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0521846145 - The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece: Religion, Society and Artistic Rationalisation

Jeremy Tanner

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I

INTRODUCTION: ART AND SOCIETY
IN CLASSICAL ART HISTORYGREEK ART, THE IDEA OF FREEDOM, AND THE CREATION
OF MODERN HIGH CULTURE

On 6 May 1884 a party celebrated the opening of the Cambridge Museum of Classical and General Archaeology.¹ The guests included not only leading lights in classics, but also a wide range of members of the social, political and cultural elite of late nineteenth-century Britain, amongst them the American Ambassador and the Prince of Wales, the painters Sir Frederick Leighton (President of the Royal Academy) and Lawrence Alma-Tadema, and the directors of both the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery. At this time, classics enjoyed a prestige unequalled before, or since. Classical education in reformed public schools and the universities had provided a unifying culture for the new functionally differentiated economic, political and cultural elites who displaced the old landed ruling class, which had dominated Britain until the industrial revolution.² Moreover, there was a particularly close alignment in the interests of classicists and contemporary painters. Sidney Colvin, the Slade Professor of Art and the primary instigator of the creation of the collection of casts after classical sculptures which formed the core of the new museum, was also the leading critical advocate of the classical revival in late nineteenth-century British painting.³ The familiarity, amongst a classically educated social elite, of the subjects drawn from classical antiquity, together with a concept of the Greeks as the first people freely to explore beauty for its own sake, both promoted a new formalism amongst English painters and enhanced the image of the painter as autonomous creator and culture hero.⁴

These ideas are encoded in a series of paintings by Alma-Tadema, which suggest a strong sense of identity between the self-image of artists and connoisseurs in the late nineteenth century and their imagined forebears in classical antiquity. *Pheidias Showing the Frieze of the Parthenon to his Friends* (figure 1.1) depicts a Leightonesque Pheidias standing on the scaffolding in front of the

¹ Beard (1993). ² Bowen (1989). ³ E. Morris (1997) 61. ⁴ E. Morris (1997).

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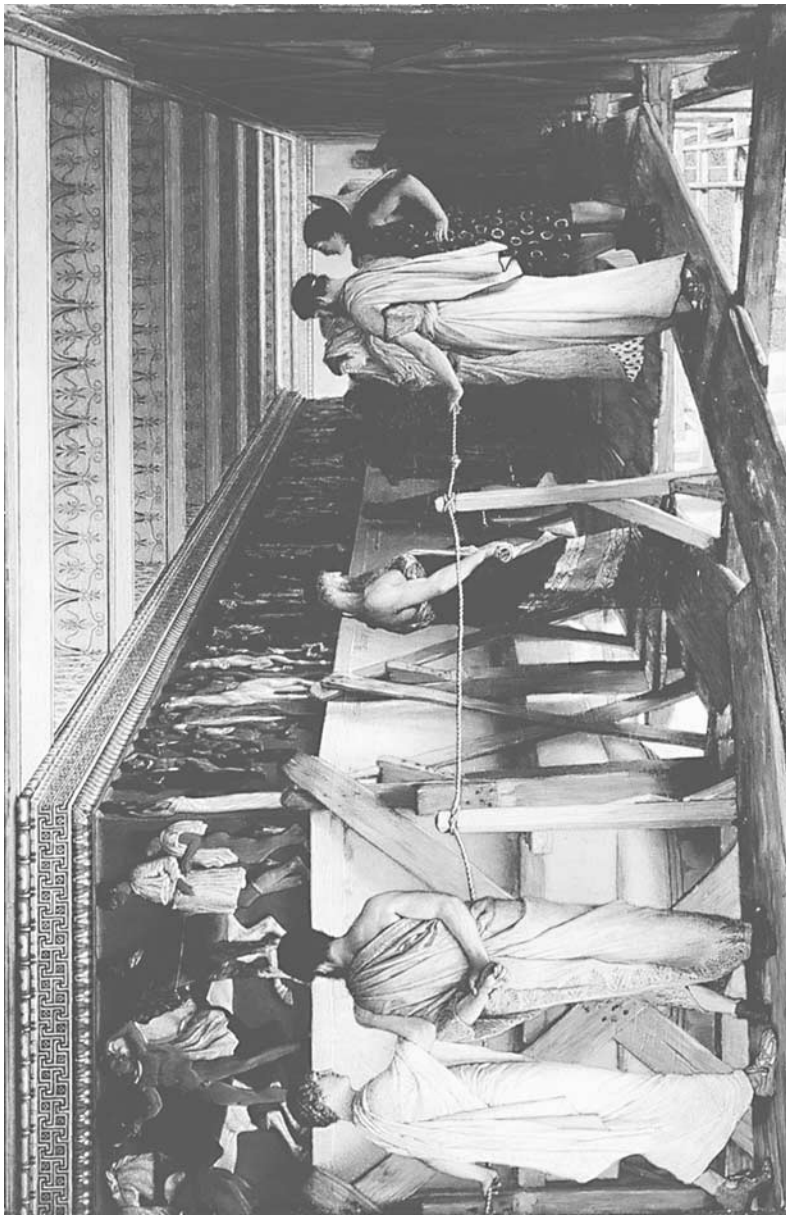


Figure 1.1 L. Alma Tadema. *Pheidias Showing the Frieze of the Parthenon to his Friends*. 1868.

Photo: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

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frieze, dazzling in polychrome, which he explicates to a small gathering of admirers. The setting – including the ropes, keeping the visitors at a suitable distance – evokes a relationship between work of art, artist and audience, closer to a work of art in a modern gallery, or indeed the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum, than to the way they might normally have been viewed in antiquity.⁵ The placing of Pheidias at the centre of the composition – a position normally occupied by the hero in academic history painting – claims the role of the artist as autocratic creator, source and origin of his œuvre, for both classical and contemporary artists.⁶ *Un Amateur Romain* (figure 1.2) shows a group of four classically draped men and women disposed around a silver statue of a young girl, in a Pompeian-style atrium house with elaborate marble columns and gilded capitals. The painting was interpreted by contemporary viewers in terms of the Roman art writer Pliny the Elder's criticisms of collectors who could not distinguish between the material and the aesthetic value of works of art. The gaze of the owner of the statue, reclining on his couch, is turned towards the two ladies, monitoring their reaction to his statue and implying a more profound interest in the impression the collector makes on his social peers than in the work of art itself. The painting thus at one and the same time criticises the pretensions of middle-class Victorian patrons with more money than taste and invites the audience 'to share the pleasure of ridiculing ancient Roman philistinism' and cultural pretension.⁷ Alma-Tadema's paintings engage a series of key concepts in the modern institution of art as high culture and project them back onto classical antiquity: the heroic status of the artist as creator, the autonomy of art, and norms of cultivated connoisseurship on the part of authentic art lovers – all concepts which, as we shall see, still centrally inform the dominant paradigm in classical art history writing. The history of classical art played a central role in the formulation of these concepts and their institutionalisation in modern high culture, most notably through the writings of J. J. Winckelmann (1717–68).

Winckelmann, notwithstanding debts to Vasari and ancient art writers such as Pliny, is the inventor of modern western art history writing. He synthesised into a compelling paradigm strands of art writing and antiquarian investigation which had previously been separate.⁸ Prior to Winckelmann, classical (Greek and Roman) art had been seen as a unitary ideal. Winckelmann, drawing on analogies with ancient rhetorical theory, gave the academic concept of an individual painter's *maniera* a historical and collective reference. Detailed

⁵ Cf. R. Osborne (1987). ⁶ Becker (1997) 144–9 (Prettejohn). ⁷ Prettejohn (1996) 134–6.

⁸ Potts (1978), (1982), Einem (1986), Haskell (1991).

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Figure 1.2 L. Alma Tadema. *Un Amateur Romain*. 1868. Photo: Glasgow Museums: Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove.

analysis of diagnostic features of style such as the conformation of the brow, the shape of the eye and nose, which were derived initially from the coins and gems he had catalogued for one of his German patrons, provided the methodological basis for attributing particular works of sculpture to their proper positions within his scheme. Winckelmann distinguished four phases. First was a hard

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and austere archaic phase. This was followed by a high phase in which artists ‘drew nearer to the truth of nature, by which they were taught to throw aside, for flowing outlines, the hardness of the older style’ and thereby achieved ‘more beauty, loftiness and grandeur’.⁹ This high phase gave way to the beautiful, distinguished by a heightened softness and grace, characteristic of artists like Praxiteles who ‘hold the same relation to their predecessors that Guido, amongst the moderns, would hold to Raphael’.¹⁰ This in its turn was followed by a period of decadence and imitation. The progressive sequence of development through the four stages is animated by political history: ‘when Greece attained its highest degree of refinement and freedom, art also became more unfettered and lofty’.¹¹ So also, with the suppression of Greek democracy first by the Macedonians, definitively by Rome, ‘the loss of freedom, from which art had, as it were, received its life, was necessarily followed by its decline and fall’.¹² Most of the styles of argumentation characteristic of the subsequent tradition of classical art history writing are prefigured in Winckelmann. In addition to the story of decline and fall, grounded in political history, Winckelmann draws analogies between literary style and artistic style: the early style is compared with the prose style of Herodotus’ ‘phrases disjoined from one another, with no connection’,¹³ whilst, ‘in light of the indisputable association between poetry and art, and the influence of one on the other’, the ‘subtle grace’ of Menander’s poetry is held to give us ‘an image of the beauties of the works of art that Lysippos and Apelles clothed with grace’.¹⁴ He uses the model of Renaissance art history as a parallel to illuminate the fragmentary record of the classical past. The early style is characterised as ‘deficient in that roundness which is produced by light and shade, like the works of the painters who preceded Raphael, and especially the Florentine school, in which the same defect is observable’. Indeed, he sees the parallelism of the sequence of artistic and scientific progress in Florence and Athens as proof of the general validity of his causal model linking artistic progress with freedom.¹⁵ He makes intuitive iconological connections between the inherent qualities of visual style, for example grandeur or grace, and the temper of the culture which produced it.¹⁶

The importance of Winckelmann’s writings lies not only in the systematic nature of his history, and its characteristic analytical tropes, but also in the construction of a culturally specific normative style of relating to works of art. In addition to reconstructing the history of Greek art, Winckelmann also sought to convey ‘an intensified appreciation of the beauties of ancient art’.¹⁷

⁹ Winckelmann (1881) VIII.2.1. ¹⁰ VIII.2.6. ¹¹ VIII.2.1. ¹² X.2.4. ¹³ VIII.1.3.

¹⁴ IX.3.30; cf. Potts (1994) 99. ¹⁵ 1.3.20. ¹⁶ Potts (1994) 101–2. ¹⁷ Potts (1982) 387.

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This he accomplished largely through extended highly subjective ‘ekphraseis’, or descriptions, of the greatest masterpieces of each style phase, such as the Apollo Belvedere (figure 1.3), which define a normative relationship for the viewer/reader to the work of art:

Among all the works of antiquity which have escaped destruction, the statue of Apollo is the highest ideal of art . . . His stature is much loftier than that of man, and his attitude speaks of the greatness with which he is filled. An eternal spring, as in the happy fields of Elysium, clothes with the charms of youth the graceful manliness of ripened years, and plays with softness and tenderness about the proud shape of his limbs. Let thy spirit penetrate into the kingdom of incorporeal beauties, and strive to become a creator of a heavenly nature, in order that thy mind may be filled with beauties that are elevated above nature; for there is nothing mortal here, nothing which human necessities require. Neither blood vessels nor sinews heat and stir this body, but a heavenly essence, diffusing itself like a gentle stream, seems to fill the whole contour of the figure . . . In the presence of this miracle of art, I forget all else, and I myself take a lofty position for the purpose of looking on it in a worthy manner. My breast seems to enlarge and swell with reverence, like the breasts of those who were filled with the spirit of prophecy, and I feel myself transported to Delos and into the Lycaean groves, – places which Apollo honoured by his presence – for my image seems to receive life and motion, like the beautiful creation of Pygmalion.¹⁸

In a similar passage, he evokes the erotic tropes of contemporary pietist hymns and prayers:

What human conception of divinity in sensuous form could be worthier and more enchanting to the imagination than the state of eternal youth and springtime of life, whose recollection even in our later years can gladden us. This corresponds to the idea of the immutability of the divine being, and a beautiful youthful godly physique awakens tenderness and love that can transport the soul into a sweet dream of ecstasy, the state of bliss that is sought in all religions, whether correctly understood or not.¹⁹

This highly sensual, deeply feelingful, construction of aesthetic response was modelled on the experience of mystic ecstasy that was characteristic of the Protestant cults of eighteenth-century Germany.²⁰ Winckelmann himself, of course, though he converted to Catholicism in order to advance his career in Rome, was brought up as a boy in the milieu of German Pietism and, even after conversion to Rome, apparently continued to enjoy singing Lutheran hymns in the privacy of his own room.²¹

Although Winckelmann’s individual contribution to the history of art cannot be doubted, and was probably strongly inflected by highly personal homoerotic fantasies of subjective and sexual freedom,²² the most important features of his

¹⁸ XI.3. ¹⁹ v.1.1; trans. Potts (1994) 167. ²⁰ Potts (1994) 167; Honour (1968) 60.

²¹ I. Morris (1994) 16. ²² Potts (1994) 4.

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Figure 1.3 Apollo Belvedere. Roman Copy. Original c. 330 BC. Vatican Museum.
Photo: Alinari 6502.

work are best understood in terms of profound changes in the institution of art in the eighteenth century, both in its social basis and its cultural framing. These changes encouraged other writers to develop ideas in similar directions to Winckelmann's, in addition to conditioning his subsequent reception. The circumstances under which viewers encountered art underwent marked change during the course of the eighteenth century. In England, the cultural and political revolutions of the seventeenth century had undermined the role of both church and king as major artistic patrons. Art production was increasingly oriented towards collectors from the aristocracy and commercial elite, many of

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whose purchases were made at auctions, on the open market, rather than being bespoke commissions.²³ In place of the political and religious contexts for which it had hitherto been created, art was now consumed in collections in country houses, in auctions, or, on the continent, in the salons of the French Academy. These new contexts of consumption and the new, socially much more inclusive, audiences which frequented them motivated the development of new forms of critical writing that were designed to mediate the relationship between the artist and the 'public' or 'society' in general, who had replaced the private patron and God as the primary beneficiaries of the artist's services.²⁴

A tradition of critical art writing, commencing with Shaftesbury and the Richardsons in England, and culminating in the aesthetics of Baumgarten, Moritz and Kant in Germany, redefined the nature of art and aesthetics. Building on the beginnings of the development of the concept of the artist as creator in the Renaissance,²⁵ they conceptualised the work of art not as a skilful imitation of nature, but as a completely self-sufficient and autonomous object, better understood in terms of the contemplative relationship it permitted with its viewer than in terms of the skilful and purposive product of craft technique mastered by its maker on which earlier art criticism had focused.²⁶ The nature of that experience was articulated in terms drawn from the Methodist and Pietist strands of Protestant culture, which had developed in reaction against the austerity of Calvinism. Pietism emphasised the idea of God as a god of love and benevolence. Just as rational world mastery that was demonstrated in business success served to secure certitude of salvation for Puritans and in secularised form shaped modern conceptions of professional vocations,²⁷ so charitable and sympathetic feelings towards one's fellow men were conceived of as a mark of God's grace amongst the Pietists, and a premium was laid on experiencing and giving expression to such feelings, as a manifestation of the workings of the grace of God within the heart.²⁸ Admission to the community of the faithful involved not only a confession of faith but also an account of how God's grace had manifested itself within one, in the form of all the appropriate feelings of Christian love and sympathy: subjective experience became the criterion of personal value.²⁹ In a secularised form this structure of response survived into and was extended as part of the cult of sensibility celebrated and developed in eighteenth-century novel writing, and satirised in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, by which time the movement had passed its peak.³⁰

²³ Pears (1988). ²⁴ Honour (1968) 19; Pears (1988) 49; Habermas (1989).

²⁵ Blunt (1940) 23–38, 72–8; Panofsky (1968) 85–6, 93–5. ²⁶ Abrams (1989a), (1989b).

²⁷ Weber (1931). ²⁸ Campbell (1987) 99–137. ²⁹ Campbell (1987) 128.

³⁰ Campbell (1987) 138–60.

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The idea of the artist and of the work of art as an object of disinterested love, analogous to the conceptual model of God, had already been intimated in academic art theorists like Bellori.³¹ This facilitated the transfer of the sensibility associated with mystical strands of Protestantism – Pietism, Methodism, Quietism – into aesthetic discourse. Karl Philip Moritz, in his essay ‘On the Unification of all the Fine Arts . . . under the Concept of the Complete in itself’, describes the experience of artistic beauty as follows:

it makes us seem to lose ourselves in the beautiful object; and precisely this loss, this forgetfulness of self, is the highest degree of pure and disinterested pleasure which beauty grants us. In that moment we sacrifice our individual confined being to a kind of higher being. Pleasure in the beautiful must come ever closer to disinterested love, if it is to be genuine.³²

The language echoes that of Quietist mystical experience, described in very similar terms in Moritz’s autobiographical novel *Anton Reiser*. A feelingful response lies at the centre of the discourse of the ‘art lover’ elaborated in eighteenth-century aesthetics. Kant (educated in a Pietist milieu) demanded ‘both taste and feeling’ as necessary components of an adequate response to a work of fine art, defined as an object which pleases for its own sake, irrespective of ends of utility or morality. Winckelmann wrote a ‘Treatise on the Capacity for the Feeling (*Empfindung*) of Beauty in Art’ (1763). In this he contrasts the impassivity of ‘a certain young Britain of the highest class who was in his carriage and did not even show a sign of life and his presence when I gave him a talk on the beauty of Apollo’ with the ‘soft heart and responsive senses’ which are the sign of the capacity for feeling beauty characteristic of the true art lover.³³ The senses were not, as in strands of Neoplatonic and neo-Stoic thought inherited from classical antiquity, merely means or stepping-stones to higher intellectual ends. Baumgarten, in his essays on aesthetics, characterised poetry and painting in terms of the ‘perfection of sensuous cognition’, owing its specific value to the exploitation of sensate non-logical capacities of the mind in the pleasurable expansion of human experience.³⁴ These ways of seeing were cultivated as a set of critical practices which formed an aesthetic ethos, seeking to engender a certain spiritual depth and inner composure or freedom, against the alienating and fragmenting pressures of the instrumental rationality characteristic of the modern social and economic orders, an ethos best exemplified by Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795).³⁵

³¹ Panofsky (1968) 154–77. ³² Abrams (1989b) 166.

³³ Trans. in Irwin (1972) 89–103; quotations 89–90, 92. ³⁴ Abrams (1989b) 174–9.

³⁵ Hunter (1992).

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Although the cult of sensibility as a total way of life fell into disrepute in the nineteenth century, its structure of feeling survived as a normative framework regulating a specific institutional domain, that of art and in particular high-cultural viewing. It can easily be found echoed in contemporary art-writing, for example an article from the French journal *Realities*:

Ignorant or initiated, we are each of us disarmed before that mystery, the masterpiece. Uncertainly searching the canvass, we await the moment of grace when the artist's message will come to us. The silent clamour of Rembrandt, the infinite gentleness of Vermeer, no culture will make these things comprehensible to us if we have not restored the calm, created the expectation, prepared within ourselves the void that is propitious to emotion.³⁶

Similarly, in the introduction to a catalogue for an exhibition of his collection of classical antiquities, Georg Ortiz describes how as a young man

I lost my religious faith, studied philosophy and became a Marxist. I was looking for God, for the truth and the absolute. In 1949 I went to Greece and I found my answer. The light was the light of truth and the scale of everything was on the scale of man. And Greek art exuded a spirit which I was much later to perceive as what I believe to be the spiritual birth of man ...

Finding the truth and the absolute in Greek art, Ortiz was converted from Marxism to art collecting, saved from his sense of alienation and spiritually transformed by a relationship with art based primarily on 'feeling'. The catalogue itself is entirely written by Ortiz out of 'love and respect for the objects', in a somewhat effusive style, justified, as against a more scholarly production, by the desire to ensure adequate 'harmony of expression and feeling'.³⁷

One of the distinctive features of this aesthetic ethos, and the art-historical consciousness which accompanies it in the modern West, is that it is borne not just by a social elite, but also by the state. The love and respect that were held to be the due of art, together with the historical orientation to art that was developed in the writings of Winckelmann and in national histories of art based on his historiographic model, were intensified by the development in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of national art museums with historical displays, in place of the picturesque or aesthetic displays intended to project the power of princely collectors or to provide *mises-en-scène* for their aristocratic and increasingly bourgeois counterparts.³⁸ In Britain, France and Germany displays were created which promoted a vision of the respective

³⁶ Quoted in Bourdieu (1984) 568, n. 63.

³⁷ Ortiz (1996) no page numbers in introductory section. ³⁸ Ernst (1993).