THE USES OF STYLE IN ARCHAEOLOGY

EDITED BY

MARGARET W. CONKEY
Department of Anthropology,
University of California, Berkeley

and

CHRISTINE A. HASTORF
Department of Anthropology,
University of Minnesota

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE
NEW YORK, PORT CHESTER
MELBOURNE, SYDNEY

1990
Chapter 10

Is there a unity to style?

Polly Wiessner

In this concluding chapter the author draws upon all the chapters in the volume to make a case for a unity to style. She draws out the important theme that much research is now being directed toward answering the question: “What kind of information can we get from style?” Following on from her own previous approaches to style, Wiessner here argues for the communicative role of style, for style as non-verbal communication, and that stylistic comparison - as a behavioral process - mirrors social comparison. She discusses the different categories of style in use by the authors in this volume, and suggests that they are based on different criteria. Thus, she sees these approaches not as mutually exclusive, but as all raising questions about the particular sources of variation or levels at which style is at work.

This observation that there are different categories of style reinforces the author’s belief that style, in fact, can be seen from a unified perspective as a means of non-verbal communication to negotiate identity. On the one hand, this kind of a conclusive and integrative chapter is optimistic in the way that Wiessner draws on the differing postures of other contributors to make stylistic analysis viable and to present concepts of style that “make sense.” On the other hand, the way in which the author must weave from among the many different contributions indicates that the archaeological uses of style are diverse, complex, multifaceted, and remain challenging. This chapter demands that readers consider carefully whether there is a unity to style.

Perhaps what is most striking to any reader of this volume is the diversity of the approaches to style that are taken by the contributors. The work of Conkey and of Davis provides a thorough discussion of the history of the use of style in archaeology and in art history. There is much of value in these two chapters on the contribution as well as limitations of stylistic approaches used in archaeological inquiry. The chapters by Hodder, DeBoer, Earle, Macdonald, Sackett, and Plog concentrate on quite different issues. Amongst other things, they follow an interesting trend of breaking away from the question “What is style?” and turning to the question “What kind of information can we get from stylistic studies?”

The chapters by Conkey and Davis provide a critical understanding of the past in stylistic studies, and those chapters that reexamine the kind of information we can get from style open up new pathways for stylistic studies in the future. Here I would like to lend some unity to the volume by discussing the question “What is style?” and then draw on the diversity of the book to discuss the papers of DeBoer, Plog, Macdonald, Earle, Sackett, and Hodder in light of the question “What kinds of information can we derive from style?”

First of all, I feel that the question “What is style?” can only be answered from the viewpoint of “What is stylistic behavior?” Although it would be ideal to have a definition of style that would allow us to identify stylistic attributes in artifacts, to separate the stylistic from the functional from the technological, I doubt this will ever be possible due to the very nature of style. alas. Hodder’s is one of the few chapters with an explicit discussion of what style is and he begins with the common definition that style is a “way of doing.” In this he
reminds us that the starting point of style is as a way of doing, or perhaps more appropriately, "doing something in a certain way." A way of doing" alone, however, is too broad a view of style, for if principles and practices of a society, such as freedom of speech or the right to bury the dead, are considered as style, then style includes essentially all behavior and becomes a meaningless category. What is missing here is the communicative role that is so central to style, that style is a means of communication based on doing something in a certain way. I read this implication in Hoccleve's subsequent discussion of style: style is interpretative but it is the communicative aspects of style that inspire interpretation. Style is not power but a medium of communication that can legitimize power. If style is to be of use in archaeological analysis, it is necessary then to concentrate on the communicative aspects of style as "a way of doing" in addition to recognizing that style, amongst other things, is a part of non-verbal rather than verbal behavior. This is not to reduce style to communication, but to draw out the central aspect of style that is of use to archaeologists. It is not to say that other aspects of style cannot be defined and developed. If style is seen from the perspective of non-verbal rather than verbal communication, then many of the problems that archaeologists have with style can be elucidated. Let us take a look at style in this perspective.

Style as non-verbal communication

First of all, in non-verbal behavior many communicative signals are derived from functional counterparts, making communication closely intertwined with function. To give some basic examples often cited in ethology: sticking out one's tongue in rejection and mockery is thought to be derived from infants sticking out their tongues to reject food; kissing is a form of feeding; and stamping one's feet in anger from aggressive approach (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989). Likewise, stylistic signals are frequently derived from functional elements.

A good ethnographic example would be the ceremonial axes of highland New Guinea. Before steel axes were introduced, stone work-axes were highly valued as the stone could only be obtained through trade in many areas and it took hours and hours of hard work to grind a blank into a functional axe blade. Axes were essential tools for forest clearance, as well as important weapons in battle, and thus were used in many payments, such as bridewealth and compensations. From the functional axes, ceremonial counterparts were derived. These axes were worn in men's belts during "sing-sings" (dances), exchanges, and other public rituals and events. Ceremonial axes had blades of finer quality than work axes and were largely decorative symbol of wealth and strength. They were more shiny and could not be used to chop wood although they could be given to somebody a good clout should a fight arise. Among the Melpa, axes had finely plaited hatting and clusters of bamboo rings attached to them and they were sometimes decorated with leaves and grasses, thus being both decoration of something to be decorated (Strathern and Strathern 1971).

Different highland groups developed their own styles of ceremonial axes. Thus a form that was designed primarily for communication about status had evolved from a functional tool. Because many signals are derived from functional counterparts it is characteristic of non-verbal behavior that certain actions or ways of doing things take on a primarily functional role, a communicative role, or both, depending on context. For instance, one may stand close to somebody touching him or her either as an expression of affection and affiliation or to get a better view in a crowd. One may squat to keep out sharp sunlight or as part of a facial expression to convey some emotion. The same applies to material culture - artifacts may be made in a certain way for functional reasons, communicative reasons, or both. However, the fact that functional and communicative aspects of form may be interrelated does not remove the need to determine which parts of an object are important functionally and which communicatively in certain contexts. Such an understanding is critical to any interpretation.

I will return to style and function later, but first let us consider one more attribute of non-verbal communication, namely that non-verbal communication does not have the freedom of verbal communication and usually has restricted areas about which it gives information. Take facial expressions for example. In all cultures, facial expressions are used primarily to express or mask emotions, and proxemics are used to express relative relations between people and groups. Just as it seems quite natural that proxemics express interpersonal affiliative relationships, it is not surprising that style, as communication through a way of doing things, is used to express identity. There are only limited criteria by which an identity can be attached to someone: by his natural physical appearance, by what he does, or how he does it. It appears that in all cultures people do not only use ways of doing things to project their identity to others, but doing something in a new or different way spurs two questions: "Why are they doing it that way?" and "Who are they that they are doing it in such a way?" So automatic and universally found is this reaction that it suggests a deeply rooted perceptual bias for perceiving ways of doing things for both their functional efficiency and social meanings.

Finally, it should be noted here that although style has been considered for its efficiency in some studies (Wobst 1977), like other forms of non-verbal communication, style may not be the most efficient way to send a message in terms of cost, but it is often very effective. One factor that adds to its effectiveness is the fact that it can be a form of visual art and thus play an aesthetic role in sending a message. Eibl-Eibesfeldt gives a good description of this quality of art and style:

Art is the ability to put aesthetic perception in the service of communication and to use its attention binding structures and aesthetically rewarding nature as a means of conveying a message... when it is too easy for the observer to discover order, the object lacks effectiveness.
and the same holds true when the object is too complex and regularity cannot be detected.

(Elff-Elbsfeldt 1989: 175)

The contexts and ways in which style makes use of the aesthetic topic that deserves research in its own right. One excellent example of the role of aesthetic perception in style to present a new image can be found in DeBoer’s discussion (chapter 9, this volume) of Shinpo-Compo ceramics.

Style and identity

While on the subject of identity, let us take a brief look at what is known about the process of identity formation because it is important to understanding the understanding of social identity. In social psychology, the idea that the need to establish a self-image through comparing oneself to others and desire to project this image in a positive way to others has so strongly supported by evidence from different cultures if it is assumed to be a basic cognitive process in humans (Tajfel 1978, 1982; Turner 1975). However, the ways in which this may happen are recognized to be culture and historically determined (Wetherell 1982), though comparing themselves to others people evaluate their identities in relative terms and develop a self-image.

Stylistic comparison mirrors social comparison. When people compare their ways of doing things within their own communities, they also compare themselves with those others and decide whether to simulate, differentiate, emulate, etc.: they decide whether to negotiate their relative identity. This concept is easy to grasp intuitively—when shopping for clothing or household furnishings, we avoid buying things that we associate with people we dislike or in some important way consider to be different than we are, and we gravitate towards things we associate with people we like and consider to be similar to us.

A similar pattern of comparison was found among Kalahari San in an analysis of conversations about headwork. Discussions of headwork almost invariably led to discussions about the makers of headpieces and people of certain styles. People who are not close kindred members and negative comparisons made references to more general groups of non-kin or affinal kin at a distance (Wiesner 1984).

If the various points made in the above discussion are put together, this leaves us with the following working concept of style for archaeological studies: Style is a form of non-verbal communication through doing something in a certain way that communicates information about relative identity.

Style and function

What does doing working definition then imply for other ways of style presented in this volume and for the categories of style presented here and elsewhere? First of all, the fact that action and communication are intertwined in most forms of non-verbal communication supports Sackett’s model (1982: chapter 4, this volume) of isochrestic variation for where style resides. Since many communicative signals are derived from functional counterparts, style must reside in both functional and decorative attributes.

Sackett’s argument for a passive style also has some validity. Everything has to be done in some way and not every action is executed or interpreted with great significance attached to it. Many ways of doing art are acquired gradually by enculturation, are not subject to regular social comparison, and thus play a background role in communication. In everyday life, many ways of doing art are ignored and only when somebody departs from the standard procedure are questions of what, why, and who raised. At the other end of the spectrum are ways of doing art which great social and symbolic significance are attached. These are subject to active comparison and can be of major importance in communication, thus constituting an “active” style. Styles may change from passive to active if the role of the artifact changes or if social conditions bring about a need for increased communication.

I basically agree then with the concepts that Sackett presents in his papers. Where I have trouble with Sackett’s ideas or papers is in his linking “isochrestic variation,” a model for where style resides, with “passive style.” Whether style resides in functional or decorative attributes should have absolutely no relation to whether or not it is used actively. In this issue lies the crux of our disagreement over stylistic variation in Kalahari San projectile points (Sackett 1985; Wiesner 1985).

Categories of style

Now let us take a look at the categories of style presented in the literature: Sackett’s isochrestic and iconological style (Sackett 1982), my emblematic and assertive style (Wiesner 1983) and Macdonald’s “panache and protocol” (chapter 6, this volume). How do these categories fit with the views presented above? Can these categories be made to coincide with one another? Are these categories worthwhile in stylistic studies?

If one takes a close look at the three classifications of style, it becomes apparent that they are based on three different sets of criteria, each of which is a critical source of variation in style. Sackett’s classification is based primarily on whether style plays an active or passive role in communication. As Sackett makes clear in this volume (chapter 4), iconological variation is essentially active style and isochrestic variation, passive style. Determining how actively or passively style is used in communication is probably the first step that must be taken in stylistic analyses. Passively used style is not subject to frequent or intensive comparison and thus social boundaries reflected by it may not keep up with changing social relations. Conversely, if the role of an artifact switches from a passive to an active one, then changes in stylistic boundaries may take place with little corresponding social change. This occurs with Kalahari projectile points after the introduction of metal (Wiesner 1985).

My categories of emblematic and assertive style are based on quite different criteria (Wiesner 1983), with by far the
most important of these being specificity of referent. All styles have social referents, some having very specific ones such as an emblem that represents a football team, and others such as styles of clothing, each with many vague associations. Styles with distinct referents are those that I call emblems and those with more vague associations I call assertive. Styles without distinct referents that work through association are by no means the same as passive styles. They may be both active and effective means of communication giving powerful aesthetic impressions and stirring strong feelings through associations.

Specificity of referent has an important effect on the nature of stylistic and social comparison and how easily styles are adopted by others. Specificity of referent can and often does change as styles are adopted in new contexts and take on new meanings. One example can be seen in Hodder’s description of the way in which the swastika is used in the past. Another modern example is the change in the context in which blue jeans have been worn during this century and the corresponding associations that have developed. Blue jeans or dungarees began as workmen’s clothing and were associated with practicality and work. In the 1960s they were adopted as one of many symbols of the youth revolution and in the 1970s and 1980s they were re-adapted as designer jeans, taking on a much wider, more varied and more vague set of significations.

Macdonald classifies style into panache or protocol on the basis of the level at which comparison occurs. This is a different criterion from that which Sackett and I have used. As with Macdonald’s approach, the level at which comparisons are made is also an important source of variation in style. Comparison at the individual level will result in different stylistic distributions and rates of change from those at the group level. Conditions and contexts which bring out the level of style to negotiate individual or group identity will be mentioned later. The three classifications mentioned above are based on different criteria, each of which is an important source of variation in style, and may be affected by different conditions, require different methods of analysis, and yield different kinds of information.

For these reasons, it may be best to move away from a single classification of style and see style from a unified perspective as means of non-verbal communication to negotiate identity at the beginning of a stylistic analysis, the following three questions can be asked: does an attribute that style appear to have an active or passive role in communication? is it more likely to have had a distinct or vague referent? does it appear to the other individual, group identity, or both?

What kinds of information are contained in style? If style is non-verbal communication about identity through a way of doing, for archaeologists, it must be seen as communication during history and prehistory. The task of the archaeologist is to use all available historical and contextual information to assist in determining what was being communicated in the past. Five of the chapters in this volume—Plog’s, Macdonald’s, Earle’s, DeBoer’s, and Hodder’s—see style as communication in the past and ask the question of what style was used to express. Interestingly, each chapter uses style to derive somewhat different but related kinds of information about the past. Here I would like to discuss some of the ideas presented in these chapters as they greatly expand on traditional uses of style in archaeology.

Style, social boundaries and interaction

Aside from the use of style to establish chronology, the use of style to obtain information on prehistoric groups, boundaries, and interaction has been the most common use of style in archaeology. DeBoer and Davis (chapters 10 and 3, this volume) both give interesting discussions of style and social boundaries, but here I would like to concentrate on Plog’s analysis (chapter 7) as it is an interesting archaeological re-analysis of style through time. Plog recognizes that the problem of many stylistic analyses lies in our simplistic assumptions about style: in particular, in the failure to recognize that as social systems evolve in complexity, so do the determinants of style. It is in this light that he re-analyzes the material from the southwestern United States.

In Plog’s discussion, he raises two important sources of variation mentioned above, the passive or active role of style and the distinctiveness of referent. First he argues that the very broad distributions of style found at the beginning of his study period could be the result of style in pottery playing a very passive role and that subsequent changes, such as increase in population density or growth in pottery production, could alter the role of style without necessarily being accompanied by major changes in social groups. The latter is certainly the case for stylistic changes in Kalahari San beaded headbands (Wiessner 1984).

Plog points out that changes in stylistic boundaries do not necessarily have to correspond to changes in areas inhabited by different cultures but could be related to the changing roles of style or to social distance between members of one society. In his case study, it becomes clear that it is usually not possible to determine the source of stylistic variation from patterns of similarity or differentiation alone. For this, one must make use of all available contextual and historical data, a point made by Davis (chapter 3, this volume).

Plog goes on to mention the second major source of stylistic variation mentioned above, specificity of referent. Through time, the Dosogushi style appears to take on a more distinct referent, becoming “iconographic.” He interprets this as the establishment of social ties across a broader region. This is indeed one possibility but it also may be due to the third source of variation discussed above, the level at which comparison takes place.

In the face of increasing population density, individuals
often feel the need to distinguish themselves from others and to 
express greater individuality (Wissler 1954). This trend would 
be encouraged by new economic opportunities, including 
broader exchange ties. Thus, diversity could be generated by 
exchange of ties, a growing need for individual 
expression, or some sort of interaction between the two. The 
appearance of a style with a more distinct referent in the 
Dogozshi style, apparent increasing individual expression in 
style, and possibly a more active role for style in pottery raises 
the question of whether these were due to social change alone 
or whether there was a corresponding change in the way 
pottery was used. Since the Dogozshi style is found on 
ceremonial sites the possibility of a new role for other styles 
of pottery must also be considered. With the realization that 
the determinants of style become more complex as social 
systems evolve (Plog, chapter 7. this volume), stylistic studies 
will break away from simplistic analyses involving one-to-one 
relations between style and social organization and make a 
much greater contribution to our understanding of social 
change in the past.

Style, the individual and society

Macdonald’s chapter brings up one of the more 
interesting potential uses of style in archaeology, the separation 
of individual (panache) from group (protocol) expression to 
discover changing relations between the individual and groups in 
society. Macdonald focuses primarily on methodological 
considerations to provide the tools for examining stylistic 
variability in archaeological data and separating that generated 
at the individual level from that generated at the group level. 
Here I would like to expand on the kinds of information we can 
gain from style by looking at individual and group expression.

There is a good theoretical basis in identity theory for 
arguing that style should project information about both 
individual and group identity. As mentioned earlier, individuals 
in all cultures have been shown to possess a strong desire to 
create a self-image through social comparison and to project 
this to others in a positive way. Self-images have two 
components, a personal one and a social one. Social identity is 
important in that individuals are unable to form self-images in the 
absence of an identity derived from membership in one or 
more groups (Tajfel 1982). Conversely, an element of personal 
identity seems equally important and when put in situations of 
extraordinary conformity, individuals experience discomfort and 
strive to differentiate themselves from others (Fromkin 
personal identity may be "switched on" by certain situations. 
Since style is one medium of projecting identity, one would 
expect both personal and social identity to be expressed in 
style. In fact, a very large part of being stylish does seem to 
involv playing individual against group expression in 
innovative ways.

The relation of the individual to society is an issue that 
has been widely discussed in the social sciences. In pre-class 
societies as well as in class societies, the conflict between the 
individual and the group is one of the driving forces of social 
change. As Macdonald points out, certain social conditions 
such as individual competition may bring out panache 
(individual) as opposed to protocol (group) stylistic expression. 
I have suggested elsewhere (Wissler 1958) some other 
conditions that might "switch on" a sense of individual or group 
expression. Situations that switch on group identity include 
war, inter-group competition and aggression, need for 
cooperation to reach certain goals, and imposed political 
control requiring group action. These situations that could 
switch on personal identity would be inter-individual 
competition, options for individual economic gain, and 
breakdown in the social order that would require individuals to 
seek solutions for their own problems, amongst others. Using 
data from changing house decorations in Vietnam, ceremonial 
dress at various occasions in New Guinea, and beadwork styles 
from Kalamari San, very simple analyses of increasing diversity 
have yielded some promising results (Wissler 1988). In all 
three cases, changing or different relations between the 
individual and society do become apparent in analysis of the 
stylistic data.

DeBoer’s chapter (chapter 9) gives a particularly 
interesting perspective on style and individual and group 
relations because of his study of the learning process in 
acquiring skills for Shipibo-Conibo pottery. Through studying 
the process of design acquisition in children he isolates a limited 
number of design elements that are used to express 
Shipibo-Conibo identity. Along with these elements is an 
organizing principle that these elements should be combined in 
innovative and aesthetically pleasing ways to conform to 
Shipibo-Conibo style. Since Shipibo-Conibo style is admired 
and thus expresses a positive group identity, women from other 
roots of origin and with different degrees of acculturation 
conform to the basic elements and principles of the style. 
Within this basic style, however, is great individual expression 
and variation. Through his study of individual artists and their 
social situations in different family compounds, DeBoer finds 
that individual stylistic differentiation within the family is often 
associated with the desire to "escape." In other words, women 
who do not gain a positive image from their family situation 
often try to express their own individual positive identity.

DeBoer mentions that the distinctive decorative style that 
mark's virtually all classes of material culture today cannot be 
securely identified before the mid-nineteenth century and that 
since then it has flourished. It would be interesting to look at 
the florescence of Shipibo-Conibo style in terms of changing 
relations between the individual and society through time. 
From looking at changes in style through time and 


corresponding contextual conditions, it is often easier to 
identify sources of variation than in a static ethnoarchaeological 
perspective. As Plog’s and Hodder's studies also show, when 
one sees what changes occur through time and what factors 
these are associated with, it is possible to get further insight 
into the sources of stylistic variation.

Although the individual may be difficult to recognize in
archaeological studies. Increasing individual expression should not be equated with more sophisticated methods of analysis such as those discussed by Macdonald (chapter 6), the changing relations between the individual and society should be one of the more promising areas of stylistic studies.

Style, status and power
In his chapter (chapter 8), Earle brings up the use of style to mark social boundaries and distance within a group rather than between groups, in other words, the use of style to confer and support status. The emergence of great styles in civilizations has long been discussed by archaeologists, but few systematic studies have centered on the question: “What kinds of information can we get from styles marking social distance within a group?”

Style has a number of inherent properties that make it a very effective means of marking status positions and social boundaries within a hierarchy. First of all, as a means of visual communication, style can catch the observers’ attention and make a deep aesthetic impression while simultaneously sending messages concerning status and power. Style can make use of extravagance and display in a way that perhaps no other means of communication can. It is not surprising then that, more often than not, styles conferring status and power have to do with objects requiring substantial wealth, labor, or appropriate social ties to acquire. Styles supporting status are thus often expensive, although hardly an efficient means of transmitting information at a low cost, as the cloaks of half a million bird feathers worn by Hawaiian chiefs illustrate. In addition, styles have a permanence that other forms of communication lack, lending an impression of solidarity to a situation. Style also has the potential to convey several messages at once, one modifying, supporting, or negating the other.

Styles acting to convey status and power may, in many cases, be easier to identify and interpret than those delimiting boundaries between groups. This is because, as Earle mentions, they are often highly symbolic with distinct referents, are very used and are found only in certain contexts. In addition, they are often incorporated into luxury items.

Complex societies, of course, can have many different ways of organizing and the nature of status positions can be radically different from one to another. From a regional perspective, Earle shows how style is used as communication to demark chiefdoms, thus facilitating interaction and exchange of leaders sharing common bonds through styles. This is one of many possible strategies to use style to confer and maintain power and there is a great need for archaeological studies to make explicit how style is used to express social strategies. For example, styles associated with new and fixed status positions may exhibit less variation those associated with attained ones. Competition for social status may be expressed through stylistic imitation and evaluation, with those striving for status imitating those in high positions and the latter differentiating to maintain the social difference. Earle’s chapter is one carefully worked out example of how style is used in social and political power struggles. Further studies in other complex societies will elucidate many others, particularly since in this area of interacting identity it is possible to take fullest advantage of the attributes of style as a means of non-verbal communication.

Style and the nature of relationships
Plog’s, Macdonald’s, DeBoer’s, and Earle’s chapters (7, 8, 9, and 10) have discussed three kinds of information that we can get from style: information about groups, boundaries and interaction; that on changing relations between the individual and society; and that on status and social hierarchies. Given that data are adequate for such analyses and that it is possible to get some control over some of the variation in style, that is, referent and level of comparison, still we get no more than a skeleton of the relationships that may have existed in the past. We may find indications of changing social boundaries, of increasing or decreasing group or individual expression, or of the existence and development of status positions, but still we will know little of the nature of these relationships. DeBoer’s chapter gives us an excellent idea of the multiplicity of relationships that can be expressed in style. It is here that Hodder’s approach (chapter 5) has much to add to our understanding of the symbolism behind style and thereby puts some skin and flesh onto the skeleton of social relationships.

There are essentially two levels at which stylistic studies can proceed. The first involves the analysis of style according to expression of similarities versus differences, simplicity and uniformity versus complexity and diversity, with little attention being paid to underlying symbolism. The second level involves trying to understand the meaning of the symbolism behind style to grasp the underlying nature of social relationships. The latter is made possible by some of the properties of style discussed by Hodder: the relative nature of style in that it relates an individual event to a greater whole and to the interpretive and multivalent aspects of style.

Let us first look at the interpretive and multivalent quality of style. In choosing styles, people consciously or subconsciously play on symbols to express relative identity. This could not be more evident than in Hodder’s discussions of Johnny Rotten and Boy George. The intricate meanings, implications, and associations attached to symbols make it possible to express relationships far more complex than those of mere similarity and difference. In addition, as mentioned earlier, style — as a form of visual art — can play on aesthetic perception to be a particularly effective means of communication. The extent to which style makes use of aesthetic perception, of course, will depend on how actively it is used in communication.

The interpretive quality of style may stem from several related factors. The first is the perceptual bias in humans to interpret ways of doing things for their social and functional meanings. An observation also made by Sackett and Hodder.
The second is style's role as a visual art that makes use of aesthetic perception, which in turn challenges the observer to seek multiple meanings. Art in many tribal societies, as well as in the works of such artists as Escher, conceals several aspects in one item, so that once one aspect is discovered, the observer is challenged to go on and see what else might be found.

Finally, style in the service of communication about identity makes use of ambiguity to facilitate certain social strategies. In many social interactions, it is most effective to avoid having one's cards on the table, but rather to convey ambiguity and raise questions about one's identity, leaving room for the creation of a wide variety of relationships. It is thus essential in any attempts to interpret the symbolism behind style that the multivalent and ambiguous quality of style be recognized.

Another of the salient properties of style is that it is relative. This, I would argue, comes from the process underlying stylistic development and stylistic change, that of social and stylistic comparison. In choosing styles individuals compare themselves to others in the society or the society as a whole and communicate stylistically their position relative to that of others. They relate their individual or group identity to that of the greater society. In any society, there is a limited number of central relations of importance such as cooperation, competition, or separation and tension between the sexes, egalitarian, or competitive or structured status relations between individuals, and so on. There are also accompanying central metaphors to express these. Comparison relates back to these central relations and metaphors and as a result they appear again and again in different classes of data. Analyses of different sets of archaeological data, then, should lead back to these central relations and metaphors, giving some basis for accepting or rejecting symbolic interpretations of one data set.

In principle, then, style should contain information on the nature of relationships within and between groups if the symbols that style plays upon can be interpreted. In this respect I fully agree with Hodder's overall point that there is much more than objective facts to be obtained from stylistic analyses. However, his argument that 'archaeological analyses of style would benefit, first, from rejection of an 'objective' quantitative and descriptive approach' (Hodder, chapter 5, this volume: 30) could eventually lead to little more than writing fairy tales about the past. Meaningful interpretation of stylistic symbolism involves far more than intuitively reconstituting the 'wholes' of a past society as Hodder does in his discussion.

Even in an ethnographic study with full information on history and context available, it can be very difficult to discover the symbolic meanings underlying style. When asked what something means, informants can often not say, but only convey a certain feeling associated with a style because much of stylistic symbolism works on association. Other symbols may have had a distinct referent that became generalized or lost over generations of reproduction. Dreary as it is, the only solution seems to be careful descriptions and analysis—such as in the work of Plog and DeBoer—of as many different classes of artifacts as possible, the linking of these with information on economy, exchange, politics, settlement patterns, etc., and in the end, an attempt at interpretation of meaning underlying central symbols and metaphor.

To illustrate this, let us take a look at Hodder's example:

I have argued (Hodder 1987) that in the Neolithic women were seen as both the creators and destroyers of social life, as both creative and dangerous. It could be further suggested that, since evidence from cemeteries such as Nitra (Sherratt 1982) implies that older men often fulfilled dominant social roles, the link between women and the domestic family unit set up a conflict between women as producers and reproducers of the individual family unit and wider political constructs dominated by men.

(Chapter 5, above: 30)

For the sake of argument, let me suggest another interpretation. In many tribal societies, ancestor worship is based on the idea that reciprocal obligations do not end with death, but that it is necessary to maintain relations with the spirits of the dead similar to those with the living to keep up balance and harmony in a society. The association of women in the domestic context with symbols of death then does not necessarily mean that women are the destroyers of social life, but could represent women's role in perpetuating relations with the ancestors.

In addition, the role of women as producers and reproducers in the private realm and that of men in the political and social or public realm does not necessarily imply conflict. This division of labor may just as well be a solution to potential conflict. It is possible that the central conflict was between conflicting men's roles, that is, competition between individuals within the group to attain status or the one hand and competition between groups, which requires cooperation and group loyalty on the other. Women may have played a mediating role, acting as links between groups through marriage ties and as the ones who maintained ties with spirits of past generations.

Needless to say, my interpretation has no more validity than Hodder's. The point I am trying to make here is that only careful quantitative and descriptive analyses can lead us to accept one interpretation as being more plausible than the other. In this case, some relevant questions might be:

1. What were the different sizes of social units marked by stylistic boundaries during different periods? Is there evidence of strong differentiation and perhaps competition between these? What was the settlement pattern within these units?

2. Is there strong individual expression in either male or female items? In male items, is extravagance used, suggesting competition for status?
3) Through time does individual expression in artifacts increase or decrease?
2) Do symbols and styles in male and female realms show contrast and opposition?

These are just a few of several possible questions that lend some degree of verification to one interpretation or another. If interpretation of symbols used in styles is to be of use to archaeology, then it must be founded in rigorous tests of all available data and clearly tied to the results of archaeological excavations. If this is done, it may indeed be possible for archaeologists to provide interpretive insights into general symbols and metaphors of ways of doing, thinking, or being to individual events were referred in the past.

Inclusion, style does have an underlying unity, although its manifestations and the relations it is used to negotiate are clear. One can see this very clearly in an event such as a ceremonial dance in the highlands of New Guinea. All of the items worn by dancers have some meaning in communicating information about identity. Group boundaries are clearly marked by styles of ceremonial dress; although the dress of poor groups shows mutual influence. The ability of all people to obtain similar ornaments of value displays group wealth and strength. This assumption is reinforced by the strong aesthetic impression created by the line of dancers.

In contrast, individual variations in certain points of dress stress ingenuity, elegance, wealth, or status, which in opposition to group harmony. This tension may be felt by observers. Individual items of dress play very different roles in communication. Some items, such as frontal aprons, are rather standardized with little attention being paid to them other than that they are hung properly and move in rhythm to the dance. Other aspects, such as face paintings, may convey much more active messages. Some ornaments may bear decorations with distinct messages, such as a cluster of leaves in an armband as a signal to a girlfriend to enter the dance line next to her boyfriend. Other ornaments, such as large shells, may have no distinct meaning but only give an impression of greater size to the dancer, indirectly indicating power and strength. The amount of information contained in the various items of self-decoration is so great that Strathern and Strathern (1971) have devoted an entire book to the subject. An overall analysis of symbols would lead to one or two central metaphors: one involving strength, wealth, size, and power, and another involving the contradiction between the individual and the group so central to highland societies with fierce inter-individual and inter-group competition and aggression.

In leaving a ceremonial dance, one is struck by a number of impressions about style. The first is the unity of style as a means of communication about identity. The next is the vast amount of information on social relationships contained in style. The last, for an archaeologist, is a realization of the difficulties involved in obtaining this information from analysis of what, if anything, would be left as archaeological materials.

This volume as one of the first devoted solely to the subject of style, breaks away from traditional uses of style and explores the broad potential of stylistic studies within the limits of archaeological data.