"RENDERING OF NATURE IN EARLY GREEK ART"

By MEYER SCHAPIRO

IT is twenty-five years since Professor Emanuel Loewy published his remarkably clear analysis of the steps from Greek archaism to Greek realistic sculpture. Rereading it, we become aware how much the modern arts have changed our view of the archaic and primitive. Formerly we found a justification of the academic standards of accuracy in a Hellenistic precedent, which Loewy showed was the goal of a long development, attained step by step, through crudity, error, and a restraining tendency towards abstraction. Today this same account seems to us a history of decay rather than of progress. The word "archaic" had then an invidious suggestion; however dispassionate its user, there was attached to it the stigma of incompetence and childishness.

Professor Loewy discovered in archaic Greek art seven peculiarities, some of which are common to other primitive arts and to the drawings of children. He explained them as the result of a memory picture deposited by numerous visual impressions. The artist, instead of consulting nature, copied an image without individuality or accident; he drew from a concept rather than from a percept. And such an image is characteristically generalized, stylized, flat, isolated, distinct, and "coincident with the form's greatest expansion."

Reading Loewy's book we at once understand why archaic art is so stiff and deformed, why its presentations are so simple, its mass so uniform, its planes arbitrary, its silhouettes clear, its details geometrical, and its whole appearance that of an idea only incompletely liberated from its material embodiment.

As Greek art develops, these "crudities" give way to an accurate observation of nature. The memory image is gradually abandoned; in time the stone figure is as free in its movements, as well articulated, muscled and expressed, as a living being. It is Lysippus, according to Loewy, who takes the final step, and by means of torsion of the trunk and by an asymmetrical disposition of the axes of the body, begets figures which are omnifacial, whose forms flow one into the other without the abrupt archaic divisions and "quadrature." In the "Youth Tying his Sandals" (Louvre), there is a great foreshortening of the trunk and the upper part of the body, beyond anything in earlier art; "The whole figure . . . throws its arms and legs vigorously into space." Since all idea of background is absent, "the specific perfection of statuary is achieved; the direct contact with nature has been reached in all its essentials."

But groups are not as fully developed as their members which may be completely rounded, and yet together furnish only a front view. The Laocoon is designed, for one view, the Wrestlers (Florence) for two views; it is the Farnese Bull which is "plurifacial to be intelligible." Loewy believes that if the figures of Antiope, the dog, and the mountain god, were not scattered and detached from the central group, then the Farnese Bull "would not only have reached the highest perfection for a group in the round, but would have gone even further than perfection allows." The figures enclose a space as well as fill it.

Relief and drawing undergo similar developments, abandoning the flat conception, losing the rigid contour, introducing overlapping planes, foreshortening, environment, and perspective. Greek art as it develops becomes more naturalistic, and approximates appearances in all their details and variety.

However accurate Loewy's account may be in tracing the succession of the forms of Greek art, it leads him into errors of artistic judgment and interpretation. He overlooks entirely, in his zeal for a scrupulous record, that the change from arbitrary conceptions, from observed facts, generalized and treated abstractly, to literal representation and merely imitative forms, corresponds to a loss of artistic power. For the excellence of Greek art lies in the beauty of its formal ideas and in the sensitive refinement and ordering of shapes which in nature are coarse, chaotic, ephermeral, and unorganized. It imposes rhythmic designs upon non-rhythmical material, and expresses the vitality of its subjects by abstracting from them their most suggestive and harmonious contours. Its reference is intrinsic, while that of decadent art is usually to associations not, at bottom, æsthetic.

With the growth of realism design decays—not at once, but when the discovery of natural detail is bound up, not with the desire for a more intricate order or pattern, or the extending of rhythmical relations into a third dimension, but with a passion

for more exact replicas of models. Design must decay, because design is imaginative, arbitrary, emotional; it limits nature, it transforms appearances into eccentricities analogous to the human mind. And successful realism precludes such tampering. Instead of modifying appearances, it accepts them wholesale, with perhaps the addition of a sentiment or an anecdote.

The anatomical discoveries of the fifth century seem to us vigorous and fresh, because they were conceived archaically, and geometrized. The anatomical learning of the Hellenistic period seems academic and pompous, because unredeemed by the ancient abstractions. The very nature of this technical research is anti-artistic, for the artist subordinates, arranges, omits, whereas the Hellenistic realist would expose every muscle and introduce a wealth of foreshortening.

Overlooking æsthetic considerations, Loewy's method leads to a *reductio ad absurdum,* to a higher valuation of decadent art because it is the last term in a technical series. Since Greek art develops from memory concepts towards a closer imitation of nature, ergo, such imitation is the specific excellence of art. Historically he is quite correct; his observations can with like success be applied to many other periods, but also with the same error in interpretation. It is the "biological fallacy" (as Geoffrey Scott calls it) of confusing development with progress. It results from the common substitution of one phase of art for its whole and predicating of it an attribute of the other. Sculpture employs visual facts, but all these visual facts cannot equal the work of art. Hence a history of sculpture in terms of its rendering of nature, alone, must necessarily misjudge a great deal. The difference in attitude between the artist and the imitator is critical.

If one paralleled Prof. Loewy's brilliant study of the nature of Greek archaism and its consequent supersession, with a sensitive study and analysis of the æsthetic factors of Greek art, in which a detailed examination would be made of the rise and decay of design and rhythm and coherence, then Loewy's judgments of the Farnese Bull and of the Youth Tying his Sandals would seem very much distorted. He commends the latter for "throwing its arms and legs vigorously into space" when the obviously indigenous virtues of sculpture in the round are restraint, mass, concentration of parts within a unifying solid, and perfect clarity. (I should add that the translator is partly to blame; the original German is not as violent—"mit Armen und Beinen keck in den Raum greift"; but it expresses the same notion of sculpture freed from the limitation of a unified, constraining block.) He goes even further. He considers this diffusion of gesture a "specific perfection of statuary." "Direct contact with nature has been reached in all its essentials," he writes, and thus reveals the shortcoming of his method.

Various views of the statue give totally different ideas of its volume. In some it is top-heavy, in some it is weakened by great holes; in some the outline of the left leg is crude and unrelated to, or detached from, the general contour; from some views the upper and lower parts are not unified in respect to their volumes. The conception is fine pictorially, but the invitation to move around it reveals many defects. The details of modelling are uninspiringly literal, where formerly the imagination had created a beautiful ordering of planes.

It is in his judgment of the Farnese Bull, however, that Loewy displays the most critical laxity. The effect is of a *tableau vivant,* utterly chaotic, with only the slightest pretense to artistic effect. The group is arranged as a pyramid, but the meaning of this device has been lost. This pyramid does not effect stability, grandeur, repose, and a simple unified mass. The planes has little to do with one another; the space is hardly organized, the positions of the various parts are dictated by narrative, by ideas of function rather than by notions of formal fitness or harmony. True, the group encloses a space; but should we judge it as we judge that great art which encloses space—architecture—we should have to condemn it as very crude indeed.

And yet this group, were it not for some details, says Loewy, "would not only have reached the highest perfection for a group in the round, but would have gone even further than perfection allows." A study of its linear arrangement would show that the artists had no such aim; a study of its planes would reveal that they were left to themselves and achieved no order; and a study of its whole volume would render obvious the artists' innocence of design, of planning, or of a sense of formal composition. The hollows and bumps are most disconcerting; the subject is difficult to grasp in its uncouth irregularity of outline and depression.

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Since, as has often been noted, a growth in realism causes a diminution in design, or "art forms" or *"presentata,"* there must be some intimate relation between the memory image and good composition. For the various devices of arrangement which

we find in archaic art, in its representation and in its ornament, tend to disappear from those arts which observe nature closely and copy her. The Bushman drawings which are renowned for their accuracy are not as decorative as the far less literal and more primitive "Dipylon" figures. Exactly what this relation is, I do not know. Perhaps a comprehensive study of the "forms" of art, both decorative and representative, and psychological analysis may some day tell us. But we have many clues, and some deductions are verifiable. The rhythm of music and poetry, the demand for regularity, and the emotional effects of accent and asymmetry of time, are referable to the rhythmical character of living processes—respiration, pulse, peristalsis, growth, etc.

Well, Loewy has unconsciously given us similar data for the study of the origin of pictorial and sculptural design, when he pointed out so clearly that whereas in nature the parts have an organic and functional bond, the nexus of parts in the memory image is a *conceptual order determined by the force of their associations, their effectiveness in consciousness and in thought.* The whole may be irreconcilable with any one aspect of reality; but the parts are conceptually efficacious. Thence follow the seven laws of archaic Greek art.

Just as the satisfactions of musical rhythms derive at bottom from the nature of physiological processes, so the appreciation of *visual order* may perhaps spring from the nature of mental imagery, from the mind's manner of conceiving with ease, directness, power, clarity, and distinction, forms which were presented to its senses in confusion, overlapping, encroachment and complexity. It is not that the mental images are beautiful, just as the monotonous repetition of a heart beat is no aesthetic delight, but that their mutual relations, the order of their succession or dominance, correspond to what we call design, or express themselves as such. Hence so many treatises on the beautiful devote themselves to analysis of the lines of paintings, in an attempt to show how they govern the movements of the eye, hold it, absorb it, and lead it, by inevitable sequence, to the center or dominant motif. Good design is felt as a harmony analogous to the most efficient manner of perception, a means whereby the function is expanded and indulged in, and all values attached to fine seeing, heightened.

Loewy, however, lost some of the implications of his discernment. He had observed that the connection of parts is in nature, organic; in memory pictures, mental. Yet, pages after, he remarks a want of *plastic coordination* in archaic, and transitional, sculpture. ("There is still wanting the power to coordinate them all in one plastic whole" . . . "no subordination of movements of planes to a comprehensive plastic conception.") In describing the change from archaic to full blown realistic work, Loewy shows clearly that in the later art the unity is organic, naturalistic, and not plastic; instead of flattening planes or geometrizing details, the later artist combines them as they are combined in nature, with little regard for the general plastic effect. One has only to compare the back of the Tenean Apollo with some Hellenistic figure to grasp this distinction. The back of the Tenean Apollo is a splendid and beautiful example of what a *plastic* coordination is, a unity which proceeds from an imaginative handling, which imposes arbitrary proportions, flattens particular planes, emphasizes specific lines, all for the sake of a sculptural ensemble, as unified and harmonious as a fine facade.

The back of the Apollo of Tenea (reproduced by Loewy) is so highly coordinated that it can almost be accused of rigidity. The Farnese Bull is so little coordinated (except functionally) that it is often accused of artlessness. Plastic unity proceeds from the nature of imaginative values. The mental image is flattened, simple, coherent; in the visual object the parts are discrete, and chaotic, with only a functional logic; its silhouette is irregular, its planes not well defined. Hence, in the fifth century the new discoveries of natural form were considerably modified by a generalized statement of their position, and plastic coordination retained. It is only when this unity is lost that we become aware of detail as irrelevant, or explicable only from the point of view of anatomy.

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THE CATHEDRAL LUCCA

IN the July issue of THE ARTS were quoted the remarks made by a painter as he was on the point of departing, in a somewhat pessimistic mood for Europe. In substance he said that the contemporary American artist was out of touch with life, and that his work in consequence lacked vitality. Commenting upon the departing artist's ideas, I said that in part they reminded me "of the late Kenyon Cox." Immediately a saddened reader hurried a "letter to the editor," containing the words "you shouldn't speak of poor Kenyon Cox that way." It was not my intention to imply that the late leader of the reactionaries was in any sense of the word, "poor."

I often disagreed with Mr. Cox, but his sharp letters of protest were always stimulating. A skilful parliamentarian and an astute organization man, Kenyon Cox was also a real fighter. He was the last of the loyal and fearless reactionaries. His knowledge and his gift for lucid writing made even those most apt to disagree with him admit that he occupied his position of academic champion with power and dignity. The present-day groups of reactionaries are weak-spined compared to Kenyon Cox. They are afraid of "modern" art. Timidly they change their lines of defense, accepting and sometimes weakly claiming the