



# The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things

*George Kubler*

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## **The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things** George Kubler

Arising from the study of art history, this book presents a radically new approach to the problem of historical change. George Kubler draws upon new insights in fields such as anthropology and linguistics and replaces the notion of style with the idea of a linked succession of works distributed in time as recognizably early and late versions of the same action. The result is a view of historical sequence aligned on continuous change more than upon the ecstatic concept of style--the usual basis for conventional histories of art.

## **The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things Details**

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Author : George Kubler

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## surfurbian says

Dry as a bone. Could have been boiled down to about 5 pages. But those would have been really good pages.

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## Chris says

While reading this I went from being totally confused to discovering great insights into the study of art and culture. I sometimes felt the terminology the author used and some of his observances may have changed in the 50 years since the book was originally published. Well, sure.

If I had to read this all over again, I would probably read the conclusion first. It is an excellent summation of his position and the fluidity of art, style and culture. In my own case, it would have better prepared me for what I was embarking upon. I can imagine returning to this book to review the ideas here.

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## vi macdonald says

4.5

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## Dave Peticolas says

A curious book about the unfolding of history, in particular the history of made objects, especially art, but touching also on the relationship between artists and artisans and their place in a historical series. The author argues against the use of analogies between an artistic movement and a lifetime, i.e., the "birth", "growth", and "senescence" of some movement such as Impressionism. Instead, the history of a physical form should be understood as the development of the internal logic of the form itself as it is applied to some problem, artistic or practical.

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## R.K. Cowles says

3 1/4 stars

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## Will says

A shockingly stupid book filled with over-generalizations and uninspired ideas (although Kubler should get credit for provocative terminology like "the plural present"). I threw the book away after this particularly cringe-inducing moment of blather:

Today the artist is neither a rebel nor an entertainer... More lonely than ever, the artist today is like Daedalus, the strange artificer of wonderful and frightening surprises for his immediate circle.

Never mind the obvious self-contradiction: if artists were "more lonely than ever" for what "immediate circle" were they creating? Never mind his silly textbook-like enthusiasm: Action Painting reduced by description to "wonderful and frightening surprises"! Never mind all that because that statement was published in late 1962, after both the market collapse of Abstract Expressionism in the spring and the commercial ascendancy of Pop Art in the autumn. *Neither a rebel nor an entertainer?*—What in the world was Kubler talking about?

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## **Hooper says**

This book (like "Prints and Visual Communication" and "Understanding Media") provides insights into the very nuanced techniques of the human creation. It's a great antidote to the disembodied internet world we live in now!

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## **Jeff Friederichsen says**

An art historian, a sociologist and an archaeologist walk into a bar...

...and this is the book they would write, an analysis and theory of the origins and lifespans of humanity's output of objects both utilitarian and aesthetic. A fascinating topic, discussed in a somewhat circular but self-reinforcing manner. Kubler's arguments and theories, although not quantifiable due to the extremely subjective nature of their topic, seem innovative and modern more than 50 years later. I read this as a layman with an interest in social science and art, and it tackles questions I never expected to see answered. What social and natural forces determine the success or failure of a cultural artifact? What are the commonalities and differences of tools and purely aesthetic objects? Why the Beatles, and why then?

A dense but rewarding book.

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## **Elin says**

I was first introduced to this book my freshman year of college, in 2002. It was so difficult for me to read that I didn't get through it for a few years. Eventually, I revisited it, and I'm so glad that I did. The Shape of Time changed that way I saw art. It helped me understand that ideas in art flow from one artist to the next, and that these ideas have a life span of their own. The beginning stage of an idea, or as Kubler calls it, form, develops quickly and unpredictably. The form is poorly defined, and contains vast areas for exploration. As the form enters its middle age, the most fruitful period of its life occurs, where the rules of the form have become set and there is still lots of room to explore and develop. In the final stages of a form, innovations within it becomes stale and working within the rules of the form requires a huge effort.

Example:

Let's say that the first Western movie comes out. It's a new idea, but not tremendously well executed. After some time, the golden age of westerns comes along. Westerns become better, themes are explored, these are

the westerns we remember. Eventually, the western becomes a tired cliché and we move on to action movies. Kubler elaborates on this idea with a dense, precise writing that one has to push through. I found the second half of the book, however, much easier to read than the first. I recommend this book for artists trying to understand their place in broader culture.

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### **Sasu Kakir says**

Very academic; not an easy read - yet I enjoyed regular epiphanies through its high level/long perspective analysis of artistic and cultural endeavour and production. In the end, I compared it to exercise: grunting and sweating and counting down the reps/minutes/kms during, but high immediately after (occasionally during), followed by lasting health benefits.

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### **Linda says**

It was OK. A good read to brush up on methodology.

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