Brand Styles in Commercial Design
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Introduction

Style has long been an important concept for distinguishing the works of individual artists and classifying works of art and architecture into groups, schools, regions, and periods.[1] However, there is no reason why discussions of style should be limited to objects of art and architecture, excluding everyday objects of design, such as cars or shoes. As already noted by Alpers,[2] the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin pointed to similarities in style between Gothic cathedrals and Gothic shoes to illustrate that style extends beyond objects of art.[3] In fact, all human artifacts may be said to represent or exemplify characteristics of a style,[4] and historians and philosophers of art and architecture have often referred to everyday objects such as cars[5] and toys[6] when attempting to refine their classifications. However, with a few noteworthy exceptions,[7] everyday products made for commercial mass markets have seldom been discussed in the context of the treatment of styles in art and architecture.

In the product design literature, the style of new products was quickly recognized as an important subject, especially in relation to the market reception of new designs.[8] In addition, the skills associated with producing a style for a brand also have long been recognized in the management literature as a key contribution of design.[9] Still, both literatures (on product design and management) have only briefly addressed the historical and theoretical assumptions underlying the notion of brand styles in products. In general, styles are explained as invariant (formal) elements that represent a brand, both in individual products and across product ranges, but little is said about the origin of these elements or what they refer to. The cursory treatment of style in design and management may be linked to its elusive character.[10] At first glance, we may readily recognize and classify objects as representatives of one style or another. Yet, in the pursuit of a more general theory of style, the assumptions underlying our classifications tend to collapse under scrutiny.

In this article, we will discuss the notion of brand styles in commercial, mass-produced products as a concern for designers working for companies in competitive markets. Departing from earlier texts on style in art and architecture, we will discuss some of the current challenges with the concept of a brand style in design, and then explore a new conceptual framework that separates the production of brand styles from their reception in the market. Our contribution will be twofold. First, we will extend the art historical

1   Style is not the only concept used in art historical studies. Historians and philosophers of art and architecture are typically advocated to complement their studies on style with studies on the date, technique, function and significance of an object. Whitney Davis, "Style and History in Art History," in *The Uses of Style in Archaeology*, ed. Margaret Conkey and Christine Hastorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19. By the same token, studies on style in design should not be perceived as isolated activities but as valuable contributions to studies on function, production, significance, use, etc.

2   Svetlana Alpers, "Style Is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 139–40.

3   An electronic version is available at http://www.tu-cottbus.de/theo/D_A_T_A/Architektur/20.Jhdt/Woelfflin/Woelfflin_158.htm (accessed 10/2009).

4   Nelson Goodman, "The Status of Style," *Critical Inquiry* 1: 4 (1975): 808, George Kubler, "Style and the Representation of Historical Time," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 138 (1967): 854.

5   Ernst H. Gombrich, "Style," in International *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills (New York: The Macmillan Company & The Free Press, 1972), 354–55.

6   Ernest H. Gombrich, "Meditations on a Hobby Horse, or the Roots of Artistic Form," in *Aesthetics Today (Revised Edition)*, ed. Morris Philipson and Paul J. Gudel (New York: New American Library, 1980).

7   See, for example, Erwin Panofsky, "The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator," in *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (London: The MIT Press, 1997).

8   See, for example, Geoffrey Holme, *Industrial Design and the Future* (London: The Studio Limited, 1934), 18–21, J. Gordon Lippincott, *Design for Business* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), 51–58, Harold van Doren*, Industrial Design: A Practical Guide to Product Design and Development*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1954), 15–16, Harley J. Earl, *The Look of Things* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation / Dept. of Public Relations, 1955), Gregor Paulsson and Nils Paulsson, *Tingens Bruk Och Prägel* (Stockholm: Kooperative förbundets bokförlag, 1956), 113.

9   See, for example, Ben Nash, "Product Development," *Journal of Marketing* 1: 3 (1937): 257; P. Kotler and G. A. Rath, "Design—a Powerful but Neglected Strategic Tool," *Journal of Business Strategy* 5: 2 (1984): 18; J. A. Menge, "Style Change Costs as a Market Weapon," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 76: 4 (1962).

10   Schapiro noted that "Styles are not usually defined in a strictly logical way.… the definition indicates the time and place of a style or its author, or the historical relation to other styles, rather than its peculiar features." Meyer Schapiro, "Style," in *Aesthetics Today* (Revised Edition), ed. Morris Philipson and Paul J. Gudel (New York: New American Library, 1980), 139.

11   Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger, Seventh ed. (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950), 1–2.

12   For more information about the origin and legacy of this treatment of style in studies on art and architecture, see David Summers, "'Form,' Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description," *Critical Inquiry* 15: 2 (1989): 372–79.

perspective to style production by applying it to commercial brand styles in product design. In particular, we will advance the view that the production of contemporary brand styles passes through various phases, each of which can be characterized by a particular perspective on the market differentiation of the brand in question. Second, we will follow the art historical argument that style attributions made during reception are subjective, employed rhetorically to further the interests of the critic. Applying this idea to style attributions of branded products—by consumers, designers, and the companies they work for—we will argue that brand styles can become an important vehicle for laying bare the interests of these various parties and opening up discussion among them about the actual and desired structural qualities of products.

Modern and Contemporary Problems with Brand Styles

In classifying objects by styles, art historians long relied upon a separation between form (how) and content (what) in works of art. Styles revealed themselves in the different ways the content of an artwork is expressed. Wölfflin, in a classic example, gave the anecdote of four friends who initially decided to paint the same landscape and "firmly resolved not to deviate from nature by a hair's breadth," but ended up with four totally different paintings.[11] According to Wölfflin, the disparity between the paintings represented a non-mimetic element of the artworks, in which the styles of the painters were expressed, unbound by the shared content of their work.[12] Such a view of style is also found in twentieth-century design, namely in the modernist division between form and function. In this view, stylistic decisions are apparent from the lavish decoration of a product's technical and/or utilitarian function.[13] Given the modernist ideal that there can be only one rational (and optimal) solution to any design problem, decisions regarding decoration were seen as redundant[14] and this typically positioned the concept of style outside the scope of design.[15] However, the modernist perspective on style has been questioned on several accounts. First, as noted by Forty, the modernists engaged in much debate about the underlying assumptions behind what would constitute a proper solution, implying that the expression of such solutions could differ.[16] Second, as summarized by Dormer, "The claim that use influences the shape and form of a product is not the same as the claim that use determines the final design."[17] Third, definitions of style are not limited to "decorations" of the form.[18] A case in point is that a style can equally be grounded in the "content" of objects as much as their "form."[19] Any structural quality of design, whether it pertains to the how or what of a product can be a constituent element of a style. In product design, the use of boxer engines over successive product generations may for instance be perceived as a prominent characteristic of the Porsche style, while the more decorative aspects of the form of the cars (such as the shape of the headlights) have varied over the years.[20]

13   For more in-depth discussions on the legacy of modernism in twentieth-century design theory and practice, see Peter Fuller, "The Search for a Postmodern Aesthetic," in *Design after Modernism: Beyond the Object*, ed. John Thackara (Thames and Hudson, 1988), François Burkhardt, "Design and 'Avant-Postmodernism'," in *Design after Modernism*, ed. John Thackara (London Thames and Hudson, 1986).

14   "True functional solutions were identical with true formal solutions: each and every function was meant to have one—and only one—solution proper to it, and, consequently, only one proper form." Jan Michl, "Form Follows What? The Modernist Notion of Function as a Carte Blanche," *Magazine of the Faculty of Architecture & Town Planning* 10 (1995): 25. An edited electronic version is available at http://janmichl.com/eng.fff.hai. html (accessed 10/2009.)

15   Arthur J. Pulos, *American Design Ethic: A History of Industrial Design to 1940* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986), 402–3.

16   Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 240–48.

17   Peter Dormer, *Design since 1945*, World of Art (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1993), 55.

18   Schapiro, "Style," 139.

19   This point is examined by Goodman, who searched for styles in the expressive attributes of objects. "[S]tyle is not exclusively a matter of how as contrasted with what, does not depend on either synonymous alternatives or upon conscious choices among alternatives, and comprises only but not all aspects of how and what a work symbolizes." Goodman, "The Status of Style," 808.

The elusive character of style has fueled considerable debate among art historians over the years. During the latter part of the twentieth century, the apparent lack of agreement on style even made historians and philosophers actively distance themselves from the notion of style when analyzing objects of art and architecture.[21] Alpers, for instance, suggested avoiding the concept of style because it had been defined in so many ways that speaking about the style of objects led to more uncertainty than clarity.[22] But the recommendation to abolish the notion of style has not proven successful in art history or in design. On the contrary, it has led to the replacement of conventional style classifications with more elaborate descriptions, or to the substitution of the word style by other, equally elusive terms that only serve to cloud the issue.[23] In response to this "unavoidable" character of style, a number of historians and philosophers have sought to re-evaluate the concept of style, while still acknowledging its ambivalent character.[24] While the notion of style is "a highly conditioned and ambivalent hermeneutical 'construct' worked out at a distinct moment in social and intellectual history,"[25] it does not prohibit a degree of conceptual unity to its use when trying to describe and compare human artifacts of similar or different character.[26]

Similarly, designers have felt compelled to avoid the inherent ambiguity of style in theory and practice.[27] However, the notion of style seems intrinsically linked to how we seek similarities and differences between objects created by different designers and produced by different brands. For instance, we readily analyze and critique the styles of the past and comment on the styles of designers such as Karim Rashid or Philippe Starck. In many cases, we associate the style of a designer with a company brand. Eliot Noyes's typewriter designs have become associated with the style of IBM, and Jacob Jensen's stereo equipment with that of Bang and Olufsen. In the market, consumers may only have a vague awareness of designers, but they readily distinguish one brand style from another and attribute different designs to different brands based on considerations of style. Although there may be little agreement between expert historians in art, architecture, and design on what exactly should be included in the concept of style, the notion has survived its critics and is still used by experts and laymen alike.

With a renewed interest in the commercial role of design, the literature on design has begun to discuss how companies can gain a competitive advantage through brand styles.[28, 29] In many of these discussions, the focus is on establishing a distinct style to help consumers recognize the products of a particular brand. The major aim here is to locate tangible product attributes (shapes, colors, materials, etc.)[30] and to identify the meanings associated with these attributes.[31] The underlying idea is that designers can create brand recognition by replicating these attributes in the design of new products. Attempts have been made to capture the styles

20 Note that by describing a brand style in terms of the how (form) and what (content) of the designs of the products falling under a brand we temporarily suspend considerations about the why. To stay with the example of Porsche, many consumers know that most car models in Porsche's history had a boxer engine. This is also frequently mentioned in Porsche advertising and (sometimes sponsored) editorial content in car magazines. It can be said to be central to the brand's heritage and identity. However, this structural aspect of Porsche's car design is mentioned without ever explaining why the boxer engine would be a good solution. In fact, many car experts, and Porsche enthusiasts among them, think that a boxer engine in the back is not an ideal starting point for a sports car, and Porsche's history suggests that the choice of the boxer engine was perhaps more based on issues of availability, rather than of functionality. Randy Leffingwell and David Newhardt, *Porsche 911: Perfection by Design* (Osceola: MotorBooks/MBI Publishing Company, 2005), 32–74. Thus, the extent to which functions are part of a brand style is debatable, because even the central mechanical parts of a product that make up the function can be known by the market without being understood.

21 Jaś Elsner, "Style," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 98.

22 Alpers, "Style Is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again," 137.

23 For example, academics and practitioners have argued for the importance of design/product languages to establish recognition in the marketplace for a company or designer, while often only briefly relating their discussions on what constitutes a design/product language to the extant literature on style. See, for example, Rune Monö, *Design for Product Understanding: The Aesthetics of Design from a Semiotic Approach*, trans. Michael Knight, 1st ed. (Stockholm: Liber AB, 1997), 104–8, 65.

of brands such as Buick, Dove, Volvo, and Nokia by identifying (and interpreting) reoccurring attributes of their branded products. However, the classification and interpretation of reoccurring product attributes is a risky venture when the underlying assumptions behind the notion of styles in products are only addressed in passing. A danger is that some important characteristics of brand styles and their meaning may be overlooked. This can happen for a number of reasons. First, some companies have established a style for their brand without replicating the attributes of their previous products. For example, almost immediately after the launch of the Apple iMac in 1998, journalists were referring to a distinct iMac style characterized by glossy translucent and candied colored plastic. Second, the perception of a brand style by a target group of consumers in the market can be heavily framed by what consumers already know about a brand. We can find products in the marketplace that share several product attributes, yet are not perceived as representing a single brand style. For example, the Swedish garden equipment producer Stiga has the same distinct color scheme and sturdy expression as the American heavy machinery producer Caterpillar, but their target consumers are unlikely to recognize a single brand style in the designs of the two companies. Third, the association of products with brand styles need not depend on particular concrete attributes that are repeated over the brand portfolio, but it can also be instantiated by similarities on a more abstract level. For example, many Alessi products express a similar type of playfulness through references to childhood that allow them to be classified to an Alessi style (or a specific time period of it), even though they do not share any concrete attributes. According to Alberto Alessi, the playful style of the company and its references to childhood symbolize an affective and potentially transitional quality of design.[32] This symbolic relation between particular designs and their meaning implies that a brand style does not need to incorporate specific design elements in each product, but can instead be established by reoccurring references to the brand style in a wide variety of concrete product attributes.[33, 34]

All in all, the current discourse on brand styles is confronted with the problem of where and how to search for tangible evidence of styles in products. In addition, there might be a problem of style attribution, in that the way that people ascribe the products of a brand to a style is contextual and depends on knowledge about the brand and its previous styles. In the remainder of this paper we will present a new perspective on the production and reception of brand styles as a response to these problems. This perspective will draw equally from past thinking about style in art, architecture, and design. But before turning to this, we will first look more deeply into the root of modern and contemporary problems with the concept of style.

24 See, for example, Caroline van Eck, James McAllister, and Renée van de Vall, *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Philip Sohm, *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Margaret Conkey, and Christine Hastorf, *New Directions in Archaeology: The Uses of Style in Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

25 Willibald Sauerländer, "From Stilus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion," *Art History* 6 (1983): 254.

26 Margaret Conkey and Christine Hastorf, eds., *The Uses of Style in Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3.

27 When reflecting on the cursory treatment of style in product design, we also should not forget that design have sought to avoid being reduced to "[T]he wrapping of product in nice shapes and pretty colors", as a cynical designer describes the traditional role of designers as stylists within companies. Christopher Lorenz, *The Design Dimension: The New Competitive Weapon for Product Strategy & Global Marketing* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1990), x.

28 See, for example, Mike Baxter, *Product Design: A Practical Guide to Systematic Methods of New Product Development*, 1st ed. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1995), 174–77, Monika Hestad, "Den Kommersielle Formen" (The Oslo School of Architecture and Design, 2008).

29 In the management literature, where design has always been viewed as a commercial instrument, the concept of style was never abolished, and was always connected to market differentiation through recurrent design features in products, set within a larger goal of positioning a brand in the market. See, for example, Philip Kotler, *Marketing Management*, International ed. (London: Prentice Hall International, Inc., 2000), 312.

Style and the Problem of Progression

We start our overview with Giorgio Vasari, who in the sixteenth century proposed an analogy between developments in styles and periods of human life in that both undergo transitions from infancy to old age and death. He believed that the greatest maturity in style existed in his own time, the Renaissance, fostered by the newfound wealth and grandeur of a number of Italian cities. In brief, the style of works of art and architecture was seen as the outcome of a development of the artist and/or the society he/she lived in. Adhering to an ideal that styles develop over time, the task of the art historian was "to decode the meaning, to uncover the principles lying behind the mute face of a work of art."[35] The art historian could make the past accessible for interpretation in the present through the style of an object, as that style was perceived as a direct outcome of personal as well as societal developments. In the nineteenth century, the "general" scheme of developments in styles was complemented by a Darwinian perspective, when terms such as "evolution" and "life" became common in discussions on style in art.[36] In product design, styles have also been discussed from a Darwinian perspective. Pye, for instance, argued that "so long as evolutionary changes in them [styles] continue, good design flourishes."[37] Another example is the metaphorical use of design DNA as the driving force behind the design attributes that convey a product's brand identity over product generations.[38] While there are theoretical differences between the "Vasarian" and the "Darwinian" perspectives in art history, both schemes were based on the ideal that styles improve over time, and that the improvements are tightly connected to personal and social progress.[39] This means that the style of an object could act as a sign of the time, readily interpretable by an art historian.

The ideal of style progression created a number of problems for art historians,[40] and some of these may also be encountered by designers when analyzing brand styles. The first problem with the ideal of progression in styles lies in its normative character. By explicitly stating, or implicitly acknowledging, that more advanced styles are preferable, some objects can be devalued only because of their apparently juvenile or primitive expression and/or deviation from a more advanced standard. For example, Karjalainen analyzed the history of Volvo, and found that the brand style of Volvo changed from a boxy style to a more muscular style over a range of models introduced during the 1990s. This change is seen by Karjalainen as a response to a growing need in the market for dynamic looking cars. However, fearing that consumers would no longer recognize the new style as typical of Volvo, the car designers added style features from curvier Volvo models from the 1950s and highlighted these references to previous models in their effort to promote the new Volvo style.[41] These retro-elements in the Volvo style support the view that changes in brand styles are not necessarily progressions.

A second problem with the ideal of style progression is that, in the case of art, the series of choices an individual takes to achieve a particular aim is unclear. The reason for this, as noted by Gombrich, is that the "aim of art . . . may shift, and what we take to be the end-point of a logical evolution may only look this way by hindsight."[42] He exemplified this claim by pointing to individual artists who seldom know what constitutes the next step in a logical progression. After all, if the artists knew the ultimate goal of their work, why would they not ignore the steps in between and more quickly reach the final aim of the style? Similar problems exist for brand styles in commercial design. A number of studies have examined changes in brand styles over time. McCormack, Cagan, and Vogel noted that the Buick style has been altered quite radically over the years, with many of the alterations responding to changes in technology, design philosophy, or control of the company.[43] Buick probably could not have foreseen many of these changes. Another example is the Apple iMac. When it was launched, Apple's designers presumably gave it a distinct style with the aim of generating attention in a market that had stagnated in terms of style. Later, when they extended the iMac style to other products (such as the iBook), they most likely did this to benefit from the positive connotations people had attached to the iMac. In other words, the aim that companies strive for in their designs can shift even within a single brand style and depends heavily on the continuously changing circumstances that a company finds itself in.

Finally, even if we allowed for the possibility that a brand style has a progressive and stable aim, it is often unclear what constitutes progression for a brand style. This depends on who is evaluating it. People's reactions to styles can differ widely,[44] and for this reason the designers' work on brand styles is tightly connected to the idea of market segmentation and product differentiation.[45] Thus, what is seen as advanced by some may be perceived quite differently by others, and various styles may be needed to achieve the same commercial aim among different groups of customers. This fact was already evident in 1754 when the London-based furniture maker Thomas Chippendale published *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director,* in which he marketed furniture in a variety of styles to fit the diverse home décor needs and wishes of potential clients.[46] A more recent example of how people's reactions to style can differ widely is found in the distinct style of the 1998 Fiat Multipla. The style's distinctiveness was celebrated by art critics and designers. Thanks to its distinct style, the Multipla was even granted a place in the Museum of Modern Art in New York during its "Different Roads—Automobiles for the Next Century" exhibition in 1999.[47] However, despite its "artistic" success, far from everyone liked the appearance of the Multipla. In fact, many people thought it was too controversial, and sales never really took off.[48]

30 M. Agarwal and J. Cagan, "A Blend of Different Tastes: The Language of Coffeemarkers," *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 25 (1998): 205–226; J. P. McCormack, J. Cagan, and C. M. Vogel, "Speaking the Buick Language: Capturing, Understanding, and Exploring Brand Identity with-Shape Grammars," *Design Studies* 25:1 (2004): 1–29; M. J. Pugliese and J. Cagan, "Capturing a Rebel: Modeling the Harley-Davidson Brand through a Motorcycle Shape Grammar," *Research in Engineering Design-Theory Applications and Concurrent Engineering* 13:3 (2002): 139–156; Hau Hing Chau, "Preserving Brand Identity in Engineering Design Using a Grammatical Approach" (The University of Leeds, 2002); Anders Warell, "Design Syntactics: A Functional Approach to Visual Product Form" (Chalmers University of Technology, 2001).

31 Toni-Matti Karjalainen, "It Looks Like a Toyota: Educational Approaches to Designing for Visual Brand Recognition," *International Journal of Design* 1:1 (2007): 67–81; Toni-Matti Karjalainen, "Semantic Transformation in Design: Communicating Strategic Brand Identity through Product Design References" (University of Art and Design Helsinki, 2004).

32 Alberto Alessi, "The Design Factories: Europe's Industrial Future?," in *Alessi: The Design Factory*, ed. Meret Gabra-Liddell (London: Art & Design Monographs, 1994), 9–15.

33 In the literature on product semantics, styles are seen as important signs for meaning attribution, not only because of what they represent, but also because of what they can symbolize. See, for example, Susann Vihma, "Products as Representations—a Semiotic and Aesthetic Study of Design Products" (University of Art and Design Helsinki, 1995), 104–8. Steffen refers to styles as 'symbol complexes' of meanings which typically transcend the direct associations we derive from products. Dagmar Steffen, *Design Als Produktsprache: Der "Offenbacher Ansatz" In Theorie Und Praxis* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Form GmbH, 2000), 87–92. Likewise, in the management literature, a brand style is often recognized as an important sign for identifying and attributing (often allusive) meanings to a brand, including symbolic (or brand iconic) meanings. Douglas B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), 155–87. Note, however, that the assumptions underlying the notion of brand styles are only briefly touched upon in this literature.

34 In consumer psychology, abstract attributes are seen as a way of comparing products that share few concrete attributes, such as products from different product categories. Michael D. Johnson, "Consumer Choice Strategies for Comparing Non Comparable Alternatives," *Journal of Consumer Research* 11 (1984): 741–753.

35 Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1994), 131.

36 James S. Ackerman, "A Theory of Style," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20: 3 (1962): 230.

37 David Pye, *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design* (London: Barrie and Jenkins Ltd., 1978), 134.

The Production of Brand Styles

In seeking an explanation for changes in style in the arts that avoids the ideal of progression, Ackerman argued that changes style wise occur because of the balance between stability and change that intrinsically exists in how people solve problems.[49] Stable patterns of problem solving emerge due to factors such as tradition, accepted working techniques, and people's natural desire for continuity. Patterns change because of boredom, passion, and the human instinct to reject past practices and explore new technical, expressive, and representative challenges and solutions. Ackerman argued that in this problem-solving process "[a] style, then, may be thought of as a class of related solutions to a problem—or responses to a challenge— that may be said to begin whenever artists begin to pursue a problem or react to a challenge which differs significantly from those posed by the prevailing style or styles."[50] In doing so, Ackerman avoided the ideal of progression in styles by linking the origin of a style to the search for a solution to a problem or challenge.[51] If we apply Ackerman's definition to the design of mass-produced products, the expression of a brand style can be said to arise from a reoccurring set of solutions to a problem or challenge facing designers of branded goods.

Other authors have found that artists often test different solutions when seeking a solution to a problem or challenge. Schapiro noted that artists can express a number of different styles through their work, even during shorter periods of time.[52] Wollheim argued that the reason for this is that an artist may have realized a solution only incompletely or simply not found a solution for their current problem or challenge at hand.[53] Thus, not all the works of an artist (or a period) need necessarily be seen as the outcome of the same style and nor does each work need to be representative of that style to the same degree.[54] When combining these insights with Ackerman's definition of style and applying them to design, we can arrive at a synthesized view of brand styles, one that accounts for the rise of new brand styles and their persistence as well as variation among various product designs within a brand.

Like Wollheim's argument for art, design too has been described as a matter of trial and error, where "we have to make the things we have designed before we can find out whether our assumptions are right or wrong."[55] It is therefore not uncommon for designers to test a number of different solutions in the process of producing a brand style.[56] Designers also work within a corporate setting where the production of a brand style is synchronized with broader developments in the company and its market environment.[57] Thus, the designer is not limited by the repeated use of a solution to a distinct, previously unexplored problem or challenge facing a producer of branded goods. This implies that not all product designs of a brand should necessarily be seen as representative of a single style, or be seen as equally representative of that style.

38 See, for example, Stephen N. Smyth and David R. Wallace, "Towards the Synthesis of Aesthetic Product Form" (paper presented at the ASME 2000 Design Engineering Technical Conference and Computers and Information in Engineering Conference, Baltimore, Maryland, 10–13 September 2000), McCormack, Cagan, and Vogel, "Speaking the Buick Language: Capturing, Understanding, and Exploring Brand Identity with-Shape Grammars," 2–3.

39 Strictly speaking, evolution theory does not imply progress, since it does not assume that the principle of adaptation through survival has a particular direction. However, the applications of evolution theory in art have historically looked at evolution teleologically as a series of progressions, in correspondence to the popular reception of evolution theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

40 Ackerman, "A Theory of Style", 230–32; Gombrich, "Style," 354; Schapiro, "Style," 142–44.

41 Karjalainen, "Semantic Transformation in Design: Communicating Strategic Brand Identity through Product Design References," 102–45.

42 Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order—a Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1979), 210.

43 McCormack, Cagan, and Vogel, "Speaking the Buick Language: Capturing, Understanding, and Exploring Brand Identity with-Shape Grammars," 6.

44 T. Moulson and G. Sproles, "Styling Strategies," *Business Horizons* 43: 5 (2000): 47–48.

45 Karjalainen, "Semantic Transformation in Design: Communicating Strategic Brand Identity through Product Design References," 148–52.

46 For more information about this early manifestation of consumerism, see Penny Sparke, *Design in Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), 21–23.

47 http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1999/differentroads/cars/fiat_multiple.htm (accessed 10/2009).

Another implication of this view on style production is that designers, or the companies they work for, might not be aware that they are designing products in a certain way. Some of the reoccurring solutions used when producing an object can be created habitually, and may therefore not be recognized as a solution by the producer(s) of a style.[58] However, in a commercial setting, heavy competition between different brands will also force producers to become more self-aware and create styles deliberately in order to differentiate their brand from other brands. With these intended styles, brands aim to forge a strong visual identity for their brand—one that can be easily recognized in the market and assure potential customers of the brand's inherent quality.[59, 60]

The development of (intended) brand styles may involve several phases. First, during a *search phase* a designer or design team may search for solutions to a new problem or challenge facing a producer. While searching, the designer can test out different solutions, sometimes for different products that are produced by the brand. During this phase, the designer benefits from traditions and accepted working procedures and may also refer back to earlier solutions that are implicitly or explicitly known to him or her.[61] We can for instance speculate about the degree to which Jonathan Ive, when designing the Apple iMac, was influenced by the glossy white and blue translucent plastic of the already existing Rowenta Surfline iron.[62]

A search phase can be followed by a *nurture phase* in which a company has settled on a set of solutions to a problem and then repeatedly asks its designer(s) to extend it to new products of the brand (as Apple extended the iMac style to the iBook). During the nurture phase, the brand style becomes more defined and more easily recognizable. By extending the brand style to new products, the initial product becomes a reference in itself that can be employed by designers and recognized by consumers. Nokia, for instance, makes use of so-called "lead products" to clarify internally what is representative for a set of products that are to be styled in a similar fashion.[63] Internally, these products express what Nokia desires to communicate to a specific target group in the market, and by studying these products Nokia's designers learn how they can embody the same brand style in new products aimed at the same target group.

A nurture phase ends when the process underlying the creation of a brand style enters a new search phase, or when it enters a *vary phase*. In a vary phase, a designer remains "true" to the original solutions but tries to build on them by incorporating new brand style references. To stay with the example of Nokia, at the turn of the century the company nurtured a particular solution in its mobile phones in response to the need (or challenge) to appear user friendly: many models were designed with a U-shaped curve under the display, denoting a friendly smile. Later Nokia phones (such as

48 The low appeal among consumers for the Multipla style was reaffirmed in 2007 when *Time* magazine placed the car on its list of "The 50 Worst Cars of All Time." http://www.time.com/cars/ (accessed 10/2009).

49 Ackerman, "A Theory of Style," 228.

50 Ibid., 236.

51 For a review about the position and significance of Ackerman's treatment of style in art history, see Minor, *Art History's History*, 129–34.

52 Schapiro, "Style," 146.

53 Richard Wollheim, "Looking for the Styleme," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 200.

54 Davis, "Style and History in Art History," 19–21.

55 David Pye, *The Nature of Design* (London: Studio Vista Ltd., 1964), 26.

56 For some examples from the automotive industry see C. Bangle, "The Ultimate Creativity Machine—How BMW Turns Art into Profit," *Harvard Business Review* 79:1 (2001): 47–55, 174, Henry W. Wolpert, "Why Conventional Automobile Styling Research May Become Obsolete," *Advances in Consumer Research* 7: 1 (1980).

57 Davide Ravasi and Gabriella Lojacono, "Managing Design and Designers for Strategic Renewal," *Long Range Planning* 38:1 (2005): 51–77.

58 Leonard B. Meyer, "Towards a Theory of Style," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 30–31.

59 Ravasi and Lojacono, "Managing Design and Designers for Strategic Renewal," 73.

60 This was already much in evidence during the German Renaissance, when competition drove independent wood sculptor shops to produce "showily skillful" styles and brand them with the initials of the master sculptor. Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 121.

61 For a longer discussion on how designers are bound by existing solutions, see Jan Michl, "On Seeing Design as Redesign: An Exploration of a Neglected Problem in Design Education," *Scandinavian Journal of Design History* 12 (2002): 7–23.

the 7600 model) showed variations of this style, no longer featuring a U shape but a curved, more leaf-like silhouette. Within Nokia this was not considered a big digression from the U shape because it was felt that the phones retained the value of user-friendliness through their reference to an organic and natural shape.[64]

This multi-phase perspective of brand styles implies that there can be a different perspective on market differentiation at different stages of the production of a brand style. The first association an individual reflecting on a brand style will have is that it serves to position the products of brand A against the products of brand B. However, the multi-phase view of brand styles makes it plausible that brand styles can also serve other types of market positioning for a brand. For example, differentiation against previous models of the same brand is a likely focus during the search phase, and differentiation against other models in the current brand portfolio is a likely focus of brand styles during the vary phase.[65] Thus, the multi-phase view of style production can help clarify the diverse role of design in differentiating a brand in the market.

In art historical writing, two forces are frequently mentioned as influencing changes in style, over and above their creators' intrinsic need for change: technological improvements and social rivalry (fashion).[66] Technological improvements are relevant because they determine the boundary conditions for a solution. When applied to product design, technological improvements are particularly relevant because they determine what is economically feasible to produce.[67] For example, the traditional technique for painting a car body at the beginning of the twentieth century was to coat the body with multiple layers of lacquer paint. The required drying period for each layer resulted in production times of up to a month. When Ford set out to produce the low cost Model T, this time was reduced to about four hours by flowing enamel on sheets of metal and drying it in large ovens. However, due to the high temperatures in the ovens, this production technique initially only worked for black pigments, and black became a prominent attribute of Ford's Model T style. When General Motors set out to challenge Ford's market dominance in the 1920s, the development of the nitrocellulose lacquer paint Duco allowed them to produce cars in more varied and colorful styles while still maintaining a quick drying time.[68, 69]

Technological improvements do not necessarily render older technologies obsolete. Gombrich stated that the use of older technologies can serve the purpose of re-enactment and preservation, and as a result provide objects with symbolic meanings.[70] Some brands seem to consciously seek to benefit from this. Harley-Davidson prominently displays its classic V-twin engine, a technical solution from the 1920s. This is one of the features that has turned its motorcycles into American icons.[71] The company uses these engines even though more technically sophisticated solutions are available. Technology can also indirectly influence the creation of styles when

62 Rowenta launched the Surfline iron prior to the iMac. Regarding its apparent similarities with the iMac, Rowenta's marketing manager (Steve Jones) gave the following statement: "Rowenta is flattered to see that the new iMac design bears a close resemblance to our Surfline iron, which was launched five years ago. We wish Apple all the success with iMac that we have had with our irons." http://www.theapplecollection.com/iMac/iStore/iron.html (accessed 10/2009).

63 Karjalainen, "Semantic Transformation in Design: Communicating Strategic Brand Identity through Product Design References," 148–77.

64 Toni-Matti Karjalainen and Dirk Snelders, "Designing visual recognition for the brand," *Journal of Product Innovation Management* (In press).

65 Extending the work of the Swedish designer and design theorist Rune Monö, Warell argues that a "product's identity [style] can be described on three axes; the product range of the manufacturer; the products available on the market as a whole; and the historic succession of generations of products." He then proposes that descriptions on these axes can be used to position a product on the market. Warell, "Design Syntactics: A Functional Approach to Visual Product Form," 51. In support for such a claim, Karjalainen and Snelders found that Nokia supports its portfolio strategy through style differentiation and that Nokia actively seeks differentiation with respect to competitors as well as between different product lines within their portfolio. Toni-Matti Karjalainen and Dirk Snelders, "Designing Visual Recognition for the Brand," *Journal of Product Innovation Management* (In press).

66 Gombrich, "Style," 354–56. See also, Ackerman, "A Theory of Style," 229; Schapiro, "Style," 160–63.

67 Pye, *The Nature of Design*, 46.

68 David Gartman, "Tough Guys and Pretty Boys: The Cultural Antagonisms of Engineering and Aesthetics in Automotive History," *Morf* 5 (2006): 73–78.

it is invoked (for what it signifies and its artistic qualities) in the design of other objects.[72] Streamlining initially emerged in aviation technology to improve flight efficiency. Later, everyday products also were streamlined to convey an expression of progress, speed, and non-friction.[73]

The second factor frequently mentioned as an influence on changes in style is competitive social rivalry among both producers and consumers. Social rivalry is important because it influences the direction in which a style develops. Gombrich noted that once something becomes a source of social rivalry, competition results in expressions far beyond functional and technological purposes.[74] In Gombrich's view, even the decision to not conform to the rules of competition constitutes adherence to its underlying principles. If a challenger to the current rules can acquire sufficient social prestige, she/he might create a nonconformist fashion that ultimately leads to new rules of competition. Thus, the solution offered by a challenger is relevant because it may point to the direction in which a field of experimentation is likely to become productive.[75]

The Reception of Brand Styles
Art historians position themselves as the receivers of a style when classifying art and architectural objects as belonging to a style while hypothesizing about their maker, significance, use, etc.[76] In their attempt to attribute objects to an origin, art historians long lacked detailed knowledge about the production process behind their objects of study. As a consequence, art historians often had to rely on similarities and differences between the structural qualities of objects (the so-called "like and unlike") in order to be able to determine the origin of objects on the basis of an attribution of style.[77, 78]

Like art historians, consumers, designers, and the companies they work for may also focus on the style of products and the brands they belong to, on the basis of what is like and unlike.[79] Thus, brand styles can help to identify a product's origin and make sense of its place in the world.[80] In this sense-making, the attribution of products to a brand style is based on perceived similarities and differences between products within the brand and between different brands. Based on our discussion of style production in the previous section, we expect that these similarities and differences are based on reoccurring sets of solutions to problems or challenges, leading to recognizable effects (or a conspicuous lack thereof) in the structural qualities of a selection of products of a brand on certain markets, during a certain period of time.[81]

In addition, receivers in the market may be unaware of the company's practices and intentions, and they may have other interests when ascribing products to a brand style. In art history, it has been noted that each attribution of an object to a style starts with a focus in interest (e.g., aesthetic, technical, or expressive) on the part of the individual(s) making the attribution.[82] As a result, the grounds

69   For more information on the impact of technology on the expression of color and style in art see Philip Ball, *Bright Earth: The Invention of Colour* (London: Vintage Books, 2001).

70   Gombrich, "Style," 254–55.

71   Peter Stanfield, "Heritage Design: The Harley-Davidson Motor Company," *Journal of Design History* 5: 2 (1992): 142–49.

72   Schapiro, "Style," 160–61.

73   Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA*, Oxford History of Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 116–25.

74   Gombrich, "Style," 355.

75   Pye, *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*, 131.

76   Ackerman, "A Theory of Style," 227.

77   Elsner, "Style," 102.

78   While there is no universal system for describing the similarities and differences within and between such groups, Schapiro noted that classifications of style were often based on "form elements or motives, form relationships, and expressions." Schapiro, "Style," 139.

79   J. P. L. Schoormans and H. S. J. Robben, "The Effect of New Package Design on Product Attention, Categorization and Evaluation," *Journal of Economic Psychology* 18:2–3 (1997): 271–287.

80   This is similar to style attribution in art, c.f., Ernst H. Gombrich, *Gombrich on the Renaissance*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 1985), 9.

81   With respect to the treatment of style in art history, Davis notes that a way of working produces a style "insofar as certain actions have certain exhibited or unexhibited effects." Davis, "Style and History in Art History," 29.

82   Paul Mattick, "Context," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 114.

83   Elsner, "Style," 106.

84   E. H. Gombrich, *The Uses of Images—Studies in the Social Function of Art and Visual Communication* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999), 256.

on which a receptive audience identifies a brand style are only loosely connected to the practices and intentions of its producers. This idea is taken to its logical conclusion by Elsner, for whom style is "a rhetorical tool whereby the visual practices of periods of the past or the different works of particular individuals (unconsciously similar through their shared stylistic quirks) may be defined."[83]

Elsner's idea of style as a rhetorical tool suggests that what we notice in the design of a branded product also depends on what we seek. Even with full knowledge of the designer's and company's intentions, consumers and design experts still may have their own problems to solve when attributing objects to styles. In addition, style attribution is subject to "distorting" psychological effects. With respect to this, Gombrich noted that "it is the deviation from the convention that is intended to impress you, but as soon as the deviation turns into a convention of its own . . . [it] leads inexorably to its demise."[84] As a result, in distinguishing the unlike from the like we may initially overestimate, and later underestimate, what may be recognized as the most prominent characteristics of a style.[85]

The looser connection between defining styles in the process of production and attributing objects to styles in the process of reception holds two important consequences. First, a style is not statically grounded in objects; instead during reception, it is "sought" and expressed by someone.[86] As such, a classification of a product to a style is revealing, as it unveils our perception of, and justifications for, similarities and differences among products and brands.[87] We noted above that style attributions have been criticized for this. However, here we want to argue that it is precisely because such judgments can be criticized that they have value in the design process. The attempts of experts, consumers, designers, and companies to attribute products to a style reveal how these different parties look at products and how they compare them to other products. Thus, by encouraging people to identify products according to their brand style, product design as an activity can become more self-aware, and therefore more open to discussion and guidance from others in the design field (such as consumers and managers of the company's brand portfolio). For this reason, we would urge companies and designers to become aware of how the products falling under a brand can be said to have a certain style and how their style attribution compares to others.

Second, since the recognition of brand styles in the market depends on a product's perceived similarity with and difference from other objects, knowledge influences how we attribute products to a style. A person must recognize and know some of the attributes that are seen as typical for a style to be able to classify objects as representative of it. This knowledge can be acquired through a long involvement with certain brands, and a desire to see a certain style in the products of a brand (or a subset of them).[88] On the whole, this knowledge may influence our ability to spot similarities or

85   With respect to such comparisons, an interesting finding from psychology is that two objects may be recognized as similar to each other simply because they are perceived as unlike a third. For more information about how we form categories on the basis of judgments of similarity, see R. L. Goldstone, "The Role of Similarity in Categorization: Providing a Groundwork," *Cognition* 52:2 (194): 125–157.There also is a whole body of work in psychology that supports Gombrich's claim. New, discrepant information (in our case, a new style) may initially incite effortful processing of the information, which, in turn, leads people to compare and contrast this information with accessible knowledge from memory. However, these same studies show that, once this information becomes less surprising and more congruent to our expectations, people tend to show the opposite effect of assimilating information too easily and automatically, and by doing so exaggerating the similarity between incoming information and knowledge from memory. Paul M. Herr, "Consequences of Priming: Judgment and Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51:6 (1986): 1106–1115, G. Mandler, "The Structure of Value: Accounting for Taste," in Affect and Cognition: *The Seventeenth Annual Carnegie Symposium on Cognition*, ed. M. S. Clark and T. Fiske (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1982). For a broader discussion on psychology and style, see M. Stacey, "Psychological Challenges for the Analysis of Style," *Ai Edam-Artificial Intelligence for Engineering Design Analysis and Manufacturing* 20:3 (2006): 167–184.

86   Davis, "Style and History in Art History," 19.

87   The expressive character of style definition with respect to its user's expertise, knowledge and opinions has been suggested as a prominent reason why the notion of style for periods has been so discredited in art historical writing. Sohm, for instance, notes that a style definition "tells us what codes a person has selected to signal political and social allegiance" and as such leaves the individual open to criticism about his or her expertise. Sohm, *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy*, 14.

differences over products and brands. For example, the Jaguar X-type and the Ford Mondeo cars might not appear to have many similarities in their styles. However, both brands are owned by Ford Motor Company, and the cars are based on the same platform and share many components. Closer inspection of the cars—and knowledge of the car business or conversations with car mechanics—may lead consumers to the (somewhat self-ingratiating) conclusion that there are more similarities to these models than one would at first expect.[89]

In mass markets where consumers lack sufficient knowledge about product design, imitations of brand styles are often interpreted as undesirable for the "original" producer because they may lead consumers to believe that a copycat brand has the same qualities as the "real" brand.[90] It is therefore not surprising that many companies go to great lengths to protect their brand styles. The success of the non-conforming Apple iMac style, for instance, inspired a number of other brands to launch products with colored casings too. The products of Emachines (the eOne) and Future Power (the AIO) duplicated the iMac style to such a degree that Apple filed lawsuits against them.[91] Still, in the same way that style definitions may differ among art historians, what consumers see as representative of a style is not fixed, and protecting a brand style is a challenging task.[92] Perhaps it is also an overly constraining one. Not all misconceptions about a style are necessarily bad; many can lead to new and potentially valuable meanings being attached to the brand, which may be commercially interesting for companies in their own right.[93]

Final Comments

In the spirit of Wölfflin, who compared shoes to cathedrals, we have approached the notion of brand styles by departing from earlier texts on style written by historians and philosophers of art and architecture. We proposed that the expression of a brand style is grounded in the use of a particular set of solutions to an unexplored problem or challenge facing a producer of branded goods. The solution set can vary as it passes through different phases, each of which can be characterized by a particular perspective on the market differentiation of the brand. However, we also recognized that designers would be ill-advised to rely too heavily on replicating existing attributes in new products to achieve brand recognition, without first critically reflecting on comparable products and their similarities and differences. By distinguishing the like from unlike, designers should consider how they can contribute to the style attributions made by the receivers of a style, while searching, nurturing, and varying in the way that they work.

Finally, the differentiation of brand styles from other brand styles is an enduring phenomenon to be studied and mastered by designers in their own right, especially by those working in

a commercial setting. However, given that styles are inherently ambiguous, we need to approach style adaptively, with an eye to the problem at hand. Brand style attributions enable us to define the potential of a design in light of other designs that either complement or compete with what a brand produces.

88   For art, Goodman stated: "Styles are normally accessible only to the knowing eye or ear, the tuned sensibility, the informed and inquisitive mind." Goodman, "The Status of Style," 810. Also see Elsner, "Style," 102; Minor, *Art History's History*, 133–36; Nelson Goodman, "Art and Authenticity," in *Aesthetics Today (Revised Edition)*, ed. Morris Philipson and Paul J. Gudel (New York: New American Library, 1980), 189–94.

89   In fact, Jaguar initially received extensive criticism in the press for making the X-type so similar to the Mondeo, because it was seen to dilute the Jaguar brand. See, for example, Kathleen Kerwin, "Ford Learns the Lesson of Luxury," *Business Week*, March 1, 2004: 116–117.

90   G. Miaoulis and N. Damato, "Consumer Confusion and Trademark Infringement," *Journal of Marketing* 42:2 (1978): 48–55.

91   Pui-Yik Chong, "An Exploratory Study of the Dilemma of Product Styling: A Style Life Cycle or Still a Designer's Gut?" (paper presented at the IAMOT [International Association for Management of Technology], Washington DC, 3–7 April 2004).

92   On a legal level there is a distinction between a situation when (1) a company designs its products to resemble those of another company and (2) a company that strictly copies the style of a competitor. However, due to the practical problems involved in making a clear distinction between these two situations, companies often go to great lengths in trying to justify the uniqueness of their styles. For more information on the legal challenges in protecting brand styles, see J. N. Kapferer, "Brand Confusion—Empirical-Study of a Legal Concept," *Psychology & Marketing* 12:6 (1995): 551–568.

93   An interesting case is Harley Davidson, whose current style to a large extent refers back to the way in which, amateur motorists in the 1960s customized cheap second-hand motorcycles of Harley Davidson and started treating them as icons for a modern outlaw lifestyle, against the original intentions of Harley Davidson. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*, 155–88. The value of such misconceptions (or creative misreadings) by design experts and consumers in attaching meaning to products has been discussed by, for example, Adam Richardson, "The Death of the Designer," *Design Issues* 9:2 (1993): 34–43, Peter Lloyd and Dirk Snelders, "What Was Philippe Starck Thinking Of?," *Design Studies* 24:3 (2003): 237–253.