

Winckelmann: For the Bicentennial of His Death

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Todd A. Britsch

Two hundred years have now passed since the nineteen-year-old Johann Wolfgang von Goethe heard the news that struck him “like a thunderclap from a clear sky”¹ Johann Joachim Winckelmann had been murdered in Trieste while awaiting a ship that would take him back to his adopted home in Rome. The news was particularly shocking to Goethe because he and his associates were still under the impression that Winckelmann was en route to a reunion with his old acquaintances in Germany, and that the opportunity to see such an important figure would soon be theirs. Goethe reports that he and his friends had entertained no hopes of actually speaking with Winckelmann, but that they had anticipated watching him from afar.² The enthusiasm which the young writer felt towards his older countryman did not fade with the ensuing years. Indeed, thirty-seven years after Winckelmann’s death, Goethe edited a small booklet entitled *Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert*, in which his praise was still very considerable.³

Goethe was not alone in his high regard. Lessing, whose famous *Laokoon* was written as a reaction to some of Winckelmann’s basic theses, referred to him as one of two writers “whom I would gladly have given a few years of my life.”⁴ Herder, Schelling, Schiller, Hölderlin, the Schlegels, and a large number of others were deeply concerned with his writings. Nor was his influence limited to Germany. Franz Schultz accurately notes that Winckelmann was “the first German since Luther who found European recognition.”⁵ Mme. de Staël gives him brief but important consideration in *De L’Allemagne*, calling him “the man who caused a veritable revolution in Germany in the manner of considering the arts and, through the arts, literature. . . .”⁶ During Winckelmann’s life his works were translated and published in Italy, France, and England.

The degree and extent of Winckelmann’s reputation during his lifetime and the decades which followed make somewhat surprising the rather obscure place which he is now accorded in cultural history. Although it is not this paper’s purpose to defend his fame against the fortunes of time, it will attempt to enumerate the thoughts which so inspired his contemporaries and the developments which helped lead to his present position. Winckelmann’s contributions lie in three related areas—as a founder of the

science of archaeology,⁷ as one of the first modern practitioners of art history and cultural history,⁸ and as a forerunner to the great German intellectual and literary movement which dominated Europe for the century and a half after his death.

Winckelmann's role in the establishment of a scientific approach to archaeology was in part the result of a number of fortunate circumstances. In 1754, largely because he felt it would help provide him access to the great collections of classical art in Rome, he became a convert to Roman Catholicism. The following year, with some aid from the church, he left Dresden for Rome, where he established permanent residence. During these same years the first excavations were begun in Pompeii and Herculaneum. It was natural that Winckelmann would travel to Naples to investigate the discoveries there, for his reputation as a student of classical art was already quite well established, and friends were eager to receive his evaluation of the monuments so recently found.

Yet despite his position among the classical scholars of Rome, Winckelmann was not always well received at the sites of the destroyed cities. In fact, because of professional jealousy, he was at times prohibited from even visiting the areas where digging was in progress. But through the aid of a few sympathetic admirers, he was allowed to view a few secondary works of sculpture and painting, and from these he gathered enough information to write what are now considered the first scientific reports of these discoveries.⁹ Winckelmann's articles were not different from others in factual description; several accurate papers had been published before. Winckelmann's strength lay in his ability to discern characteristics that would identify artifacts in relation to rather narrow historical periods. For example he recognized that the degree of shifting or counterbalancing of the weight of a statue tended to become more extreme in later works. Likewise he observed that definition of musculature also became more pronounced in works that were produced after the fifth century B.C. On the basis of such evidence he was able to establish a dating system that was often surprisingly accurate when compared to the fragmentary evidence with which he worked.

Winckelmann's archaeological work was not normally concerned with such striking recent discoveries. Many of his papers and catalogues were of works which had been for centuries in the possession of royalty or the church. Indeed, the two statues that he was most concerned with were the *Laocoön* and *Apollo* of Belvedere, both of which were well-known treasures of the Vatican collections. But he still attempted to view each statue, cameo, fresco, or coin from the basis of historical characteristics. His work led many others to similar procedures. Ironically, it was this very attempt to classify works according to dates and historical movements that contributed in

large part to the decline of interest in Winckelmann's writings. As new techniques were developed to date ancient monuments, Winckelmann was very frequently found to be in error. For some time, scholars were unable to separate his factual inaccuracies from his contributions to the beginnings of the science.

In spite of the obvious importance of his approach to archaeology, it was actually only one facet of his major discovery as an art historian—the concept of historical style. To those accustomed to viewing art largely on the basis of cultural periods, it would probably be surprising to discover that such an approach is of rather recent origin. Modern art history had its beginnings with Vasari and his followers in the late Renaissance and Baroque years. Yet as Ernst Heidrich points out, there is little of the “historical” in the works of these writers. Their concern was almost exclusively biographical—the artist's beginnings (usually in unfortunate circumstances), his amazing flowering, and finally his decline.¹⁰

Winckelmann's approach differed consciously from that of his predecessors. His *magnum opus*, the *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, begins with his avowal to seek the essence of art, “in which the story of the artist has little influence.”¹¹ More important, in Winckelmann's opinion, were historical, geographical, political, and religious forces. Thus Winckelmann attributed the static quality of Egyptian art to the monolithic nature of the country and its social institutions; yearly floods; a religion which deified the political leaders; flat, undeviating landscape; and similar influences.¹² Greek art, on the other hand, was diverse and progressive because of a moderate climate, multiple political systems, mountainous countryside, and anthropomorphic religion.¹³ As Meinecke points out, Winckelmann's assumption of geographical influence was derived largely from Enlightenment historiography, especially that of Montesquieu.¹⁴ Winckelmann was the first, however, to apply such concepts to the field of art.

Winckelmann realized early in his career that although the differences between the arts of various nations could be attributed to the influences mentioned above, this fact would not explain the obvious differences in the arts of various ages within the same area. To solve this problem he again borrowed from Enlightenment thinkers, but with a great originality of application. The concept of biological growth of nations was used by a few eighteenth-century historians to explain certain political phenomena. Winckelmann applied this idea to art and cultural development and promoted the theory of historical styles. He thought of artistic periods as following a natural cycle, which he described in four stages—inception (*Ursprung*), growth (*Wachstum*), change (*Veränderung*), and decline (*Fall*).¹⁵ On the basis of these stages he was able to differentiate four basic styles in Greek art. These he called the oldest style, the high or grand style,

the beautiful style, and finally, the period of imitation.¹⁶ Winckelmann's definitions of these styles were so accurate that they correspond very well with the modern designations for the same periods—archaic, classic (Hellenic), fourth century and early Hellenistic, and late Hellenistic. There is some lack of clarity in his thought concerning causes of the cycle, but this is of lesser importance than the fact that for the first time critics were provided a concept with which both individual works as well as entire epochs could be analyzed. Perhaps the final testimony to the universal nature of this contribution is the fact that scholars daily employ the idea of historical style without knowing that Winckelmann was the first to use it in a modern manner.

Although the popularity of Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* was widespread in Germany, most Germans were probably more influenced by a little tract that was Winckelmann's first publication—the *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*. Winckelmann wrote this pamphlet in Dresden while awaiting his trip to Italy. At this time he had had a most limited experience with art works, especially those from Greece. The Dresden museums and courts had a few original works and a fair collection of plaster casts, but no masterpieces of Hellenic or Hellenistic sculpture. Thus it is all the more surprising that he not only proposed imitation of Greek art as the only method for Germany to establish a great artistic tradition, but also gave a definition of classical art which became the leading aesthetic and literary norm during a great period of German creative history. In characterizing the *Laocoön* Winckelmann said it exhibited "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur"¹⁷—a concept which finds itself repeated in the works of most of the great later eighteenth-century German writers. It would be impossible to conceive of Goethe's *Iphigenia*, Schiller's "beautiful soul" (*schöne Seele*), or Hölderlin's *Diotima* without this stimulus provided by Winckelmann.

In addition to providing motivation for classical literature, Winckelmann's writings aided the formation of a German culture in a second way. After the Thirty Years' War, independent creative efforts were severely limited in Germany. The country had lost a major part of its economic capacity and a large percentage of its population. It was therefore especially susceptible to the economic, military, and artistic forces of France. For almost a century—from 1650 to 1750—music was the only art in Germany which flourished largely independent of French influence. All others, especially architecture and literature, became increasingly imitative of Franco-Roman baroque. In large part this imitation resulted in poor works that had some degree of polish but little substance. Winckelmann helped the Germans develop an independent art in two ways: he was a German writer whose European reputation was sufficient to cause national pride; and

he showed Germany a culture which it could adopt as a spiritual ancestor. The French had often felt a special kinship with Rome, both the republic and the empire. Now Germany looked to Greece as its model. Greek sculpture, architecture, painting, and especially literature enjoyed a great revival, and writers strove to become like Homer and Pindar. A great deal has been written concerning the positive or harmful effects of this involvement with Greece,¹⁸ but it was without question one of the most important aspects of German intellectual and artistic life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Probably even the theories and works of such later writers as Heine, Nietzsche, and George cannot be fully explained without reference to Winckelmann's concept of Greece.

In addition to the three areas outlined, Winckelmann made a great number of related contributions. He provided an aesthetic evaluation of line,¹⁹ developed a theory of artistic grace,²⁰ and more than anyone else was responsible for the attitudes toward fifth-century Greece that prevailed universally until rather recently. It may well be, however, that besides his archaeological inaccuracies, no other single matter has contributed more to his loss of fame than the fact that scholars are now starting to question the stereotype which attributes to Greek character almost faultless moderation, control, Stoicism, and noble self-sufficiency. To Winckelmann, more than any other, we owe this evaluation. Whether or not he is proved to be wrong in this respect, the artistic and scholarly worlds have reaped great harvests from the conception of Greece which Winckelmann helped to form.

Dr. Britsch is assistant professor of German and humanities at Brigham Young University. A former Fulbright scholar to Germany, he has specialized in cultural history and aesthetics.

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke*, Vol. IX, ed. Lieselotte Blumenthal (Hamburg, 1955), p. 8. Translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Goethe, *Werke*, Vol. XII, ed. Herbert von Einem (1953), pp. 96–129.

4. Walther Rehm, *Götterstille und Göttetrauer: Aufsätze zur Deutsch-Antiken Begegnung* (München, 1951), p. 183.

5. Franz Schultz, *Klassik und Romantik der Deutschen*, 2nd rev. ed. (Stuttgart, 1952), p. 125.

6. Mme. de Staël, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1820), X, 236.

7. Winckelmann's contributions to the founding of scientific archaeology are widely acknowledged. Even C. W. Ceram's popularizing book, *Gods, Graves, and Scholars: The Story of Archaeology*, trans. E. B. Garside (New York, 1952), contains a chapter entitled "Winckelmann: The Birth of a Science," pp. 11–17.

8. Gilbert Highet repeats F. Fister's observation that Winckelmann invented both the concept and the term "*Kunstgeschichte*" (art history), in *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influence on Western Literature* (Oxford, 1949), p. 665.

9. Carl Justi devotes several long chapters to Winckelmann's four trips to Naples in the second and third volumes of his great biography, *Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, 5th ed., ed. Walther Rehm (Köln, 1956).

10. Ernst Heidrich, *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Methode der Kunstgeschichte* (Basel, 1917), p. 15.

11. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Werke: Einzig rechtmässige Original-Ausgabe* (Stuttgart, 1847), I, 1. There is a great need for a new scholarly edition of Winckelmann's works. The recent publication in East Germany of Winckelmann's *Geschichte*, ed. Wilhelm Senff (Weimar, 1964), at least makes the work available again to interested readers, but serious students will find the notes and "Nachwort" very unsatisfying.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 37.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 33, 35.

14. Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, Vol. III of *Werke* (München, 1959), p. 292.

15. Winckelmann, I, 1.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 299, 300.

17. *Ibid.*, II, 12. To modern viewers, Winckelmann's use of such terms to describe the late Hellenistic statue by Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athanodoros would seem very strange. It should be remembered, however, that Winckelmann was writing during the most extreme period of Baroque and Rococo sculpture. Even the *Laocoön* could appear simple and quiet in comparison to statuary of that period.

18. In his *Griechentum und Goethezeit: Geschichte eines Glaubens* (München, 1952), Walther Rehm insists, "The belief in that which is Greek is finally only a simile for the belief in that which is most purely human and therefore also for the belief in that which is German." (p. 17) Eliza M. Butler's *The Tyranny of Greece Over Germany* (Boston, 1958) was written to support her thesis that the Greek influence in Germany stifled the Germans' natural creativity. Many others have taken positions somewhere between these two.

19. Winckelmann, II, 14, 42, 62; I, 24 ff.

20. *Ibid.*, II, 320–324.