

Western Art and the Antique: Continuity, Imitation and Assimilation

DISCUSSANT

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I want first of all to thank Salvatore Settis, the organizer of this session, and the speakers, for their stimulating and timely challenge to the conventional wisdom we have inherited from the Warburg School and Erwin Panofsky, about what happened to classical antiquity in post-classical times. It has been fascinating to learn of Panofsky's great debt to his predecessors—most surprisingly, perhaps, Heinrich Wölfflin, to whose formalist approach Panofsky's whole iconographical method was in its turn a challenge and antidote. And it has been illuminating to hear the speakers retrace in this context the gamut of our classical heritage from what Dorothy Glass described as the debased classicism of Lombard art to the passion for antiquarian precision, including even copies and fakes that inspired the world-view of Ingres. Together, you have demonstrated clearly that neither the medieval disjunction between form and content, nor their reintegration during the Renaissance were as complete as Panofsky made out.

It has been a particularly moving and bittersweet experience for me since—and I hate myself for saying this—I, along with my wife (we are, after all, one person) am probably one of the few people in this room old enough actually to have studied with Panofsky. I cannot tell you how exciting it was to sit in Panofsky's seminar on Iconology nearly 40 years ago and hear his charming and elegant formulations of those brilliant and inspiring ideas that have since become the standard clichés of our discipline—alas, much in need of critical reexamination.

I must confess at the outset that my reaction has been mixed, one might almost say contradictory. On the one hand, I am reminded of Jackson Pollock's anguished reaction to the criticism that he merely splashed paint on his canvases with the abandon of a madman or the brutishness of a chimpanzee.

"But I do control," he cried—"there is, order." Similarly, Panofsky is supposed to have exclaimed, despite the extraordinary sophistication of certain manifestations of classicism in the Middle Ages "But after all, there was a Renaissance," meaning, in art historical terms, that we can, after-all tell the difference between medieval and Renaissance art works, and this difference can in large part be seen through their respective relations to the art of antiquity.

At the same time, I am struck by the sheer importance that attaches, for better or for worse, to the subject of the classical heritage in post-classical times. For hundreds of years now people have actually defined the history of our civilization in terms of this relationship. It is as though our very lives depended on it. Settis rightly emphasizes that in some profound sense Panofsky saw himself, and humanistic values generally, reflected in the Renaissance. Even in our own times, the development of western culture is defined largely in terms of the anti-classicism of the modern movement and the classicism of post-modernism. Indeed, the whole thrust of today's session testifies to this very point. We feel justified in qualifying, criticizing, and supplementing the work of our predecessors—including Panofsky himself, and to say nothing of the Lombard masters or of Ingres—precisely because we believe our modern understanding of the true spirit of classical antiquity is somehow truer than theirs.

I want to take just a few moments of your time to offer some observations on this fundamental point, namely, the relationship between our conception of our classical heritage and our conception of ourselves. The relationship involves, it seems to me, an historical and historiographical paradox to which we have been heir, whether consciously or not, since the Renaissance. One of the cornerstones of modern historiography is that the basic organization of historical time into three divisions or periods; ancient, medieval, and modern, was an achievement of the Renaissance. The notion of there having been a distant, ancient, classical civilization that was destroyed by the establishment of Christianity and the barbarian invasions, resulting in a cultural decadence that was in turn succeeded by a new contemporary time in which the ancient world is reborn—this historical structure can be traced ultimately to Petrarch in the mid-fourteenth century. The paradox to which I refer consists in the simultaneous emergence, on the one hand, of a fixed, perspective view of a distant part, and, on the other hand, of a sense of the present as a new, distinctly modern era in the definition of which the past plays an essential role. This way of thinking about history can be seen as a reflection of the dual nature of the Renaissance itself, which while looking back to antiquity for authority, also found license to bring forth something new. There was in fact a twofold break with medieval tradition—a leapfrog return to an ideal golden age in the remote past, and an equal and opposite thrust forward toward an ideal future based on current achievements and ambitions.

It is a remarkable fact that although the retrospective and innovative aspects of the Renaissance have often been studied separately, the relationship between these two terms of the paradox has not been brought clearly into focus. By and large, the Renaissance

interest in the past has been conceived alternatively as essential and intellectual, or as incidental and social. In the first case, the revival of culture is seen more or less as an end in itself, the character of the Renaissance determined mainly by progressively greater liberation from medieval convention and increasingly complete assimilation of classical values. In the second conception, the essence of the Renaissance lay in the development of a new social order, of which the revival of antiquity was merely a symptom, the outward mask of an increasingly secularized attitude toward the world.

In the essential, intellectual view, what was new about the Renaissance was its retrospectivity. This attitude received its most concise and compelling formulation in Panofsky's famous definition of the Renaissance achievement as the reintegration of classical form with classical content. The concept was based on the notion of historical distance, that is, a sense of remoteness that made it possible to dissociate ancient culture from the strictures and disapprobation of Christianity. In Panofsky's definition the revival is self-contained as well as essential, since reintegration of classical form and meaning is a self-sufficient and self-justifying process, akin to and in many ways precedent for our own "scientific" historical attitude which makes reconstructing the past an end in itself.

The view of Renaissance interest in antiquity as an incidental symptom of a new social order was represented by Jacob Burckhardt, notably in the opening paragraphs of the chapter on the revival of antiquity in his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*.¹ Burckhardt is at pains to emphasize, as one of the chief propositions of his book, that the conquest of the western world was achieved not through the revival of antiquity alone, but through its union with what he calls the genius of the Italian people. Burckhardt goes on to observe that the degree of independence which the national spirit maintained in this

¹ Burckhardt, Jacob, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, New York, 1958

union varied according to circumstances. In the modern Latin literature of the period, he says, it was very small, while in plastic art, as well as in other spheres, it was remarkably great. In this book Burckhardt does not actually deal with the visual arts, but he says in the general introduction he had intended to fill the gap by a special work on "The Art of the Renaissance." Of course, Burckhardt did write a great deal about art, and if one takes the wonderful series of lectures on Renaissance sculpture as an example, one is indeed astonished by the passion with which he describes the originality of and independence from classical tradition displayed by the Italian masters through the High Renaissance. Time and time again he stresses, often with very subtle observations of the effects of form and emotion, the differences between the Italian works and their classical antecedents. The explanation he gives for the Renaissance enthusiasm for antiquity was that it reflected a social revolution in which the noble and the burgher came together on equal terms, so that a society developed which felt the need for culture and had the leisure and the means to obtain it. Antiquity then became the guide, leading the way from the fantasy world of the Middle Ages to an understanding of the actual physical and intellectual world.

In my view, neither of these attitudes helps to resolve the paradox of the Renaissance, the coincidence of a new sense of the past with a new sense of the present; neither perceives an inner, organic, and necessary relation between retrospection and innovation.

I am convinced that such a relationship existed, and I believe it functioned in two ways. One kind of role the past may be said to have played in the definition of the present was exemplary: the past was seen as a model to be imitated, the prestige of the prototype

serving as justification for a claim to attention and admiration made by the imitation. The second use of the past was agonistic, reference to some esteemed prototype serving not only as a witness to the ambition of the present but also as a measure of the difference between the model and its reflection. In this case the achievements of the past become a foil for the originality of the present and, in turn, a measure of the challenge raised to the future. The historical reference becomes evidence of the lesson of history having been mastered, and incorporated into a new and surpassing synthesis.

The task of future historians of the subject will be to explore the possibilities of an alternate view that regards the attitude toward the past which emerged in the Renaissance not merely as an end in itself, nor merely as a byproduct of social change, but rather as the essential ingredient in that radical redefinition of the self of which the fateful symptom is our modern conception of our own modernity.