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*Artistic Expression—  
A Sociological Analysis*



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*Dickinson College*



*Cornell University Press*

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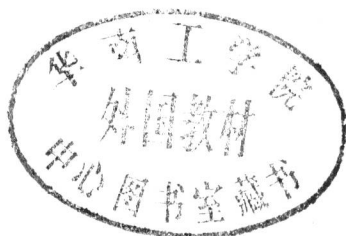
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## THE SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

A few years ago, an eminent art historian observed that "the general principles" governing "the connection of types of art with types of social structure have not been investigated in a systematic way." Another art theorist has recently implied that "the sociological approach" to art consists mainly of socioeconomic interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, I will develop the theory that a general sociology of art is implicit in the existing empirical studies of the social and cultural conditions of artistic expression. This emerging theory is by no means limited to the socioeconomic interpretations offered by some of the most insightful social historians of art.<sup>2</sup>

The current lack of a systematic theoretical structure in the sociology of art is partly due to the humanistic disposition that has led some researchers to be more concerned with the sensitive analysis of particular styles or periods, mainly from the art history of the West, than with sketching out a framework of necessarily gross generalizations that might be applied to a cross-cultural range of forms of expression.

As in most fields of historical and cultural sociology, intensive study of individual cases provides the material for the analytical work of the generalizer. He is unlikely to be a

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specialist in the artistic phenomena of a geographical area or historical period. Even if he were, the generalizer would have to resist the temptation to engage in detailed interpretations of individual cases. He remains committed to the search for general hypotheses that, however inadequate at any given time, could be subjected to empirical tests by *all* the area and period specialists, and either rejected or refined by them.

A second barrier to the development of a comprehensive sociology of art is the residual hold of Marxist aesthetics on some of the generalizers. The Marxist sociology of art suggested a hypothesis sufficiently powerful (and inadequate) to serve as an exceedingly stimulating starting point. The simplifications caused by single-minded adherence to it, however, have helped divert the sociologist from art, and the art historian, with considerable justification, from sociology.

A more fundamental difficulty encountered in a sociological analysis of art is the elusive nature of artistic data. Stylistic categorizing and judgments of artistic quality depend on a variety of aesthetic points of view and on the subjectivity of the judges. Stylistic categories not only overlap, but, furthermore, they cannot be sharply defined and still hold cross-culturally. The inherent characteristics of artistic data make rigorous methods of sociological research less fruitfully applicable to art than possibly to any other sphere of human behavior. They oblige the sociologist of art, particularly in considering style, to rely heavily on qualitative characterizations provided by the highly trained sensitivity of the art historians and to select strategic individual cases for the most flexible kind of comparison.

Quantitative research methods can, however, with caution be applied to artistic evidence. Recent cross-cultural work has suggested that universal standards of aesthetic quality

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are adhered to—at least by artistically sensitized persons—in societies as diverse as those of the Fiji Islands, Greece, Japan, the United States, and the BaKwele.<sup>3</sup> These studies, although tentative in their conclusions, furnish an empirical basis for assuming that wherever one encounters artistic phenomena, one is dealing at least with the same universe of objects, to be judged by the same types of criteria. Furthermore, a number of methodologically acceptable cases of cross-cultural,<sup>4</sup> historical,<sup>5</sup> and intrasocietal<sup>6</sup> testing of hypotheses on relationships between style and society are on record. The methodology of rigorous comparative research will, no doubt, be further developed in the future.

But a systematic elaboration of the structure of hypothetical generalizations implicit in studies of relations between style and society is needed if research is to advance beyond the individual case (and the traditional methods of art history) to the testing of general hypotheses (and the comparative method). That the hypotheses which can be presented now are necessarily to a high degree speculative does not reduce their usefulness, provided they are sufficiently specific to be testable. In testing a hypothesis, however, one needs to know what other hypotheses to keep in mind, what other factors to "hold constant." Hence the need for a systematic identification of the main types of linkage between social or cultural conditions and art style.

The sociological analysis of art has, however, been handicapped by the attitude prevalent among sociologists that art is of only marginal relevance to their discipline and therefore privileged to remain the last preserve of the humanists. The relative disinterest of the sociologists in artistic phenomena<sup>7</sup> derives in part from their assumption that art is not a powerful influence on social behavior.<sup>8</sup> This assumption still re-

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mains to be tested. In any case, the existence of some type of artistic expression in all known societies should suggest to the sociologist, as it has to the anthropologist, that art is an essential part of the sociocultural universe. The most obvious, although excessively general, explanation of the societal universality of art is the assumption that *affective orientation* to the situation of action is one of the basic requisites for the successful functioning of the human society, and that art is a strategic means of fulfilling this need.<sup>9</sup>

In the past, sociologists have been encumbered in their approach to art by inadequacies in their theory of the social functions of art. One influential (though not universal) tendency has been to assume that the main function of art for its consumers is status enhancement.<sup>10</sup> Hence art has come to be regarded by some, explicitly or implicitly, as functional mainly for groups possessing or aspiring to high status, and not for the society as a whole. A focusing of attention on this function has committed some sociologists to a partially valid but generally superficial interpretation of art.

A more broadly based conception of the social functions of art views art either as a means of re-enforcing existing social conditions, by reflecting them and thereby confirming their legitimacy, or as an instrumentality for changing social conditions, by exposing strains and stresses or by transmitting new attitudes.<sup>11</sup> While probably valid, this point of view has remained, with regard to artistic style, so general that it deserves to be characterized as an interpretative perspective rather than as a theory. It has not succeeded in identifying, within a single theoretical scheme, the main types of sociocultural conditions that affect art style, the range of style characteristics associated, cross-culturally and transhistorically, with each condition, the determinants of variation

within each range, and the sociopsychological mechanisms involved.<sup>12</sup> Since, with all its deficiencies, this conception appears to provide the most fruitful orientation for the sociological analysis of art, it will be adopted here. But it needs to be elaborated into a systematic theory, with specific empirical content leading to, and ultimately deducible from, general theoretical principles.

The empirical evidence surveyed in this book suggests the comprehensive hypothesis that the main sociological function of artistic *style* is the shaping or emotional re-enforcement of general tendencies to perceive situations of action in certain structured ways. I have proposed elsewhere that artistic *content* has the function of helping man to develop an emotional involvement with the objects of his social and cultural environment and that the *creation* of art, by providing new symbolic foci of sociocultural integration, contributes to the reintegration of society after the disturbance of a relative equilibrium. In these ways art is, actually or potentially, functional for the society as a whole, and its influence may be either conservative or innovative (or a mixture of both). Whatever its effects, they may be expected to be stronger on the artistically sensitized strata or individuals, who, at least in urban societies, tend to be the high-ranking or the alienated.<sup>13</sup> Since individuals sensitive to art are produced in all societies, but since not everyone in any particular society has this sensitivity, the need for art is a cross-cultural but not a psychological universal. This approach to the social functions of art has the advantage of suggesting that art, in its various aspects, has various social functions, and that, as a consequence, no single one of them can reasonably explain art in all of its manifestations.

As for empirical research, few sociologists (notably, Sorokin)

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have attempted systematically to exploit the potentialities of art style for revealing subjective perceptions of social reality. But, from the point of view of sociological research, style is a *projection of subjective (affective rather than cognitive) perceptions of, and responses to, situations of action*. Once style comes to be regarded as an objectification of the preferred mode of perception of sociocultural conditions, a scientifically generalizing study of style acquires a massive relevance to the central theoretical concerns of sociology and social psychology.<sup>14</sup>

This view provides the orientation of the present study. Its aims are to clarify the theoretical structure of the sociology of art, to identify the most common kinds of sociocultural conditions that everywhere influence artistic expression, and to suggest a number of testable hypotheses about the specific nature and relative potency of these influences.

Normally, the relationships to be traced operate within a definite institutional structure, the social organization of artistic enterprise, and may be affected in various ways by its structural characteristics. A change in the composition of the art public, in the operations of the art market, or in the amount of artistic consumption by political or religious institutions can be expected to produce modifications in art style, even though general sociocultural conditions affecting style (and the aesthetic goals of the artists themselves) have not changed. This expectation, however, should not invalidate the analysis to be offered, since the same types of general factors (though differing in specific values) may be assumed to operate on artists, dealers, the art public, priests, and rulers.

Suggestions that the artist's position in society affects artistic style may be read as indicating that some of the socio-

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cultural conditions which shape art style influence the relationship between artist and society as well. Thus Plekhanov implies that a fighting realism will appear when the relationship between artist and society is one of solidarity, and artistic purism (art for art's sake) when the relationship is one of "hopeless contradiction." Abell, on the other hand, insists that realism and a harmonious relationship between artist and society are both expressions of a collective state of emotional well-being, while abstraction (or deformation) in style and alienation of the artist occur in times of social strain. Well-being or strain, he assumes, is basically caused by economic or political factors.<sup>15</sup> In any case, the social organization of artistic enterprise can hardly be regarded as the basic sociological determinant of style and will not be systematically dealt with in this investigation.<sup>16</sup>

Further delimitations of coverage are due to the nature of sociology and the embarrassment of riches in artistic data. The sociology of art is not substantively concerned with unique aspects of artistic expression, however important they may be in identifying historic styles and explaining their importance in the development of artistic traditions. Only the typical, recurring characteristics of art and of society constitute the subject matter of the sociology of art. This does not mean that the recurrent is regarded, in any fundamental sense, as more significant than the unique. The limitation is simply a consequence of the present division of labor between the sociological generalizer and the cultural historian.

The wealth of artistic phenomena is such that, in a single book, only one artistic system can be seriously dealt with. The present book is concerned exclusively with the social and cultural influences on the styles of visual art, primarily painting, sculpture, and graphics. Although not much at-



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tention is given to the “popular” and “applied” arts, the suggested modes of approach and categories of analysis should apply to them as well. At any given time, however, the sociocultural backgrounds of “high” and “popular” art are likely to be at least partially different. Consequently, even though all artistic expression within a society is governed by the same sociocultural principles, the specific forms found on the two levels may be quite diverse—indeed may seem unrelated to each other.

A few observations on methodology may be appropriate. Once an artistic style has become established, it tends (or it has tended, before the modern “cult of originality”) to persist. A style that has been influenced by the social conditions of the past may thus continue on, even though conditions change. Static correlations would in such cases reveal neither causal connections nor psychological congruity between social conditions and art styles. It is therefore methodologically preferable to analyze linked-change processes, when both art style and social conditions are changing in close proximity. The problem then is one of discerning how the directions of change are associated and of relating this dynamic linkage to the existing framework of explanatory hypotheses. In practice, this approach will not always be possible, particularly when historical data are not available (as in preliterate societies) or when the use of a historical method is inappropriate (as in experimental studies of artistic preference).

I will generally attempt to correlate several types of data pertinent to the relationship under investigation. To the extent that such correlations are possible, corroborative support offered by different kinds of evidence will tend to increase confidence in the validity of the generalizations sug-