



Winckelmann

MASTERPIECES THROUGHOUT THE
VATICAN MUSEUMS



EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI

Introduction

As it has long been established, we owe the Saxon Johann Joachim Winckelmann the first theoretical exposition and applied formulation of an integrated scheme of historical, archaeological, and textual investigations, usually referred to as ‘sciences of antiquity’. Through the ups and downs of an eventful life, which saw him completing his studies first in his native Prussia – in Berlin (1735-36), Halle (1738-40) and Jena (1741) – and later on in cosmopolitan Dresden – where, from 1748 to 1754, he was librarian to Count Heinrich von Büнау (1697-1762) and where he would come to meet Cardinal Alberico Archinto (1698-1758), Apostolic Nuncio to the royal court – the scholar finally arrived in Rome (on November 18 or 19, 1755), where he would stay for nearly thirteen years and have the opportunity to improve on his investigative method. Once in Rome, Winckelmann greatly expanded his wealth of knowledge, visiting the monuments and admiring the collections for which the city was famous, forging relationships with *litterati* and artists, and making himself known in the elitist circles of local ‘antiquarians’. Moreover, by associating with figures active in the trade of antiquities, the scholar gradually acquired a high international profile, engaging in correspondence with the personalities of the era, and accompanying foreigners around Rome as they stopped there on their Grand Tour.

In the space of eight years, thanks to the patronage of the Cardinals Domenico Passionei (1682-1761) and Alessandro Albani (1692-1779), for whom he served as consultant and librarian, Winckelmann quickly climbed the steps of the academic career, becoming Prefect of the Antiquities of Rome (*Commissario* of the Antiquities of the Apostolic Chamber), or ‘Papal Antiquarian’ (11 April 1763), and *Scriptor linguae teutonicae* at the Vatican Library (May 2, 1763).

Winckelmann reached what some consider the peak of his *cursus honorum* with his appointment as *Scriptor supranumerarius linguae graecae* in the Vatican Library (5 September 1764) – a position in line with his skills of refined philologist, and one which he had long struggled for, having to overcome the opposition of qualified Officials within the Library itself. Notwithstanding this, the most distinguished honour conferred upon him should probably be considered the Office of the *Custode* (Curator) of the Profane Museum (17 April 1763), mentioned in a letter to Mengs of February 3, 1764 (“the incumbency of

custodianship [=curatorship] of the museum of profane Antiquities, currently under construction, to make it correspond to the Museum of Christian antiquities, at the other end of the long Vatican corridor”), to which Winckelmann would devote himself while keeping the posts of *scriptor* for the German language and that for the Jewish language (Hebrew), too. It was the fulfilment of tasks such as these that enabled the scholar to establish relationships with the most eminent guests at the Villa Albani – whose owner, the powerful Cardinal Alessandro, had become *Bibliothecarius Apostolicus* at the death of Passionei – and to become intimately acquainted with the collecting scene of the capital. In the meantime, works such as the *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (*Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*), of 1755, or the *Anmerkungen über die Baukunst der Alten* (*Remarks on the Architecture of the Ancients*), of 1762, had made their appearance on the bookshelves of the most prestigious libraries in Europe, opening the way for that *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (*History of the Art of Antiquity*), of 1764 which laid the conceptual foundations for Western art history. A few years later, the publication of the *Anmerkungen über die Geschichte der Kunst* (*Remarks on the History of Art of Antiquity*), followed by that of the *Monumenti Antichi Inediti* (*Unpublished Antique Monuments: in Italian*), of 1767, provided further, decisive elements in our knowledge of ancient art. Besides writing on Roman monuments, Winckelmann wrote also on those of Sicily (*Anmerkungen über die Baukunst der alten Tempel zu Girgenti in Sizilien / Remarks on the Architecture of the Ancient Temples of Agrigento in Sicily*, of 1759), Campania (*Sendschreiben von der Herculianischen Entdeckungen / Letter on the Herculanean Discoveries*, of 1762), and Pompeii (*Nachrichten von den neuesten Herculianischen Entdeckungen / Report on the Latest Discoveries at Herculaneum*, of 1764). On a different side, complementary to his interests as a historian and a philologist, Winckelmann – the friend of such artists as the sculptor Johannes Wiedewelt (1731-1802) and the painter Anton Raphaël Mengs (1728-1779) – produced a significant body of aesthetic writings, beginning with the juvenile *Erinnerung über die Betrachtung der Werke der Kunst* (*Memoir on the Observation of Works of Art*), *Von der Grazie in den Werken der Kunst* (*On Grace in Works of Art*), *Beschreibung des Torso im Belvedere* (*Description of the Belvedere Torso*) and *Beschreibung des Apollo im Belvedere* (*Description of the Belvedere Apollo*), of 1756, to the *Versuch einer Allegorie, besonders für die Kunst* (*Essay on Allegory, especially for Art*) of 1766, preceded by the fundamental *Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst und dem Unterricht in derselben* (*Essay on the Feeling for Beauty in Art and the Method of Teaching It*), of 1762.

Having broadened his view to encompass ancient societies in their totality, Winckelmann may be considered the founding father of modern archaeology and, at the same time, the first proponent of an aesthetic capable of making its principles resonate in the present. Indeed, the great innovation of Winckelmann's theoretical system was that of a discipline no longer built up through "a chronological series of events or artists' lives", but rather as a succession of evolutionary phases "placing the emphasis on the transformation of styles" – a fact which makes him the forerunner of modern art historians (D. Irwin). By setting out to study the distinctive features of each civilisation, the scholar places them in relation not only with the artistic output of each era, but also with elements previously irrelevant to the historical investigation in itself, such as customs, social conditions, religion, and climate.

As a result, the influence of Winckelmann's vision on his contemporaries was immense (Mengs, to whom the *Geschichte* is dedicated, was among the first to put into practise his old friend's teachings), reaching as far as the threshold of our own time. And if Raphael's "sublime" painting seems to be the only one capable of gathering the connoisseur's unconditional praise (Raphael, like his Greek forerunners, creates his figures according to a canon of ideal perfection which transcends the datum found in nature), the reference to antiquity marks the road for a return to that "noble simplicity" and "quiet grandeur" which, in the eyes of the historian, distinguished the manifestations of Greek art: "The imitation of beautiful in nature either refers to a single model or brings together the observations of various individual models and composes them into a whole. In the first case, a likeness is made, a portrait; this is the path that leads to copies, to Dutch forms and figures. The second way, by contrast, leads to the universally beautiful and to its ideal figures; it is this latter way that was taken by the Greeks. If the artist stands on these foundations and allows his hand and feelings to be guided by the Greek rule of beauty, he is already safely on the way to the imitation of nature" (*Thoughts on the Imitation of Antiquity*, 1755).

It is precisely this familiarity with the expressive codes of antiquity that seals Raphael's work with the status of a cultural "post quem", *summa* and swan-song, at the same time, of modern classicism: following the extinction of the painter's grand manner, a decadence of the arts would be established, destined to last until "the dawn of that new age, of which Winckelmann himself longed to be" regarded as "herald and initiator" (F. Testa).

Three hundred years after the great Saxon's birth and two hundred-fifty after his own death, the Vatican Museums take the opportunity of this double anniversary to dedicate a special initiative to his memory. From November

9, 2018 to March 9, 2019, visitors will be invited to follow a ‘diffused’ itinerary through the Museums, where artworks illustrated, analysed, or even only mentioned by the writer will be clearly signalled and inserted into a didactic programme, highlighting the scientific reasons behind each selection. Given the extent of the subjects involved, the itinerary in question will wind its way through the various sections of the Museum, giving obvious prominence to those displaying classical sculpture (the Octagonal Courtyard, the Chiaramonti, Braccio Nuovo, Gregorian Profane Museum), with occasional incursions into territories which, with respect to Winckelmann’s view, have been recently termed “liminal” to Classic’s perception (Egyptian and Etruscan Museums). Alongside these, references to works representative of artists and styles from subsequent eras (the Pinacoteca, the *Stanze* or Rooms of Raphael and his School, the Sistine Chapel itself) literally abound.

A separate case is finally represented by the eighteenth-century structures of the Profane Museum, exquisite cabinet of pagan antiquities, founded – on inspiration of the same Winckelmann – to accommodate the rich collections of sumptuary art, the “instrumentum domesticum” and, originally, the numismatic collections of the Vatican Library. An information point with explanatory panels and audiovisuals to introduce the exhibition is set up in Room XVII of the Pinacoteca, where illustrative leaflets may be also found (including reference maps of the Museums and thematic guides to the places of interest).

As commonly experienced by many an author, expressing one’s gratitude on occasions such as these proves even more arduous than their actual organization: the joy of their sharing with readers and visitors, however, amply rewards for the efforts involved.

Looking back at the past few months, there are many people I feel I should mention. First, I am particularly indebted to Dr. Barbara Jatta, Director of the Vatican Museums, for having firmly taken the reins of the project; to Monsignor Paolo Nicolini, Delegate to the Managing-Administrative Area, for having accompanied its conceptual growth; and Dr. Roberto Romano, Secretary of the Museums, for having actively supported its development. I am also grateful to my colleagues Giandomenico Spinola, Maurizio Sannibale and Alessia Amenta – Curators of the Greek and Roman, Etruscan-Italic, Egyptian and Near Eastern Antiquities Departments, – and to Adele Breda and Alessandra Rodolfo – Curators of the Byzantine-Mediaeval, Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Art Departments – for their tireless efforts, along with their assistants, in preparing the texts. I here take the liberty of naming them all: Rosanna Barbera, Annalera Caffo, Mario Cappozzo, Eleonora Ferraz-

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