourself with a whole biography of Michelangelo and take on the responsibility for an endless and partly controversial detail? […] You could illumine Michelangelo as artist in a completely new light with a book of about 300 pages, by quite decisively and one-sidedly applying the general results you have obtained up to now as a standard specifically to MAngelo and by drawing parallels with the other great artists just as far and as clearly as the subject matter requires or permits in each.
And now you would be in the right state of mind for Rafael’s sake, and yet you would not have to mention him in the title. Your work would be nothing but a dialogue between the Quattrocento and the Cinquecento, everything from the highest and freest point of view, in short, and as clearly and emphatically as possible. Through the sharp contrast, the “essence” of Michelangelo’s art was to emerge as clearly as possible as an exemplary pattern. In a letter dated 29 August 1896, Burckhardt set the course of Wölfflin’s book in terms of content. There, he refers to the “general phenomenon of the opposition of the High Renaissance to the Early Renaissance”, and recommends the method of confrontational comparisons: “Try it […] again in Florence with Fra Bartolommeo alone, as opposed to Ghirlandajo, for example, and in Rome with the Disputa as opposed to the Florentines of the Sistina, and notice – perhaps for the hundredth time – the renunciation of the polyphony (even if it was very beautiful) in favour of the powerful and particularly the animated.” The term “simplification” (“Vereinfachung”) is used here as another core concept of Classic Art, just as Wölfflin might have read a hint of the spontaneous change in the body’s sensibility from Burckhardt’s mention in the same letter: “The human body almost suddenly has a completely different meaning in the Classic style than it did for the Quattrocentists.”

Classic Art in fact owes much to The Cicerone. Burckhardt’s main achievement was to have presented a comprehensive categorisation of the vast Italian corpus of art in an ordering intervention that could almost be called proto-structuralist. The Cicerone was the first integral art-historical inventory of Italian art that aimed at a classificatory synthesis of the greatest scale, giving the entire art cosmos of Italy a new, almost museum-like classification. It offered a morphology of the beauties of Italian art and established a grid of judgement composed of dichotomous pairs of opposites of epochs, styles, and individual artists (first and foremost Raphael vs. Michelangelo). This enabled it to integrate every single one of the approximately 10,000 works of art mentioned into this pattern of judgement in a coherent, albeit subsumption-logical manner that subordinates the individual work of art to the overall structure. In particular, Wölfflin adopts a large part of the aesthetic categories developed by Burckhardt in his Anleitung zum Genuss der Kunstwerke Italiens (An Art Guide to Painting in Italy). For instance, the “sense of form” (“Formgefühl”) expressed in the work of art is already present in The Cicerone: the impression of unity, the harmonious interplay of all parts into a whole, which for Burckhardt constitutes beauty, and a holistic spatial experience are identified therein as the main characteristics of a sense of form in the Roman High Renaissance.

An “economy of means” (“Oeconomie der Mittel”) can also already be found in Burckhardt’s work: it guarantees that balance is maintained; the ideal work of art ought to be moderate, kept in equilibrium, not falling into any extreme, and – above all – well ordered. Strict observance and ascetic use of the artistic means are enhanced; form becomes a stylistic principle. On the one hand, “economy” is to be understood as a habitus concerned with moderation and restraint; on the other hand, it also resonates with a connotation of creating balance and equilibrium – both equally aesthetic and ethical concepts. The Cicerone had exposed the ideal of an “organic” work of art as a central category. This categorisation, in which every individual part, every decorative form, was necessarily related to the whole and its function was taken up by Wölfflin: all individual parts, every single member of the organism, contributes to the harmony of the whole, to the “organic totality”, to the “superior architectural organism”, which bestows upon the viewer a “great aesthetic pleasure”. For Wölfflin, nature and art are organised according to analogous laws. In such a conception of the “true work of art” as a “lawful image of
our imagination," the work claims necessity according to the classic ideal of the greatest possible coincidence of form and content.18

Noble Simplicity, Calm Grandeur, Eternal Rest

Wölfflin’s patterns for judging art were entirely committed to classicism, especially that of Weimar, which was rooted in the classicistic normative canon of noble simplicity and calm grandeur. The “classic work of art” is timeless, eternally suspended in its intactness: present as an ideal image for all times. In the organically cohesive work of art, the coordination of formal elements is replaced by their subordination. Each element is assigned its “definite, fixed place” in the firmly established, hierarchical system. Moreover, “fixed in a strict overall framework”, the elements keep themselves under control within the ordering structure in their chessboard-like dichotomous opposition. This strict system guarantees the maintenance of the necessary order and security: “Here there is a distinct top and bottom, a decisive front and back; all the organisms are arranged in a certain order, so that no single element can take the place of the other”, as Goethe already claimed.19

These classic “laws of art” must be strictly observed by the artist in order to produce a masterpiece that can claim necessity. Transgressions against the norm of the classic are to be severely punished, because the highest beauty becomes judiciable in this model. The “normative concept” pertaining to classicism is therefore also a tendentious term against the eclecticism of the contemporary historicist variety of forms and styles, which Wölfflin condemns as subject to the whims of fashion and masquerade-like in Classic Art: “[...] man himself has changed even in his outward, bodily form; and the real kernel of a style is in the new outlook upon the human body and in new ideas about deportment and move-

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3 Adolf von Hildebrand, Young Man Standing, ca. 1881–1884, marble. Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie
ment. This conception of style is a much more weighty one than that which obtains nowadays, when styles change like fancy dresses being tried on for a masquerade. However, this uprooting of style dates only from our own century and we have really no longer any right to talk of styles, but only of fashions.”

However, contemporary art production was not condemned in general by Wölfflin as being dictated by fashion, and thus ephemeral. The sculptures of Adolf von Hildebrand, for example (figs. 3, 4), could definitely claim classic status: Wölfflin’s review of Hildebrand’s self-interpretative Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst, published in 1893, affirmatively quoted whole passages of the book, and concluded with nothing short of an apotheosis of its author: “In an age of one-sided painterly interest, the mighty veto of a master of plastic form resounds, and his voice is the voice of the artistic spirit that has reigned in all classical ages.”

Art-Historical Self-Therapy

For Wölfflin, the classic was a structural concept: “Classicality” (“Classicität”) was made to last for all time and was exempt from transience, residing in the “eternities” of art, to use Burckhardt’s term. The aesthetic patterns that Wölfflin recognises in classic art are conceived to create tranquillity through order. In his late essay on “Adolf Hildebrand’s ‘Problem of the Form’” (1931), Wölfflin emphasised in this sense the aspect of Goethean self-appeasement through the classic that was decisive for both him and Hildebrand when postulating that the central task of art is to bring the viewer “into a secure relationship with the world”. The terminology of Classic Art is accordingly characterised by order, calm, and, above all, by “necessity”, “inevitable” (“Notwendigkeit”), which is invoked no less than 41 times. Classicality was obviously a compulsory measure for Wölfflin. Form must be held in “certain bounds” (“gewissen Schranken”) by the “spirit of moderation” (“Geist des Maßes”), so that the grandeur emerging in the Cinquecento remains controllable.

The art historian becomes a founder of order who elevates himself to the status of a “god-like artist”, and at the same time keeps the potentially excessive autonomy controlled within the genesis of form. The chaotic diversity of forms is to be subdued by the classificatory categorisation. Only the lasting “final form” of the artwork guarantees definite experiences of objective finality – such as tranquillity, order, symmetry. The “ideal conception of a comprehensively ordered” and unalterably and securely completed “world”, designed to the very last detail, manifests itself as Wölfflin’s “goal of longing” in the hard, clear, and immutably solid structure of a crystal. For Wölfflin, the latter – due to its inorganic property – represents the safe alternative to an all too lively organism that could potentially transgress the limits of its harmonic order and thereby destroy it.

4 Adolf von Hildebrand, Philoctetes, 1886, marble. Munich, Glyptothek
In one of his notebooks from 1896, Wölfflin explicitly states the therapeutic function of the classic as a sedative against anything oppressive and frightening: “The Classic Style: [...] 19. III. feeling of the highest security and reassurance. The art of classic Italy. Not a person, a style. The greatest task. The major contrast to modern Nordic formlessness.”

The contrast, Wölfflin’s deep-rooted fear of formlessness, of the dissolution of form, and of disorder, becomes visible in Classic Art in a vocabulary of uncertainty. Disquietingly far from the order of the classic are untruth, deception: a blurring, dissolving chaos that eludes a firm grasp. Instead, it transgresses the defined and objectively identifiable, everything that is measurable, limited in itself, and perceived as “strictly regular” (“als streng gesetzliche empfundene Ordnung”), and threatens it with evanescence, ultimately with death.

Against this peril, the form of the classic lays everything bare. It hides nothing from the viewer; it is truthful, and always at hand when needed to calm the spectator.

In Classic Art, a metaphorical field of late classicism is introduced, which would have delighted the French academism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moderation in the sense of “verisimilitude” (“vraisemblance”) and “decorum” (“bienséance”) becomes a means of self-assurance. In this ascetic way of life, neither excesses nor extremes are envisaged, no “losing self-control” (“Sichgehenlassen”) and certainly no “intoxication” (“Rauschgenuß”).

Around 1900, the Dionysian, the ecstatic, the orgiastic, the irrational, and the occult are the opponents against which the protective shield of the Apollonian classic patterns must be placed in an unwavering and affirmative position. The rigour of form must be preserved by all means as an aesthetic and pragmatic insurance. The harmonisation of the parts and the whole becomes the ideal pattern of art and life; a balanced life ruled by moderation is the incarnation of Alberti’s concinnitas.

The Classic as an Aristocratic Way of Life

The classic is thus the result of a “life formation” (“Lebensbildung”) in which ethics and aesthetics are inseparably combined in outstanding, “noble” – which, for Wölfflin, means aristocratically distinguished – individuals. The ideal figure is the intellectual aristocrat. In the sense of this model, the bourgeois opulence of the materialistic Quattrocento is replaced in Classic Art by the aristocratic seclusion of the idealistic Cinquecento. Political subordination in the duchy of Florence, ruled by Cosimo I in an increasingly autocratic manner, banished the ever-present danger of upheaval in the egalitarian (here synonymous with highly insecure) Republic, which itself is usually the result of the worst conceivable disruption of order, that of revolution. Peace and order had to be guaranteed by means of strict hierarchisation, which in the Cinquecento was also evident in the formal shaping of art: sheer size, diversification, and increase in complexity, all whilst maintaining the unity of the work, as well as block-like solidity, are the guarantors of the lasting survival of classic art. In Baldassare Castiglione’s Il Cortegiano (The Courtier), Wölfflin finds his archetype of the intellectual aristocrat.

The hallmark of a truly noble and distinguished character is the perfect congruence of being and appearance. It matures into the highest perfection of personality, as Wölfflin elaborates on Raphael’s portrait of Castiglione (fig. 5) in Classic Art: “The man gazes calmly out of the picture, his soul in his eyes, yet without obtrusive sentiment, for Raphael was painting the aristocratic courtier, the embodiment of the complete gentleman, as described by Castiglione himself in his little book, ‘Il Cortigiano’, with modesty as the basic trait of his character. The nobility of the man is shown, not by any hauteur of bearing, but by his unpretentious and restrained calm.”

The noble courtier with his unstrained, virtuoso sprezzatura displays an aristocratic bearing that
demonstrates his nature – sublimated by art and nonchalance. This intellectual aristocratic courtier moves around in ordered circumstances and keeps the right balance in his interpersonal interactions, avoiding direct contact with “the threatening characteristic of the individual” ("das Individual-Charakteristische") which cannot be held at a distance in an objective manner. 42

Wölfflin’s Crusade Against the Unclassic

In Classic Art, Wölfflin significantly pushes his methodological program – the reintegration of aesthetics into art history – once more. Now it is a matter of an aesthetics “of the normative culmination on the classic”, 43 as Wölfflin’s wording “the value and the essence of a work of art” in his preface suggests. 44 In 1966, Ernst Gombrich analysed Wölfflin’s dichotomous classification scheme in Norm and Form, using Wölfflin’s own instruments of structural analysis under the premise that in all writing on art, formal or stylistic descriptive criteria tend to instantaneously turn into normative evaluation criteria. 45 The establishment of an ideal of art is basically – in Wölfflin’s case even to an outstanding degree – achieved through the devaluation of its opposing concepts. According to Gombrich, all classifications of style can be reduced to the basic polarity of classical versus non-classical, unclassical (or, formulated in terms of production aesthetics and intentionality, anti-classical). 46

The unclass order has no right to positive definition; it is always defined ex negativo as deviation from and degeneration of the classic. This results in a vocabulary of exclusion, devaluation, and prohibition, which in Classic Art is used for the Quattrocento. In this sense, Man-
erist art formed a further foil of contrast to the classic in Wölfflin’s work, which he considered an anti-classical phenomenon of fashion and decadence, primarily due to the destruction of the classic sense of space with its “constructive honesty” ("konstruktive Ehrlichkeit”), 47 the dissolution of the unified body concept of the Renaissance, and an unnaturally void formalism: “From now on, everybody sought to obtain stupendous effects of mass, utterly rejecting Raphael’s architectonic methods. Spaciousness and beauty of proportion became alien concepts; the feeling for the potentialities of a plane surface or spatial area became completely atrophied. Paint-
ers began to rival one another in the atrocious overcrowding of canvases, in a dissolution of forms which deliberately sought a contradiction between the amount of space available and the objects in it.” 48 The last chapter of the chronological part of Classic Art, in which Wölfflin condemns Mannerism, accordingly is entitled “The Decline” (“Der Verfall”). 49

In Wölfflin’s eyes, the anticlassical is form without norm, without inner order; it is arbitrary, lacking rules, and thus a product of the whims of the artist. For Wölfflin, the genuine

5 Raphael, Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione, 1514–1515, oil on canvas, 82 × 67 cm. Paris, Louvre Museum
task of an art historian seems to have been to build a protective wall against modernity’s onslaught of formlessness, aided by the aesthetic patterns and grids of judgement he had developed. The classic is historically complete and offers the critic of modernity a safe haven. Because it belongs to the past, the reconstruction of the classic ideal can succeed with absolute certainty. Wölfflin was in search of fixed structures and elementary patterns of behaviour that would restore the right form to his era, which lacked formal style. Admittedly, the classic art of the Renaissance could be compared – according to Wölfflin – “with the ruins of a building nearly, but never quite, finished”, whose original form had to be supplemented by widely scattered fragments and imperfect traditions. Only the art historian, thoroughly familiar with the structural patterns of the classic, can resurrect the exemplary ideal – for eternity.

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6 Wölfflin 1952 (as in note 2), 39. “Völlig ausser Vergleich steht die Kraft seiner Formaufassung und die Klarheit des innern Vorstellens. Kein Tasten und Suchen; mit dem ersten Strich giebt er den bestimmten Ausdruck. Zeichnungen von ihm haben etwas Durchdringendes. Sie sind ganz gesättigt mit Form; die innere Struktur, die Mechanik der Bewegung scheint sich bis auf den letzten Rest in Ausdruck umgesetzt zu haben” (Wölfflin 1899 [as in note 4], 42).

7 Wölfflin 1952 (as in note 2), XI; Wölfflin 1899 (as in note 4), VII.
12 Wölfflin 1952 (as in note 2), XII. “Um dieses Ziel sicherer zu erreichen, ist dem, historischen Teil zur Gegenprobe ein zweiter systematischer beigegeben, der nicht nach Persönlichkeiten, sondern nach Begriffen den Stoff ordnet, und in diesem zweiten Teil soll zugleich die Erklärung des Phänomens enthalten sein” (Wölfflin 1899 [as in note 4], IX).
16 Wölfflin 1899 (as in note 4), 251. Translated as “beauty is clarity of articulation” in Wölfflin 1952 (as in note 2), 264.
19 Wölfflin 1893 (as in note 18), 20.
Jetzt gewonnenen allgemeinen Resultate als Maßstab gerade an Mängelo anlegen und die Parallele mit den übrigen Großen gerade so weit und so deutlich durchführten als der Gegenstand es jedesmal verlangt oder zuläßt. Und jetzt wären Sie gerade auch um Rafaels willen in der besten Stimmung, und brauchten ihn doch auf dem Titel nicht zu nennen. Ihr Werk würde leider Zweisprache zwischen Quattrocento und Cinquecento, Alles vom höchsten und freisten Standpunkt aus, kurz, und so deutlich und entschieden als möglich."


25 Ibid., 290, no. 1619: “Der menschliche Leib hat im klassischen Styl fast plötzlich eine ganz andere Bedeutung als bei den Quattrocentisten.”


27 Burckhardt 2001 (as in note 26), vol. 1, 19.


33 Werner Hofmann, Fragen der Strukturanalyse, in: Hofmann 1979 (as in note 29), 70–89, here 76.


38 Wölfflin 1910 (as in note 34), 29.
39 Heinrich Wölfflin, Goethes Italienische Reise: Rede an der Goetheetagung in Weimar [1926], in: Wölfflin 1941 (as in note 34), 49–57, here 54.
40 Lurz 1981 (as in note 23), 126.
41 Wölfflin 1952 (as in note 2), 121. "Der Mann sieht aus dem Bilde heraus mit ruhigem, seelenvollen Blick, aber ohne ausdringliches Sentimento. Es ist der vornehm geborene Hofmann, den Raffael hier zu malen hatte, die Verkörperung des vollkommenen Kavaliers, wie ihn Castiglione selbst in seinem Büchlein vom ‘Cortigiano’ gefordert hat. Die modesta ist der Grundzug dieses Charakters. Ohne vornehme Pose kennzeichnet sich der Adelige durch das anspruchslose, zurückhaltende, stille Wesen” (Wölfflin 1899 [as in note 4], 118–119).
42 Cf. Anon., Heinrich Wölfflin über “Das Erlebnis des Klassischen”, in: Heidelberger Tageblatt, 27 January 1932, 4, quoted by Michael Gnehm, Heinrich Wölfflin und das Erlebnis des Klassischen, in: Franziska Bomski and Thorsten Valk (eds.), Die Rede vom Klassischen im 20. Jahrhundert: Transformationen und Kontinuitäten, Göttingen 2020, 167–194, here 172: ”Objective clarity, unity of wholeness, strict organic form, victory of the type and the ideal over that which is characteristic of the individual, greatness of form, these are the essential features of all classic art” (“Sachliche Klarheit, Geschlossenheit der Ganzeht, strenge organische Form, Stieg des Typus und des Ideals über das Individual-Charakteristische, Größe der Form, das sind die Wesenszüge aller klassischen Kunst”). This Wöllflinian pathos of distance was countered by Hildebrand’s concept of the “distant picture”, in which the work of art coalesces into a harmonious whole for the viewer from a distance and is withdrawn from direct haptic confrontation in the deep space of perspective.
44 Wölfflin 1952 (as in note 2), XI (“Wert und Wesen des Kunstswerks”; Wölfflin 1899 [as in note 4], VII).
45 Ernst Gombrich, Norm and Form: The Stylistic Categories of Art History and their Origins in Renaissance Ideals, in: id., Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance, London 1966, 81–98 and 149, esp. 89: ”It is no accident, I believe, that the various terms for non-classical styles turn out to be such terms of exclusion. It was the classical tradition of normative aesthetics that first formulated some rules of art, and such rules are most easily formulated negatively as a catalogue of sins to be avoided. Just as most of the Ten Commandments are really prohibitions, so most rules of art and of style are warnings against certain sins […] – the disharmonious, the arbitrary and the illogical must be taboo to those who follow the classical canon.”
46 Ibid., 83: ”That procession of styles and periods known to every beginner – Classic, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Mannerist, Baroque, Rococo, Neo-Classical and Romantic – represents only a series of masks for two categories, the classical and the non-classical.”
47 Hönes 2011 (as in note 36), 49.
48 Wölfflin 1952 (as in note 2), 202. ”Alle suchen jetzt die betäubenden Massenwirkungen. Von der Architekturkonic Raffaels will man nichts mehr hören. Das Wohlräumige, das schöne Mass sind fremde Begriffe geworden. Das Gefühl hat sich ganz abgestumpft für das, was man einer Fläche, einem Raum zutun darf. Man wetteifert in dem entsetzlichen Vollpfropfen der Bilder, in einer Formlosigkeit, die absichtlich den Widerspruch zwischen Raum und Füllung sucht” (Wölfflin 1899 [as in note 4], 187).
49 The model for this title can also be found in Burckhardt 2001 (as in note 26), vol. 2, 115. See Oskar Bätschmann, Jacob Burckhardt: Kunstgeschichte mit und ohne Ästhetik, in: Andreas Beyer and Danièle Cohn (eds.), Die Kunst denken: Zu Ästhetik und Kunstgeschichte, Berlin and Munich 2012, 119–136, here 126.
50 Wölfflin 1952 (as in note 2), XVIII (”mit der Ruine eines nie ganz vollendeten Baues”; Wölfflin 1899 [as in note 4], 4).