

**Key Writers on Art**  
**Heinrich Wölfflin**

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**Introduction**

During his first semester of undergraduate study at the University of Basel, Wölfflin wrote an impassioned letter to his father in which he described the intellectual path he intended for his future. Wölfflin envisioned a history of culture that combined philosophy and artistry and that utilized the empiricism of the natural sciences. In formulating such an ideal, Wölfflin rejected the narrow focus on *experientia* that he identified with “biographers, genealogists, ... anecdote collectors, and chronicle writers....” He explicitly censured “specialists in art, literature and history [who] work around the smallest fraction of the greatness they have undertaken to determine.” As his goal, Wölfflin aspired to no less than the “extraction from the profusion of facts the great laws of spiritual development in the human race.” To Wölfflin this goal seemed attainable because he believed that the model of the natural sciences had generated a “new moment” in intellectual endeavors (qtd. in Hart, *Heinrich* 25-26). Soon after completing his undergraduate studies, Wölfflin began a career in teaching and writing through which he would reshape the discipline of art history.

Wölfflin’s enduring influence on art history can be identified in at least three major ways. First, Wölfflin demonstrated a disciplinary breadth that combined both

traditional and innovative theories. Second, Wölfflin applied a comparative method of visual analysis. Third, Wölfflin insisted upon the primacy of vision.

### **Disciplinary Breadth**

Wölfflin was keenly aware of many concepts and ideas current in the nineteenth-century disciplines of academia. He utilized theories and approaches from philosophy, psychology and philology. Furthermore, within the area of art history, Wölfflin was a generalist rather than a specialist. Although his publications focused primarily on the Renaissance and Baroque periods, with some references to earlier periods, Wölfflin was fully aware of and interested in the modern art movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He commented on impressionism, considered writing on contemporary art works that he characterized as Impressionism's "opposite" (qtd. in Hart, *Heinrich* 414), and enjoyed spending time in the studios of contemporary artists (Warnke 179).

Never dogmatic in his advocacy of a single theory, Wölfflin was consistent in pursuing a philosophical foundation for his history of art. The influence of many different philosophy movements can be detected in his writings, including the objectivity of the positivists, the dualism of Hegel, and the aesthetics of neo-Kantianism.

During Wölfflin's early career, a prominent concept in the psychology of aesthetics was empathy theory. According to this theory, humans empathize with objects by associating them with their bodies. Wölfflin's doctoral dissertation, *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur*, focused on empathy specific to architecture. Wölfflin argued that proportions in architecture were perceived by beholders in relation to proportions in their own physiques. One assertion in Wölfflin's dissertation is that

facades of buildings correspond to faces. Examples cited by Wölfflin include the empathetic correspondences that he claimed viewers felt between windows and human eyes and between architectural cornices and eyebrows.

Wölfflin borrowed his methodology primarily from the field of philology. Eduard Wölfflin, Heinrich Wölfflin's father, was a philologist. Considered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to be a linguistic science, philology involved the investigation of the laws of human speech, the origin and combination of words, the affinities of different languages, and the criticism and interpretation of ancient authors. It is likely that comparative methods used in philology were the basis of Wölfflin's comparative methodology for art.

### **A Comparative Method of Visual Analysis**

According to Wölfflin, there are two fundamental modes by which artists perceive and record the world. The terms linear and painterly were coined by Wölfflin to characterize these modes of visual perception. In Wölfflin's scheme, the linear mode emphasizes limits and solidity, while the painterly mode subsumes volumes into a continuous composition. The linear mode distinguishes individual elements of design while the painterly mode subordinates details within a more general tonality. The linear mode conveys stability and permanence while the painterly mode suggests movement, transience and incompleteness. The linear mode represents things as they are in an objective, quantifiable sense while the painterly mode alludes to things as they appear subjectively to the viewer.

In order to emphasize the oppositional nature of the linear and painterly modes of vision, Wölfflin defined five pairs of visual qualities: (1) linear versus painterly, (2) plane

versus recession, (3) closed form versus open form, (4) multiplicity versus unity, and (5) absolute clarity versus relative clarity. The first term in each pair suggests a formal aspect of the broader category of the linear mode of vision while the second term describes an aspect of the painterly mode of vision.

Wölfflin used the terms “linear” and “painterly” to apply both to modes of vision and to more specific visual qualities. “Linear” visual qualities include the use of clear, unbroken outlines and sharp edges to delineate figures or objects while “painterly” visual qualities include blurred contours and merging shapes. The term “plane” denotes compositions in which figures are separated from their surrounding settings and in which foregrounds and backgrounds are demarcated while the term “recession” denotes the continuous suggestion of depth, often by use of devices including foreshortening and dramatic diminutions in perspective. The term “closed form” typifies compositions which are self-contained and which appear complete, often through their emphasis on verticals and horizontals, symmetry, and centrality. In contrast, the term “open form” typifies compositions which are seemingly unlimited and which may seem incomplete, often through their reliance on diagonals, asymmetry and cropping. The term “multiplicity” describes the inclusion of multiple points of interest and independent elements within a single composition while the term “unity” describes the absorption of particular elements within a single visual impression. The term “absolute clarity” refers to the explicit depiction of precise features. In contrast, the term “relative clarity” refers to an elusive and incomplete evocation of elements.

***Principles of Art History***

Wölfflin's most influential work is *Principles of Art History*, which was published in 1915. In it, Wölfflin applied his comparative scheme of vision to European art of the High Renaissance and baroque periods (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries).

Wölfflin characterized High Renaissance art as linear in approach and baroque art as painterly. He contrasted the outlines and parallel planes he saw in High Renaissance painting to the patchy brushwork and foreshortened forms he identified with baroque painting. He differentiated the stable, symmetrical sculptures of the High Renaissance with the projecting, asymmetrical masses of baroque sculpture. He juxtaposed the low relief of High Renaissance architecture with the deeply shadowed shapes of baroque buildings. Wölfflin argued that both styles aimed at unity, but that, in High Renaissance art, unity was achieved by a harmony of independent parts while, in baroque art, unity was accomplished by the subordination of parts to a dominant element.

Although *Principles of Art History* focuses on the major art forms of two time periods, Wölfflin argued elsewhere that the modes of visual perception are visible in all aspects of a culture, including utilitarian objects and the decorative arts. For example, he stated that the Gothic style is just as easily seen in Gothic shoes as in Gothic cathedrals.

***The Art of Albrecht Dürer***

Wölfflin applied his concept of visual perception to nationalities and to generations. Claiming that the people within different cultures operate with different modes of seeing, Wölfflin distinguished between the German and Italian senses of form.

Wölfflin proposed that Germans are inherently painterly in their modes of perception and means of representation and that Italians are inherently linear.

In his first edition of *Principles of Art History*, Wölfflin suggested developing art history “without names” (qtd. in Minor 122). Because the culture and the age determine the mode of vision through which an artist evolves an individual style, Wölfflin used artists’ names principally to identify works of art, not to discuss the personalities, characters, or lives of the artists themselves. In later editions of his book, Wölfflin retracted his proposal of an anonymous art history. While convinced that artists are constrained by pre-determined modes of vision and that “not everything is possible at all times...” (Wölfflin, *Principles* 6). Wölfflin did acknowledge the importance of individual artists. In fact, Wölfflin argued that artists of genius define each period.

In 1905, Wölfflin had published the monograph *The Art of Albrecht Dürer*. Dürer, according to Wölfflin, was extraordinary because he became perceptually bi-cultural. Wölfflin argued that, at various points in his career, Dürer had created works of art that embody the German painterly mode and, at other points, that embody the Italian linear mode. Dürer’s late work was understood by Wölfflin as evidence that the artist had transcended both the Italian and German styles and had thereby formulated a unique synthesis.

### **The Primacy of Vision**

In all his writings, Wölfflin concentrated upon what he considered the primary data of a work of art, that is, the visual structure. Wölfflin emphasized visual patterns in the work of art, rather than biographical accounts of artists and patrons or symbols and

subjects of specific works of art. Basing his concepts upon his lucid observations of paintings, sculpture, and architecture, Wölfflin taught his students and readers a formal vocabulary of visual description that continues to be used today.

Despite the efficacy of his formal vocabulary, Wölfflin was ambivalent about being labeled a formalist. His belief that art history is a science had led him to broaden the scope of his work beyond visual description. His search for the sources of the modes of visions and patterns of style led him to theorize that visual patterns arise from a “national psychology of vision.”

Wölfflin sometimes resorted to the term *zeitgeist* to invoke the elusive spirit of a national people and an age. He related modes of beholding to types of human psychology. He polarized the former into a linear and painterly modes and the latter into northern and southern, German and Italian, consciousness of form.

Conceived over a long period of time but written in the first months of World War I, *Principles of Art History* could easily have become a polemic reflecting the political exigencies of the day. At a time and in a country in which art and culture were increasingly appropriated into a nationalistic agenda, Wölfflin penned his strongest declaration of the autonomy of visual culture. This culture, according to Wölfflin, possesses its own integrity, its own forces, its own dynamics of beholding and of representing, of changing and of transforming. Wölfflin concluded *Principles of Art History* with a humanistic profession that, “However different national characters may be, the general human element which binds is stronger than all that separates.” (232.) [1]

## Legacy

Wölfflin was one of the most influential art historians of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. While Wölfflin's theories about the national psychology of vision have been criticized, the comparative method utilized by Wölfflin has been adopted almost universally. In his writing, Wölfflin typically referred to works of art in pairs. In his lectures, Wölfflin projected images simultaneously by using two magic lanterns, the predecessors of more modern slide projectors. Today, scholarship in art history continues to use comparisons between works of art. Periods and places are now defined by how they relate to other periods and places. Moreover, teaching in art history almost invariably involves projecting multiple images during lectures.

Wölfflin's career spanned many decades, and his writings evinced many changes in ideas. Nonetheless, the commitment to systematic inquiry that he espoused as an assertive undergraduate student remained consistent. The central thesis of Wölfflin's work, that the primary essence of a work of art consists of what is given visually, is fundamental to many contemporary analyses of works of art from all cultures and historical periods. The descriptive vocabulary employed in Wölfflin's work, including terms such as linear, painterly, plane, recession, open and closed form, is integral to contemporary discussions of art. The inductive process of Wölfflin's thought remains useful to the contemporary recognition of visual style. Through Wölfflin, viewers have been offered an access not only to the artistic heritage of the Renaissance and baroque periods in Europe but also to the richness of visual cultures throughout the world.

Word Count: 2,010

**Biography**

Heinrich Wölfflin. Born Winterthur, 24 June 1864. Son of Eduard Wölfflin, professor of Philology at the universities of Zürich, Erlangen, and Munich (1870-1905). Wölfflin studied philosophy at the universities of Basel, Berlin, and Munich (1882-1886), and graduated from the University of Munich in 1886. Wölfflin taught at the universities of Basel (1893-1901), Berlin (1901-1912), Munich (1912-1924), and Zürich (1924-1934). Died Zürich, 19 July 1945.

**Note:**

1. Marin Warnke has argued that a shift can be identified in Wölfflin's writing at the beginning of World War I. Warnke proposes that, prior to the war, Wölfflin frequently referred to non-artistic influences in art, but that in the *Principles of Art History*, Wölfflin minimized discussion of all areas outside visual forms and aesthetics. Warnke attributes this shift to a deliberate refusal, though never explicitly articulated by Wölfflin, to subsume art history to the nationalistic agenda of the German state (173-8).

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