

**Chronological Organization of Schools and Styles of Art**  
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**Abstract**

Chronological arrangement plays an important role in arts organization because it mirrors stylistic development. Over time, increasingly shorter time periods have become appropriate in the chronological organization of the arts due to the rate of technological change, modern communications and education, and modern values that favor pluralism and individuality. Century- or decades-based time periods, although arbitrary, avoid difficulties posed by multiple schools of art being active across overlapping time periods. Such arbitrary time periods appear also to serve well for the current time during which the concept of schools of art has weakened.

**Centrality of Chronological Organization to the Arts**

Chronological/historical perspective plays a very different role in the arts (and to a lesser extent, the humanities) than it does in the social sciences, natural sciences, and technology. For example, art history and music history are integral components of the study of art and music. However, the history of science is generally considered a distinct field, aligned with history rather than with the scientific field under study. Moreover, pre-modern scientific endeavors may not be considered science at all. In contrast, there is neither art nor music so far removed in prehistory as to be considered outside their respective fields of study.

The broad coverage of the arts across time corresponds to the important role that chronological organization plays in their organization. But chronological organization is not just a convenient tool in arts classification. All artistic schools and styles—the latter a major facet of the arts—are situated in time. Chronological organization thus mirrors stylistic development.

In adopting chronological periods as an organizing principle for the arts, the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) faces several questions. First, how long should artistic time periods be? Second, how can appropriate starting and ending dates for time periods be identified? Third, can an appropriate chronological organization for modern schools of art extend to contemporary art?

**Duration of Time Periods: How Long?**

In the DDC, stylistic development has been treated differently across the various arts, with few patterns carrying across all the developments. The most universal of the patterns is that time periods have consistently gone from longer (e.g., indefinitely long periods, multi-century periods) to shorter (e.g., century) spans. The most commonly used time period at present is the century. However, subdivision by decades is provided for in some cases. Given the consistent

pattern of moving from longer spans to shorter spans, the assumption is that once decade subdivisions are allowed, they will continue to be used.

Why should time periods for the arts get shorter over time? Many reasons exist: the rate of technological change, modern communications and education, and modern values that favor pluralism and individuality.

- An overarching factor is the influence of the world in which modern artists live, in which today's technologies are expected to be improved upon by tomorrow's technologies, with "tomorrow" arriving ever and ever sooner.
- Modern communications allow stylistic innovations to be disseminated worldwide within short periods of time. No longer does it take decades or longer for a style to become known to and assimilated by other artists.
- Modern communications also facilitate the creation of schools that arise on the basis of some cultural value (e.g., utilitarianism, formalism), only to find that the shared value manifests itself in varied ways in the artworks of different artists. In this way, a school can carry within itself the seeds of future splintering into new schools or styles.
- Today's schools are as likely to be self-proclaimed, for example, through the naming of an exhibition or the issuance of a manifesto, as to be discovered by the art critic. "It frequently happens that particular authors and artists have the ambition to originate new terms which cannot, however, be made to conform with any fundamental idea or order, and which considerably add to the irritating confusion of the various -isms" (Hodin 1951, 349).
- A related factor is the familiarity modern artists have with the ever increasing quantity of art that has gone before them, from which they can choose one set of elements to incorporate in their artwork at one time and another set of elements at another time. Nor is a historical perspective needed to accommodate this phenomenon: At any one time in the modern art world, multiple styles are likely to be active and to influence one another. "The . . . decline of neo-expressionism in the mid-1980s has been followed by a pluralist situation in which virtually all forms of work are exhibited and written about" (Atkins 1990, 127, s.v. Pluralism).
- It is supposed that few modern artists work within a single style or tradition their entire careers, whereas this would not have been unusual a century or two ago. "The individual artist cannot be nailed down to one school or direction in the living development which he goes through" (Hodin 1951, 349).
- As important as any of the other factors is the value placed in our current society on individuality: "A multitude of personal styles contribute to the stylistic currents of a given era. No artist's style is likely to completely embody any one particular style; it is, after all, individuality and personality that contemporary Westerners value in art" (Atkins 1990, 155, s.v. Style).
- In a chart showing art movements active between 1950 and 1990, the thirty-eight movements for which both starting and ending times were shown averaged less than fifteen years of activity. Another seventeen movements, averaging twenty-nine years' duration, were still active in 1990 (Atkins 1990, 8).

## **Duration of Time Periods: From When to When?**

Given these arguments, are century and possibly decade time periods a reasonable way to organize art styles and schools? We readily observe that art styles have no predilection for starting or ending in years that are multiples of 10, 50, or 100. Extending the use of such time periods would appear altogether arbitrary.

However, we also note practical difficulties in specifying meaningful time periods. The complexity of delineating artistic time periods is evident in Hodin's (1950, 347-348) comments on the temporal situatedness of the arts: "Closer study . . . shows that what at first glance looks like chaotic multiplicity in fact obeys a discipline of chronological order on the one hand—that one world of forms develops in succession to another—and on the other hand the law of contrast—or the tidal rhythm—which rests on the natural principle and need for change and completeness." At the same time that some styles develop by building on art that has gone before, often borrowing elements from multiple prior styles and juxtaposing them in novel ways, other styles develop by reacting to, or more accurately reacting against, prior styles. The end result is a picture of co-occurring art styles whose time periods to a large extent overlap, thus making the likelihood of finding meaningful date spans small. Identifying appropriate time periods is proving elusive.

Another alternative to using arbitrary century- or decade-based time periods—one less sensitive to the vagaries of overlapping time periods—is to use broad time periods, such as the Medieval Period, the Renaissance, the Neoclassical Period, the Romantic Period, the Modern Period, the Contemporary Period. However, this alternative does not actually solve the problem of periodization, since general time frames would still need to be provided for such periods. Introducing a subdivision for Contemporary art / architecture / sculpture / painting / music, for example, would require determining when such a period started. And then the problem would rear its ugly head again in trying to establish the transition from the contemporary period to a "post-contemporary" period. (Nor should we ignore the question whether a contemporary period whose hallmark is eclecticism can ever be over.) And, of course, using longer time periods runs counter to the pattern of increasingly shorter life spans for art schools and styles.

Generating customized time periods that would stand the test of time, especially for modern styles of art, is thus hard to imagine. In the end, customized time periods may be as arbitrary as century- or decade-based time periods. At the same time, century- and decade-based time periods have the advantage of lacking pretention: they do not promise or suggest a meaningfulness they cannot deliver.

## **Contemporary Art**

If a meaningful chronological organization of modern schools of art seems difficult, meaningful chronological organization of contemporary art seems almost impossible. Indeed, it is not clear that the concept of schools or styles of art continues to apply in the same way that it has in the past.

This issue is addressed by investigating the organization of modern art collections. According to the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art, “contemporary art innately resists classification into [the] schools, national styles, and media associated with earlier periods of modern art;” consequently, displays at the museum are “often thematically or conceptually oriented.” A preliminary analysis of future exhibitions at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (summer 2007–winter 2008) echoed the futility of generating a clean classificatory structure for current and future art developments. One specific set of exhibitions provided further insight into the kinds of themes and concepts used to motivate groupings of artworks: “The *Focus* series provides an opportunity for in-depth and cross-disciplinary presentations that variously concentrate on a single artists’ achievement, on broader artistic manifestations, on particular historical moments, or on significant groupings of works” (MoMA 2007, 2). Of the three-dozen-plus then-upcoming exhibitions, only two focused on a school or style / a broader artistic manifestation (minimalism, Latin American artists), while one other involved a particular historical moment (the creation of the Helvetica typeface); half of the exhibitions centered around the artworks of an individual artist; the remainder corresponded to the open-ended characterization, “significant groupings of works.”

*The Columbia Encyclopedia* (2001-2004, s.v. “Contemporary Art”) reports the following trends in contemporary art:

- pluralism

- eclecticism

- “the development of a new historicism, ironic and detached, which has spawned a number of artistic ‘neoisms’;” “sophisticated ‘quotations’ or ‘appropriations’ from prior works”

- embracing of “commercialism of a consumer society”

- manifestation of “a . . . social consciousness, often expressed in issue-driven minority, gay (frequently AIDS-related), and feminist imagery”

- use of technology-based media; digital art

- use of nontraditional materials

Unfortunately, these overall trends for contemporary art give little meaningful direction for postulating contemporary art movements. The use of arbitrary slice-of-time (probably decades-) based time periods for contemporary arts classification appears then to be an intellectually honest/responsible response. Such classification will facilitate future analysis of contemporary art, in which patterns that cannot now be predicted may become visible. In the mean time, the DDC is adopting the strategy of giving access to contemporary art developments/phenomena by mapping newly created arts-related headings from external sources (e.g., Library of Congress Subject Headings [LCSH], Art and Architecture Thesaurus [AAT] descriptors) to slice-of-time-based classes. The mapped headings become access points in the electronic version of the DDC (WebDewey), but would not immediately become part of the DDC schedules.

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