

Winckelmann and the History of Greek Sculpture

Through historiography we come to know how we arrive at our historical knowledge. In the case of the history of Greek sculpture, all the handbooks (without any necessary study of the monuments themselves) go back to the categories and dicta of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1778), the Prussian scholar who has been called “The Father of Archaeology”, “The Godfather of Art History” and “The Founder of Classical Aesthetics.” Winckelmann’s aesthetic analyses, his notions of the “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” of Greek art, have dictated our criteria of classical style. But much of what we have accepted from him as fact needs a closer look.

Winckelmann’s gymnasium teacher at Berlin called him a homo inconstans, illustrated in his starting medical studies and then abandoning them. He became an impoverished schoolmaster in 1743, which he lamented in copious letter. But his copious notebooks (brought later by Napoleon to the Bibliothèque Nationale) reflect his readings in the classics. He moved through posts as minor librarian to a Saxon count to papal antiquary in Rome, abandoning when it seemed prudent his Lutheranism for Roman Catholicism. From 1748 on he wrote numerous essays on artwork, but initially more on the basis of classical texts than on observation of the works themselves. In 1754, he wrote his “Reflections on Imitations of Greek Art” and then faked an attack on that work and wrote a defense of it, which was long on emotion and polemic, anti-Bernini and anti-Baroque. Once he reached Rome, his enthusiasm outstripped his prudence as he visited Herculaneum and Pompeii, just then being excavated. In 1764, he wrote his History of Greek Sculpture (often subsequently emended by him) and four years later was returning in triumph to Germany when he was murdered by an ex-con.

The History was intensely evolutionary, seeing Greek sculpture as starting from a tabula rasa and moving through five periods:

1. Origins- the first Greek figures: simple and straight-lined (unworked stone or logs), then with heads and finally (Daedalus) divided in lower half into legs.
2. Grand and Lofty – the more ancient style, through Pheidias
3. Beautiful – Praxiteles and Lysippus
4. Imitators – Hellenistic sculpture
5. Fall- degeneration and end (Roman sculptors were seen as mere copyists)

Winckelmann pieces together this schema from his readings and imposes a chronology on Greek art, starting with aniconic (not in human form) primitive wood statues, which were succeeded by iconic stone statues by mid 7th century. But there is no physical evidence to back this up, no tabula rasa, since Mycenaean-Minoan art (which was iconic) had trickled down through the Greek dark ages. Aniconic images coexist with iconic and early Greek stone statues look just like work in wood in Egypt (where that material survives because of the climatic conditions), which runs counter to Winckelmann’s literary sources (not always named by him, but mainly Pausanias and Plutarch, antiquarians who were developing explanations for their own evolved theories and the Christian Clement, whose iconoclastic polemics disparaged worship of the Greek gods on the basis that behind their beautiful statues had been brutish wood blocks.) So we are not dealing here with Winckelmann’s own theory from primary evidence.

Winckelmann had not seen the actual Laocoon statue when he described it as embodying noble simplicity and restraint; his description is consistent with his theory rather than with the sculpture itself. It is true that Winckelmann opened the eyes of Goethe and others to the beauty of Greek art but he was not really visually analytical himself and often lifted artistic dicta from other, less well-received writers. When he wrote his History, he drew on his ancient literary sources, especially rhetorical writers like Cicero and Quintilian, whose rhetorical styles serve as models for his categories of sculptural styles.

Winckelmann saw the high bloom of Greek art as very short (from about Pericles to Alexander), owing much to Pliny the Elder's statement about Greek art collapsing around 296BC. Winckelmann thus links artistic style to political liberty (especially as reflected in the rhetorical writers of antiquity). From Cicero and Quintilian he gets his praise of 5th century Athens, but from Pliny he gets his view of the 4th century beauty of the work of Lysippus (sculptor) and Apelles (painter). But this presented a problem in linking political liberty with flourishing art, since Lysippus was court sculptor for Alexander. Winckelmann thus argues that Greece fell onto hard times after the death of Alexander because, under Macedonian rule, even though political liberty may have been gone, there was still order and lack of strife.

Dionysos of Halicarnassus gave support for Winckelmann's timetable of corruption of eloquence, especially in comparison with Pliny the Elder's schema on the development of art. The influence of rhetorical development colored the analysis of artistic development; Pliny's discovery of Hellenic and Asiatic schools of art was similar to the topos of regional styles marked by a single major figure. But artistic schema are more suited to rhetoric than to visual art; Lysippus and Apelles seem to get their prominence largely from the association with Alexander the Great, whose death also marks the end of rhetorical excellence. The Hellenistic style was considered inferior; Alexander had died, so art and rhetoric had to die also.

Winckelmann's reliance on his literary sources poses a problem: did these writers present art or themselves interpret it? The division of the schools of rhetoric in Cicero's day into Attic, Asiatic and Rhodian may not have reflected a real practice but rather only a pigeon-holing as the ancients tried to make sense of a field by fitting in pieces as they saw it (not necessarily) as it actually was).

Winckelmann's prose is so convincing that it sweeps you along. Of course, his contemporaries generally did not see the originals. His descriptions are stunning pieces, but they are a playing out of his own inner vision and of his view, via ancient literature, of antiquity.