cessfully manoeuvres her way through a patriarchal culture, it addresses the concerns of contemporary readers. Though ultimately not a great painter, Alessandra Cecchi is an enterprising young woman who creatively negotiates a life between the available institutions of marriage and the convent. A popular audience is unlikely to object to the anachronistic focus on self-expression and sexual fulfilment. It is easy to imagine this novel accompanying (especially female) travellers to Florence, as George Eliot’s Romola once did—but these two portraits of Savonarola’s Florence could not be more different or more reflective of the cultures that produced them.

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In this book, Philip Sohm’s enterprise is to take a philological approach not to the problem of style, per se, but to the contingencies of writing about style among the main literary humanists writing on art during the Baroque period in Europe. What Sohm points out is that, in writing about style, writers inevitably disclose, through their choice of language (lexicon and metaphor) their own stylistic biases, even, one supposes, while quite overtly contradicting themselves in the substance of their actual discourse. Thus, what is revealed about the period definition of style is chiefly what can be derived from textual explication, by looking at the most important writers on the subject; Vasari (who saw style in Darwinian terms of evolution and perfection), Poussin, Boschini and Balduinucci. As Sohm so succinctly puts it, “All definitions have an agenda, even those staged with philological clarity and convention” (168). So it is with “style,” and all subsequent attempts to define, refine, and confine the vast categories of meaning the term itself embraces.

In the case of visual art, it would seem that the problem of defining artistic style has to do, on the one hand, with the insufficiency of language to describe precisely the visual and, on the other, with the tendency of language to define precisely that quality of ineffability in such a way as to make the definition almost always unequal to the experience of seeing. Perhaps Ernst Gombrich put it best in his essay on style when he pointed out that the frustration of developing a system of stylistic “morphology” is considerably hampered by the knowledge that “a style, like a language, can be learned to perfection by those who could never point to its rules” (The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology, ed. Donald Preziosi. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998, p. 163). On the other hand, as Sohm so succinctly puts it, style also “tells us what the artist cannot disclose” (15).

The explosion of style in the seventeenth century quite naturally demanded a new series of definitions, describing the way new art either fulfilled traditional cat-
egories of “style,” defined by an affinity to the classical, or how widely it deviated from this norm. Faced with a new multiplicity of artistic styles, writers naturally approached the matter in neo-logistic ways or, as Sohm puts it, perhaps more satisfactorily, the period is marked by an ongoing “logomachia.” It is interesting how these debates prolonged the somewhat “nationalistic” agendas of the sixteenth century; Vasari’s extolling of the superiority of the Tuscan school, Lomazzo’s Lombard leanings and the essence of Venetian leggiadria (“gracefulness”) that seemed to pre-occupy Dolce in his Aretino.

This is a period in which Boschini defended the macchie (stains, blemishes, even “filth”) of Tintoretto, at the same time that Poussin was defining the conditions of adherence to the “Grand style” (i.e., classicism, stoicism and sobriety) in the French school. Poussin’s art visually expounded the qualities of the classical rhetorical mode, and was thus more closely allied to pre-existing linguistic forms than the mercurial, ornamented art of the Venetians. It seems precisely to have been the artificial, ornamented style of the Baroque, which grew out of the Mannerist period (itself a troubled term), that demanded a new lexicon.

Faced with this multiplicity of “stylistic” choices, writers, it would seem, settled on ambiguous language that could be both laudatory and accusatory at once. Sohm articulates his argument of the vagaries of language beautifully from Vasari to Baldinucci, ending with a wonderful chapter on “Indeterminate Style” with sections on “That Certain Something” (the “non so che”) and “Vagrant Styles,” the latter an extended examination of that wonderful word vaghezza, derived, perhaps, from the verbs “to wander” (vagare) and “to gaze fondly” (vagheggiare) and employed in the period to describe, in one definition, “an attractive beauty that induces the desire to contemplate it,” thus reflecting something not quite objective or subjective, an emotional response that hovers indistinctly between the work and its audience. These qualities, embedded or implied in the art-writing of the period, provide a nice bridge to later preoccupations with the Romantic sublime. As Sohm points out, employed by various writers in the seventeenth century, vaghezza could actually be used both to praise and to condemn the artificial, ornamental aspects of Baroque art.

The “Appendix,” which lists the stylistic terms most frequently found in Italian art criticism between 1550 and 1750, offers no translations, which is reasonable given that it is the precise meaning of these terms that is under consideration. The list itself demonstrates the logocentrism of the Renaissance and Baroque world, the very frustration that drove Boschini to invent the motto for Vasari’s Florentine Academy of Design, a consortium of artists, “Academy of DOING and not REASONING” (59), indicating that artists were possessed of a different “visual knowledge” that stood in binary opposition to the articulations of the literary elite. Sohm has written a wonderful book that demonstrates the extent to which art and the language of art invented each other through the mediation of artists and writers on art in this crucial period.

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