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NOTE

This contribution is the response piece to a larger dialogue of three articles that form the current issue of JOLCEL. The other contributions are “‘Two Styles More Opposed’: Harriet Hosmer’s Classicisms between Winckelmann and Bernini” by Melissa L. Gustin (pp. 1–31), “The Future of Winckelmann’s Classical Form: Walter Pater and Frederic Leighton” by Elizabeth Prettejohn (pp. 33–56), and “Winckelmann in Nineveh: Assyrian Remains at the Age of Classics” by Yannick Le Pape (pp. 58–78).

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Bodily Exclusions? Winckelmann's Victims and the Paradox of Form

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“Winckelmann’s text acquires much of its present-day resonance from traumatic re-definitions of ideological formations of the self and ideal self-images that historically postdate Winckelmann, but which nevertheless cannot now but inform our reading of his work.”¹

For a medievalist like me, siding with Winckelmann’s victims should come by default, since his vindication of a normative (and therefore excluding) Greek ideal only accentuated the perceived anti-classical (and therefore excluded) nature of medieval art, already sanctioned by the alternative foundational text for Art History, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* written by Vasari two centuries before. In the last decades, we art historians have also become much more aware of other questionable aspects of his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764). The “traumatic redefinitions of the self and ideal self-images” of our own age have forced us indeed to confront the essentialist and racial conceptions that lay at the core of our discipline and that turn his influential notion of style—based on the “intimate and organic link between a people and its art” and, thus, biologically transmissible—into a problematic legacy.²

And yet...

Every time we go back to Winckelmann there is something else that seems to undo the apparently simplistic divide created between the “us” addressed in his works (the Germans who should emerge as the true heirs of the Greeks), and the “others” he implicitly or explicitly leaves out. In this regard, it should be reminded that the very notion of style, as Carlo Ginzburg has masterfully argued, has served as “a means of delimiting, demarcating, and cutting out: as a weapon,” but also had “a role in the acceptance of cultural diversity,” an idea I will go back to several

¹ Potts, *Flesh and Ideal*, 222.

² Michaud, *The Barbarian Invasions*, 32; Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes*, 118–23.

times in this response piece.³ However, scholars such as Alex Potts and Georges Didi-Huberman have emphasized to what extent paradoxes are constitutive of Winckelmann's work, engrained in the unresolved tension between his normative—eternal—ideal of beauty that gives a systematic quality to his enterprise, and the task of creating a *history* able to convey the emergence and ultimate decadence of this same ideal.⁴

The cluster of papers gathered in this issue of *JOLCEL* not only attests to the enduring resonance of Winckelmann's doctrinal corpus well beyond the Neo-classical era, but also challenges reductionist views of its impact in nineteenth-century art by underscoring—once more—the many paradoxes of its reception. As Elizabeth Prettejohn asserts in her essay, “it was not inevitable, or somehow pre-programmed, that Winckelmann's account of classical form should continue to generate powerful aesthetic ideas in the generations after neoclassicism, and through to modernism.”⁵ Perhaps, part of the enduring appeal of his works had to do with the fact that he was addressing the artists of his time, providing them with the most rigorous examination to that date of the materials and techniques of ancient sculpture and, most important, of the nude as the quintessence of Greek art and the main artistic problem for whoever attempting to “imitate the Ancients.”⁶ The male naked body, understood as an almost dematerialized form, is at the core of Winckelmann's thinking, and this circumstance may explain both its potential for enticing artistic response and its conceptual limitations for art historical practice, as we will see.

In all three essays we are presented with an apparent exclusion in the name of the classical norm (of Assyrian art, of Baroque emotionalism, of modern art) that, nonetheless, allows at the same time for an alternative narrative and a more inclusive reformulation of the imperative Winckelmann had expressed in his earlier *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755). Thus, Yannick Le Pape's article traces the ambiguous consideration of Assyrian art in mid-nineteenth century France and Great Britain in the wake of the discovery of the great remains of Nineveh, Nimrud and Khorsabad. At the same time regarded as “inferior to the most secondary works of Greece” even by archaeologists of the Near East such as Austen Henry Layard, Assyrian art was able nonetheless to assure its place in the “chain of art” leading to the ‘Greek Revolution,’ and indeed to be displayed in the British Museum in close proximity to the Elgin marbles, as a sort of forebear.⁷ Albeit controversial, this arrangement of the museum collections—paralleled by a similar curatorial decision in the Louvre—was inspired by Winckelmann's diachronic narrative of the development of style and paved the way for the re-assessment of the early achievements of Greek art vis-a-vis Assyrian and Persian art, as Le Pape argues. In this respect, it may be

³ Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes*, 110.

⁴ “The art history that Winckelmann advocates oscillates ceaselessly between essence and becoming. In it the historical past is invented as much as it is discovered.” See Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 10.

⁵ Prettejohn, “Future,” 38.

⁶ Borbein, “L'*Histoire de l'art*.” Both in Dresden and Rome, Winckelmann had close contact with artists, and the *Geschichte* was dedicated to his friend, the painter Anton Raphael Mengs.

⁷ Le Pape, “Winckelmann in Nineveh,” 66.

mentioned here that the comparison between Persian and Greek archaic sculpture—among other non-classical examples, including Indian and medieval art—had somehow prompted a reflection on the aesthetic values of the archaic among one staunch supporter of the “pure ideal of beauty” advocated by Winckelmann. In his *Lectures on Sculpture*, published posthumously in 1829, John Flaxman had dismissed Persian sculpture as lacking “in science, or imitation, [or anything] particularly favourable to our pursuit of excellence,” although acknowledged its value as “a most venerable monument of ancient history and learning.”⁸ Unexpectedly, this understanding of art history as a learning process and, accordingly, as a narrative of the “progress of the human mind”, also allowed for his definition of *style* as “a well-known quality that originates in the birth of the art itself,” and is even present in the art of the “ignorant savage” or in the “humble labour of the mere workman.”⁹

Flaxman seems to have been less appreciative, however, of the art of Bernini, whom he includes among those who contributed to the “debasement” of art in the seventeenth century. In that particular matter, he was a faithful follower of Winckelmann, who had criticised Bernini’s attempt “to ennoble forms taken from lowest nature by exaggeration,” to the point that “his figures [were] like common people who [had] suddenly met with good fortune.”¹⁰ As the antithesis of the “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur,” Berninian excess was execrated in the name of good taste and social distinction both in Europe and America, where Winckelmann’s work became influential from the 1850s after Giles Henry Lodge had published an abridged translation. This is the context in which Melissa Gustin sets her portrait of the sculptor Harriet Hosmer, where she analyses how the American artist affirmed her technical prowess and aesthetic authority in the competitive Roman milieu precisely by reclaiming two subjects from Bernini—Daphne and Medusa—and refashioning them “through the application of Winckelmannian precepts.”¹¹ Her careful choice of a limited set of expressive resources would have invited comparison to Bernini’s sculptures but also the identification of allusive references to the Ovidian myths as well as archaeological quotations, certainly narrowing the intended audience of these works to a selected group of educated viewers. However, by doing so, Hosmer would have created new embodiments of the female sublime Winckelmann had theorised in his approach to the Niobe statue in the Uffizi: in contrast to the extreme anguish and distress of the women sculpted by Bernini, these are no longer victims but self-possessed characters whose nobility emerges in their ultimate restraint. In this regard, the emptying of facial expression operated in the *Daphne* and the *Medusa* would have been counterbalanced by the subtle modulation in the disposition of heads and torsos, in a striking example of formal distillation. Reduced to pure form, the human body becomes an emptied

⁸ Persepolis was only known then thanks to the *Voyages De Corneille Le Bruyn Par La Moscovie, En Perse, Et Aux Indes Orientales* (1725). See Flaxman, *Lectures on Sculpture*, 51.

⁹ Flaxman, *Lectures on Sculpture*, 233. Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes*, 120–3.

¹⁰ Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, 193. For further commentary, see Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal*, 159.

¹¹ Gustin, “Two Styles More Opposed,” 24.

cipher, as described by Potts, paradoxically incorporeal.¹² Yet, again, the opposition between Bernini and Hosmer lessens when we go deeper and forget about “Winckelmannian precepts.” The creations of the Baroque genius and the American prodigy were as far apart—or as close—as the *Niobe* and the *Laocoön*, whose bodies, either in shocking stillness or painful contortion, were understood as manifestation of their inner self. Despite Winckelmann’s attempt to turn these alternative expressive modes into incompatible artistic languages articulated in his narrative of stylistic evolution, ancient rhetorical theory and artistic practice allowed for both.¹³

That classicism could be regarded as an “international, cosmopolitan language of form,” in Gustin’s words, is further analysed by Prettejohn, who not only illuminates Frederic Leighton’s career and his profound engagement with Winckelmann’s work, but also vindicates nineteenth-century classicism as an unexpected path to modern art and formal experimentation, weaving a “genealogical, not teleological” narrative in which the classical form, instead of being discarded after the Neoclassical era, “generates a sequence of new possibilities in subsequent generations.”¹⁴ The pursuit of the “genuine antique” may have not led Leighton in the direction he followed if it were not for Pater and his influential essay on Winckelmann, where the critic emphasizes the key role of the “human form”—that is, of the naked body conceived as an abstract and, at the same time, concrete receptacle for meaning—in classical art. As Prettejohn suggests, it was this fixation with the nude what made Greek sculpture so challenging and stimulating for Victorian artists and so uncomfortable for some of their contemporaries. The confrontation with the human body, devoid of any trappings, allowed for a demanding exploration into the ultimate limits and intimate relation between form and content. In this light, to “imitate the Ancients” was to be interpreted in a more inclusive way, oriented towards formalism and depurated expressive means instead of the servile imitation of Greek and Roman models we tend to associate with academicism. In this regard, Prettejohn and Gustin’s dialogue contributes to a re-evaluation of classicism as a progressive artistic current in nineteenth-century art. But where Hosmer had opted for a severe and de-sensualized approach to the female body, Leighton was to invest himself into the material and sensory rediscovery of line and colour afforded by painting. What would have brought them closer, though, was their renewed interest on the readability of the human body beyond facial countenance and the attention paid to the contour as the element *delineating* “the general character of the subject” (Pater’s re-framing of Winckelmannian’s text).¹⁵

Nonetheless, in his perceptive reading—as passionate and captivating as the prose of the German antiquarian itself—Pater did not refrain from disclosing those aspects Winckelmann had neglected. Discussing Winckelmann’s beauty ideal and its limitations, he argues that “[l]iving in a world of exquisite but abstract and colourless form, [Winckelmann] could hardly have conceived of the subtle and

¹² Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal*, 165–73.

¹³ Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal*, 82–4 and 96–102.

¹⁴ Prettejohn, “Future,” 38.

¹⁵ Pater, “Winckelmann,” 172.

penetrative, yet somewhat grotesque art of the modern world." But what sparks his criticism is Winckelmann's failure to notice the anticipation of this "romantic temper" that was present "within the limits of the Greek ideal itself."¹⁶ In another passage he also seems acutely aware of the misleading divides imposed by the kind of master historical narrative Winckelmann had contributed to create. Although long, it deserves to be quoted in length:

The history of art has suffered as much as any history by trenchant and absolute divisions. Pagan and Christian art are sometimes harshly opposed, and the Renaissance is represented as a fashion which set in at a definite period. That is the superficial view: the deeper view is that which preserves the identity of European culture. The two are really continuous; and there is a sense in which it may be said that the Renaissance was an uninterrupted effort of the middle age, that it was ever taking place.¹⁷

This assertion attests to the discerning and comprehensive understanding of the classical tradition that Pater had, rightly emphasized by Pettejohn, which he presents as coterminous with the European culture. His view seems to anticipate the idea formulated in 1948 by Ernst Howald, who saw the recurrent rebirth of the classical as a sort of "rhythmical form" of European cultural history, a view more recently embraced and re-articulated by Salvatore Settis in his extraordinary *The Future of the Classical*.¹⁸ However, despite all his sensitivity and sharpness, Pater was blind to other problems posed by Winckelmann's works that have become urgent today, a circumstance that brings me back to the beginning of this response piece.

If, as Quatremère de Quincy eloquently described, Winckelmann "succeeded in creating a body out of what had been a pile of debris," it is time to question this central place of the represented *body* in his historical and theoretical construction, and its consequences.¹⁹ As has long been acknowledged, the *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* elevated the human body as the primal subject of art history, to the extent that "the entire development of art—its aesthetic, social and intellectual rise and fall—has been measured against the ultimate perfection of the body's naturalistic representation," according to Milette Graifman and Verity Platt.²⁰ But this was done at the price of perpetuating the divide between matter and form already present in Winckelmann's work. As a result, instead of reviving the art of the Ancients, traditional art history has tended to de-animate Greek sculpture and artworks, isolating them from their ritual or cultural context and paying scarce attention to any dynamic physical interaction between artefacts and beholders.

It might be objected that without this understanding of the human body as pure form we would not have had much of later European art. Western classicisms throughout the ages have been predicated upon what Michael Squire has called

¹⁶ Pater, "Winckelmann," 178.

¹⁷ Pater, "Winckelmann," 180.

¹⁸ *Contra* canonical historiographical narratives, such as Erwin Panofsky's *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (1960).

¹⁹ Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 3–4. Vasari's work is also invested in corporal metaphors, as emphasized by Squire, *The Art of the Body*, 49.

²⁰ Graifmann and Platt, "From Grecian Urn," 409.

the “Graeco-Roman art of the body” with its all-pervasive conventions for the naturalistic representation of the human figure... that are far from natural but rather culturally mediated.²¹ As he argues, the Greek body ideal is still with us, in the images around us and in our imagination, and that unsettles the distinction between past and present, creating a deluding perception of continuity on the one hand, and allowing for the projection of our own concerns and concepts back on past creations, on the other. But when we look at ourselves in the mirror of Greek and Roman art, what do we get back? Walter Pater would have answered that we are confronted with “the perfect animal nature of the Greeks” and “the standard of taste,” an assertion that Winckelmann would have approved and that still finds support today among those who consider the classical tradition as the foundation for “the West,” according other cultures a merely subaltern position.²² Leaving aside extreme formulations of this idea—Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* (1938) as a paradigmatic and terribly persuasive example—it is not difficult to see what becomes excluded, naturalizing exclusion itself, by these normative bodies and their marble whiteness.

And yet...

If we think of the study of the classical tradition along the lines suggested by Settis—developing an idea put forward by Claude Lévi-Strauss—as a form of anthropology or a defamiliarization technique applied not only to “our” culture (in the course of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and each “resurrection” of the classical) but to any culture, perhaps we can re-engage with Greek art, Winckelmann, and the history of art historical practice in a more inclusive way.²³ In this regard, we can follow the lead of contemporary artists such as Marc Quinn or Yinka Shonibare, who have problematized this “Graeco-Roman art of the body” by denaturalising some of their conventions. While Quinn has resorted to the monumentality and countenance of classical sculpture to visualize and dignify disability in his work *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (fig. 1), made for the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square in London, Shonibare has recently produced a series of four images of Medusa, taking Caravaggio’s famous painting as inspiration. In order to warn about the new punishment of the gods that awaits humanity—climate change—the character is portrayed here by women of different races, even if all display a tangle of snake hair made from “African” textiles, itself a token of hybridity and of the entangled histories of Europe, Africa and Asia.²⁴

Both Quinn and Shonibare’s work prove that the classical tradition can be a source of formal and conceptual stimulus, but also a legacy that demands critical detachment from artists and viewers. It is not an easy effort since, as Squire insists, “we are married to antiquity—for better *and* for worse”.²⁵ This two-sided reception brings the echo of Ginzburg’s ambivalent definition of “style” I started with. As he

²¹ Squire, *The Art of the Body*, 53–62.

²² Pater, “Winckelmann,” 165.

²³ Settis, *The Future of the Classical*, 100–11.

²⁴ The colourful textiles we identify as “African” were manufactured in Europe in the eighteenth century to be sold in Asia, as a cheaper version of the Indonesian batik, and only when they were rejected there began to be sold in African markets. Today they are still produced in the UK and The Netherlands.

²⁵ Squire, *The Art of the Body*, 24.

explains, this notion was initially conceived in ahistorical terms in the realm of Roman rhetoric to refer to the different ways in which individual authors were able to pursue artistic excellence. It was later in time, and with the advent of Christianity, that it began to be used in a historical and relational way. These two positions, although mutually incompatible, are indispensable, as Ginzburg reminds. With its tensions, incoherencies, and biases, Winckelmann himself provides us with an intellectual project that attempted to reconcile these two approaches. It is our turn now to scrutinize his legacy, not only as a normative corpus entangled in subsequent readings, but also as a historical and culturally situated enterprise, whose “otherness” we should excavate behind the myths Winckelmann created and recreated for us.²⁶

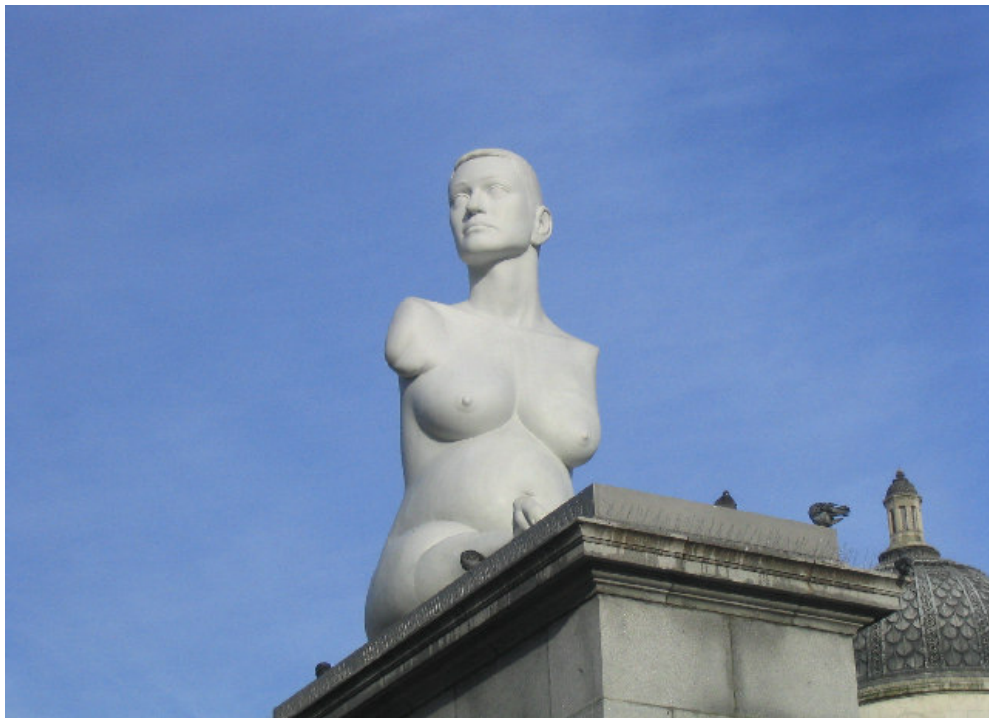


Figure 1: Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, 2005, marble, 3,5 metres, Fourth Plinth, Trafalgar Square, London.

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²⁶ On the Winckelmannian myth, see Décultot, *Johann Joachim Winckelmann*, 1–6.

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