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## *Economic Conditions and Art Styles*

ONE DOES NOT HAVE to be an economic monist to discern the existence of a rough relationship between art styles and economic conditions, both static and dynamic. However, the available data have not been formally systematized, and our understanding of the linkage lacks theoretical precision. The present survey of the literature aims at establishing a moderately disciplined framework of testable propositions in a field of sociology notoriously susceptible to interpretive speculation.

When some of the extant observations are systematized, it becomes evident that similar art styles are found on quite different levels of economic development (Chart I).

Broadly speaking, naturalism is linked with both the mature hunting economy and the commercial civilization, whereas abstractionism is associated with three levels of economic organization: an early stage of the hunting-and-gathering economy (when the first attempts at art-making were made), the pre-metallic agriculture, and the industrial system.

In search for the meaning of these linkages, we suggest that the early hunting-and-gathering economy entailed the first attempts at man's control over nature—the "regular mastery over fire"<sup>1</sup> and the systematization of tool-making.<sup>2</sup> These occurrences appear to

signify a revolutionary change in the man-nature relationship. The other two levels of economic organization which are most signally linked with abstract art are both clearly characterized by revolutionary increases in man's control over nature.

In contrast, the two levels of economic organization associated with naturalistic styles—the advanced hunting and the commercial—are both characterized by a gradually improving pragmatic adaptation to the environment without revolutionary changes in man's control *over nature*.<sup>3</sup>

Neither abstractionism nor naturalism has identical characteristics at the several levels of economic development at which they constitute dominant tendencies.<sup>4</sup> Variation within both stylistic types is due partly to technological differences, and partly to non-economic factors associated with the various levels of economic organization, all of which may affect art styles. However, naturalism and abstractionism as alternative dominant tendencies in the art of different economic stages each contain a sufficient common core to be thought of as definable typological entities.

The systematization of the economy-style linkages in Chart I suggests two general propositions:

(1) Any revolutionary increase in man's control over nature will be associated with tendencies toward abstraction in the visual arts. Such a relationship can be explained by assuming that abstractionism projects an attitude of mastery over nature. (It is not

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CHART I  
*Relationships Between Stages of Economic Development and Art Styles*

Level of Development	Art Style	Source
<i>I. Hunting-and-gathering economy</i>		
(a) Hunting-and-gathering, earliest stage of art production	Geometric	(j), p. 72; (b), pp. 216, 226.
(b) Hunting-and-gathering	Dynamic naturalistic	(i), I, 6; (a), p. 98; (c), p. 186.
Advanced hunter culture	Naturalistic	(b), p. 12.
Nomadism	Dynamic, stylized	(k), p. 179.
Pastoralism	Naturalistic, realistic	(b), p. 139; (h), p. 349.
<i>II. Agricultural economy</i>		
Agriculture	Geometric stylization, ornamental	(i), I, 12, 16; (h), p. 349.
Archaic Neolithic	Schematic, symbolic	(a), pp. 47, 76-7.
Archaic planter culture	Static, non-naturalistic	(c), pp. 185-6.
Sedentary agriculture	Symbolic, abstract	(d), I, 131.
Peasant art	Uniform monotony	(k), p. 182.
<i>III. Commercial economy</i>		
Bronze age	Realistic, naturalistic	(a), pp. 101-2; (d), II, p. 22.
Iron age	Dynamic naturalistic	(a), pp. 103-4.
Monetary economy	Naturalistic	(h), p. 269.
Urban economy	Naturalistic	(d), I, 131, 140; (i), I, 49.
Capitalism	Naturalistic, subjectivistic	(h), p. 62; (i), III, 61.
<i>IV. Industrial economy</i>		
Machine age	Geometric	(e), pp. 110, 112; (k), p. 213.
Machine age	Futurism	(d), V, 211.

Bibliographical sources for Charts I and II:

- a. Emmanuel Anati, *Camonica Valley* (New York, 1961):
- b. Hans-Georg Bandi, Henri Breuil, Lilo Berger-Kirchner, Henri Lhote, Erik Holm, Andreas Lommel, *The Art of the Stone Age: Forty Thousand Years of Rock Art* (New York, 1961).
- c. Alfred Buehler, Terry Barrow, Charles P. Mountford, *The Art of the South Sea Islands* (New York, 1962).
- d. *Encyclopedia of World Art* (New York, 1959-).
- e. Lloyd Goodrich and John H. Baur, *American Art of Our Century* (New York, 1961).
- f. Louis Harap, *Social Roots of the Arts* (New York, n.d.).
- g. Herta Haselberger, "Methods of Studying Ethnological Art," *Current Anthropology*, II (1961), 341-355.
- h. Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (New York, 1959).
- i. Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (New York, 1957).
- j. Johannes Maringer, *The Gods of Prehistoric Man*, trans. Mary Ilford (New York, 1960).
- k. Radhakamal Mukerjee, *The Social Functions of Art* (Bombay, 1951).

assumed that this is the only social source of abstract tendencies.)

(2) Any pragmatic but gradually improving adaptation to the natural environment will be linked with tendencies toward naturalism in the visual arts. The linkage can be interpreted by assuming that naturalism projects the attitude of adaptation to nature.<sup>5</sup>

Given propositions (1) and (2), two alter-

native interpretations of change in art styles may be suggested: (a) technological revolutions generate new attitudes in art-making and/or art-using groups which are then projected in new styles of art;<sup>6</sup> (b) antecedent changes in dominant value orientations<sup>7</sup> which have occurred in a society give an impetus, independently, both to technological revolutions and to changes in art style.

It seems relatively unfruitful to search for exact temporal sequences of changes that have occurred in the distant past. Hypothesis (b) would be supported by finding that the modern abstractionism, which appears to be linked with the industrial system, has developed concurrently with the emergence of industrialism. However, in this case priority belongs to the economic variable. But that does not necessarily invalidate hypothesis (b). It may take longer for a general value-orientation change toward greater mastery over nature to affect the art-making than the economy-managing groups. The immediate response of the art-making groups to the technological aspects of industrialization was largely one of protest against it. (This protest, presumably, has been one source of romanticism.) But when the general tendency toward "more controlling" attitudes had had time to influence the subconscious motivations of the art-making groups, the abstract style became artistically possible. To the abstract artists, it did not symbolize the industrial system, against which many of them continued to protest; it expressed their own basic attitudes, however similar *some* of these attitudes might have become to those which the scientific and managerial groups exhibit in their different spheres of action. (Whichever the interpretation, the survival of the naturalistic art of the commercial epoch into the early years of the twentieth century in the industrial societies could be viewed as a cultural lag.)

In Chart II, stated or implied correlations between economic processes and art styles are summarized. They suggest the following testable propositions:

(3) A static economy favors static formal art styles.

(4) Dynamic processes (trade, free competition) in the economy stimulate spontaneous and dynamic—informal—art styles.<sup>8</sup>

It is in line with propositions (3) and (4) that while the abstractionism of agricultural societies is generally static, that of industrial societies is considerably more dynamic, most dramatically so in the action-painting school.<sup>9</sup> In comparison with the agricultural economies, both the commercial and the hunting-and-gathering systems are, in different ways, dynamic;<sup>10</sup> and this dynamism reappears in their art styles. Static styles thus

CHART II  
*Linkages Between Economic Processes and Artistic Tendencies*

Economic Process	Artistic Tendency	Source
Static economy (lack of trade)	Formalism, symmetry	(f), p. 57.
Dynamic economy (revival of trade)	Expressionism	(i), I, 187.
Economic insecurity	Expressionism, mannerism	(k), p. 40; (i), II, 110 ff.
Economic crisis	Emotionalism	(h), pp. 267-8.
Free competition	Romanticism, subjectivism	(h), p. 62; (i), III, 61.
Economic planning	Geometric stylization	(i), I, 20.
Mechanization, protest against	Subjectivism, primitivism	(i), III, 61; (f), p. 93.

See footnotes to Chart I.

seem to reflect the invariant quality of life, as shaped (in the present case) by economic conditions. Variance in this sense may be due either to rapid economic growth or to an unsettled adventurous mode of existence, both of which we should expect to be linked with dynamic styles.

Further propositions suggested by Chart II may be formulated as follows:

(5) Radical changes in the economy (increase of trade, economic crisis), by generating emotional stress, give an impetus to expressionism.<sup>11</sup>

(6) Economic rationalization (planning) produces a tendency toward abstractionism. This finding gives support to proposition (1).<sup>12</sup> However,

(7) Protest against the human effects of economic rationalization results in tendencies toward subjectivism, an artistic assertion of the autonomy of the individual personality.

Propositions (3), (4), and (6) point to situations in which art objectively reflects varying economic conditions. In propositions (5) and (7), however, a subjectivistic variable mediates in the art-economy linkage. As stated in proposition (5), economic conditions may first produce emotional strain, which is then projected in art style. In proposition (7), economic conditions are correlated with an attitude of protest on the artist's part against these conditions. The attitude may have been

generated by the economic conditions themselves, or by some analytically separable factor, such as individualistic and humanitarian ideologies.<sup>13</sup> In the absence of such ideologies, artists may not be able to develop the protestant attitude.

Hauser has also related unfavorable art-market conditions to the "mania for originality,"<sup>14</sup> but the art market in Western societies seems at present rather favorable, and the mania for originality does not subside. The modern organization of the art market, however, with its high-power promotion methods does seem to contribute significantly to the "cult of originality."<sup>15</sup>

In this survey, we have inferred the presence of four analytically distinguishable kinds of linkages between art style and economic conditions:

(1) The *value orientations* dominant in a socio-historical unit may influence both economic motivation and artistic style;

(2) Subconscious *attitudes* generated by the realities of economic organization (its developmental level, structure, dynamism, and achievement) may be projected in dominant art styles;<sup>16</sup>

(3) *Current events* in the economy (e.g., crises) may have an immediate, but presumably temporary,<sup>17</sup> impact on art style; and

(4) The organization of the *art market* may artificially promote or repress particular stylistic tendencies, though it could hardly be capable of creating a popular response to an art style where no other social bases for such a response exist.

The hypothetical connecting link between economic variables and art styles is here visualized as "psychological congruity"—a similarity in emotional quality—between attitudes toward economic action, or the tensions generated by economic conditions, and art styles.<sup>18</sup> Art styles which seem to protest against existing economic conditions may be psychologically congruent with some political or cultural orientation—e.g., a progressive or a humanitarian ideology—which is critical of such conditions. Such styles may in addition reflect the secondary tensions due to the inconsistency between internalized value orientations and contemporaneous economic conditions.

Psychological congruity between economic

conditions and art styles may not only be pleasurable for the art-consuming public (provided that it has a sense of satisfactorily "fitting into" such conditions); it may also be useful in re-enforcing appropriate economic motivations and relieving the tensions generated by economic conditions. Incongruous styles would presumably be less able to perform these functions; they may become more positively functional when economic conditions have changed. However, while the functional hypotheses seem plausible, they yet remain to be tested.

If economic and artistic variables are, in various ways, correlated, and if subjective responses in art style to economic conditions are possible, an art style may to some extent serve as an instrumentality for modifying subconsciously orientations toward economic action in the art-consuming groups.<sup>19</sup>

Further investigation of the economic conditioning of art styles requires a more precise definition of the stylistic variables presumably affected by economic factors. The proof of the general theory lies in cross-cultural study of specific cases of style and economy changes.

<sup>1</sup> E. Adamson Hoebel, *Man in the Primitive World* (New York, 1958), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of making things and the idea of making forms are psychologically contiguous. One may only speculate whether the earliest art *reflects* man's discovery of his ability to make things, or whether his discovery, perhaps by accident, of his ability to make forms may not have *suggested* to him, or re-enforced, the idea of making things. The pre-human origins of the art-making interest give some support to the latter interpretation. Desmond Morris, *The Biology of Art* (New York, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> The naturalistic art of the Palaeolithic has been created by an "advanced hunter culture" which had reached a "dead end along a particular path of development," while "two other types of economic activity, hoeing of the soil and pasturing cattle . . . in conjunction led to settled agriculture . . ." Hans-Georg Bandi *et al.*, *The Art of the Stone Age: Forty Thousand Years of Rock Art* (New York, 1961), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> To cite Sir Herbert Read: "The abstractions of the Australian aborigine are informal, and contrast in this respect with the formal geometrical abstractions of, for example, the Neolithic period. Formalism—that is to say, such compositional devices as symmetry, parallel division, radial division, and regular repetition of any kind—only come into evidence when a nomadic existence gives way to settled agrarian

communities . . ." Marian W. Smith, ed., *The Artist in Tribal Society*, Proceedings of a Symposium Held at the Royal Anthropological Institute (New York, 1961), p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan points to "an antithesis of naturalism vs. schematism—the representational vs. the abstract-geometric . . . These . . . two different technical modes, the first a ready adaptation and almost an improvisation, the second an organized planning and execution . . ." *Encyclopedia of World Art*, I (New York, 1959), 770–771.

<sup>6</sup> While it is not directly pertinent to this case, the assumed connection between "prosperity" and "more splendor" in art styles suggests essentially the same general type of relationship: economic transformations generate a specific influence on art style. Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting* (New York, 1959), p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Florence Rockwood Kluckhohn and Fred L. Strodbeck, *Variations in Value Orientations* (Evanston, Ill., 1961), Chap. I. Such changes have frequently been associated with religious innovations.

<sup>8</sup> The effects on art style of a dynamic economy can apparently be offset by non-economic factors, such as political absolutism and religious orthodoxy. In comparison with the more agricultural Egypt, "the greater formal discipline of Babylonian art alongside the more mobile and more directly urban economy refutes . . . the otherwise normally valid sociological thesis according to which the strict geometric style is connected with traditionalistic agriculture and unrestrained naturalism with a more dynamic urban economy. Perhaps the more rigid forms of despotism and the more intolerant spirit of religion in Babylonia set themselves against the emancipating influence of city life . . ." Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, I (New York, 1957), 49. On Byzantine art, cf. *op. cit.*, pp. 130 ff. Soviet art is another case in point. Such cases may throw some light on the relative primacies of political and religious (or secularly ideological) as compared with economic determinants of art style.

<sup>9</sup> A significant majority of American "abstract paintings display a dynamic pattern," that is, "any pattern which stimulates in the onlooker an idea of motion, action, conflict, disequilibrium, etc." Jiri Kolaja and Robert N. Wilson, "The Theme of Social Isolation in American Painting and Poetry," in Seymour Martin Lipset and Neil J. Smelser, *Sociology: The Progress of a Decade* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1961), p. 250.

<sup>10</sup> "The establishment of sedentary and half-sedentary agricultural societies throughout almost all prehistoric Europe quickly weakened intergroup relations that had till then been facilitated by a nomadic and semi-nomadic way of life, thus provok-

ing an almost total disintegration of the bonds which had originally united the people among themselves, and eventually isolating them." Emmanuel Anati, *Camonica Valley* (New York, 1961), p. 253.

<sup>11</sup> "Expressionism" has been linked also with social disintegration (Hauser, *op. cit.*, I, 124, 127) and with intense religiosity (Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* [New York, 1959], p. 74). This linkage suggests that "expressionism" may be induced by diverse kinds of inner tension, whatever their historical causes. But, since economic changes can produce anxiety, the observations cited give indirect support to proposition (5).

<sup>12</sup> The prevalence of "Socialist realism" in the art of the Soviet Union does not invalidate this generalization. The natural effects of economic planning on artistic activity have not been allowed to appear there. It is suggestive that where rationality has been allowed to operate relatively unchecked—among the nuclear physicists—a strong preference for abstract art seems to exist. Vladimir Slepian, "The Young vs. the Old," *Problems of Communism*, XI, 3 (May–June, 1962), 59.

<sup>13</sup> Individualistic value orientations are linked with artistic "subjectivity" in general. Some evidence is summarized in my "The Value-Orientations Theory of Artistic Style" (manuscript submitted for publication).

<sup>14</sup> Hauser, *op. cit.*, II, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Edward B. Henning, "Patronage and Style in the Arts," *JAAC*, XVIII (1960), 466–71; Lester D. Longman, "Criteria in Criticism of Contemporary Art," *op. cit.*, pp. 285–93.

<sup>16</sup> The decline in the "bourgeois ethic of good workmanship" (Hauser, *op. cit.*, IV, 112) may be linked with the carelessness of execution of much of contemporary painting, and with the choice of impermanent materials.

<sup>17</sup> In the "social comment" type of American painting of the period of 1940 to 1960, "the violent emotions of the 1920's and 1930's have abated a little, and in their place a more philosophical attitude . . . one of sympathy and a warm humanity, often tinged with humor," has appeared: " . . . it may be a reflection of our more prosperous times . . ." Lloyd Goodrich and John H. Baur, *American Art of Our Century* (New York, 1961), p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> Such congruity seems to be implied by experimental evidence that characteristics like restlessness, a preference for diagonal lines, and the tendency to fill up space in doodle drawings are correlated with the subconsciously operative need for Achievement, which is one of the main psychological stimuli of entrepreneurial activity. David C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (Princeton, N. J., 1961), p. 304.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. n. 2.