Interfaces artistiques et littéraires dans l'Europe des Lumières
Artistic and Literary Exchange and Relations in Enlightenment Europe

Le Spectateur européen/The European Spectator

VOLUME II

Textes recueillis par Élisabeth DÉTIS

CENTRE INTERDISCIPLINAIRE DE RECHERCHE SUR
LES ÎLES BRITANNIQUES ET L'EUROPE DES LUMIÈRES

Pursuing the Inimitable: Winckelmann and the Legibility of Style

Steven D. DE CAROLI
University of Binghamton (New York)

In 1755, in an initial printing of only fifty copies, Johann Winckelmann issued his first publication which appeared as a pamphlet bearing the title *Gedanken ber die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Mahlerey und Bildhauer-Kunst*, and it is within this work that the paradox of imitation is given explicit formulation. Winckelmann writes: "The only way for us to become great, or, if this be possible, inimitable [*unnachahmlich*], is to imitate the ancients [*die Nachahmung der Alten*] (Winckelmann, *Reflections* 5)." Formulated in this manner the prescription appears to confound its realization. If one were to adhere to Winckelmann's demand and faithfully appropriate the qualities of the ancients through imitating them, one might soon be persuaded that the singular greatness of the ancients, their inimitable quality, is in fact threatened by the very demand of which they are the guiding criteria. If the inimitable, that which is *unnachahmlich*,

stands as the sign of greatness as this passage maintains, adequate fulfillment of the demand to achieve this greatness through imitation, through *Nachahmung*, entails the gradual corruption of the very criterion by which greatness is measured. This rule for achieving greatness—a mandate which is neither original to Winckelmann nor limited even to the eighteenth century, but which finds in Winckelmann an extraordinarily *historical* expression—is undone precisely by the adherence the rule obligates. It is by following the rule that the criteria upon which the rule grounds its legitimate claim to be followed is undone. By responding to the rule with an unmitigated compliance the rule surrenders its legitimacy. The singular and un-imitable (*un-nachahmlich*) status of the ancients which lends authority to their role as a model for behavior is precisely that which must be overcome if the demand of the rule is to be entirely satisfied. The more proficient one is in imitating the ancients the more their stature is diminished by demonstrating an exception to their inimitable quality.

To make this point more lucid one might reformulate the paradox. The rule which reads, "imitate the ancients" might be rewritten to read, "imitate the inimitable." The rule given in this formulation remains legitimate only insofar as it is *not* adequately followed, only insofar as imitation has *not* occurred. Only in failing to successfully imitate the ancients does their inimitability remain undiminished. To succeed would demonstrate that the inimitable, which one has been asked to imitate, is in fact not inimitable at all. The nearer one approaches compliance with the rule the more quickly the criteria for achieving that compliance dissolves. The form in which the rule is presented is unstable. It is, in other words, at odds with itself.

But there is a second, equally fragile way of composing Winckelmann's demand. One could formulate the rule in its more

complete configuration by including the promise that triggers this demand. In this case the rule would read: "imitate the ancients *so that you will become great*." This too, however, can be simplified and rewritten in the form: "imitate the inimitable so that you will become inimitable." Here the predicament falls on the side of the promised results for it is by imitating that one attains inimitability. The means by which one achieves this outcome, i.e. imitation, is in turn denied by the quality of that outcome, i.e. inimitability. Once again the rule, insofar as it is complied with, is untenable.

Thus, one finds in Winckelmann's concise statement two associated dilemmas and in both cases it is the *form of the rule* that is at risk.

The paradox of imitation, at least as it appears in Winckelmann, is articulated in these two enigmatic relations, but Winckelmann is by no means alone in formulating the practice of imitation in this way. Sir Joshua Reynolds—but one in a long tradition of commentators on imitation and its central role in facilitating a pedagogical engagement with the fine arts—in a lecture presented before the members of the Royal Academy on December 10, 1774 arrives at much the same dilemma: "I am ... persuaded," he remarks, "that by imitation only, variety, and even originality of invention, is produced" (74). As in the case of Winckelmann, the statement promises something it seems to simultaneously foreclose. What is at issue is not the practice of imitation itself but the destination at which it purports to arrive. Originality via imitation seems unfeasible. While an imitation might theoretically achieve a perfect replication of its exemplary model, reproducing each detail with precision, the claims of both Reynolds and Winckelmann go further. In both cases imitation yields not parity, nor identity, but "originality of invention" and the "inimitable."

This perplexity did not go unnoticed by Reynolds who further into his lecture addresses the issue by delineating a noteworthy distinction between two types of imitation which begins to shed light on the peculiarities involved and suggests an approach to understanding Winckelmann's paradoxical formulation. He writes: "A man is as little likely to form a true idea of the perfection of the art, by studying a *single* artist, as he would be to produce a perfectly beautiful figure, by an exact imitation of any *individual* living model" (82, emphasis added), and with further elucidation: "He, who confines himself to the imitation of an *individual*, as he never proposes to surpass, so he is not likely to equal the object of his imitation. He professes only to follow; and he that follows must necessarily be behind" (82, emphasis added).

In both passages imitation in the form of a slavish fidelity to a single model is disparaged as incapable of distinguishing itself, in both quality and relation, from the object which serves as its model. This lesser form of imitation is, of course, customarily referred to as copying. In contrast, Reynolds speaks of another, higher form of imitation which while it is akin to the copy distinguishes itself by taking as its model neither an individual object nor a single artist. It is a crucial difference. What this higher form of imitation adopts as its model is not a single work of art but an array of similarly paradigmatic works, e.g. the works of the ancients as a totality. If one rereads Winckelmann's formulation in light of this synthetic approach it is easy to infer that he too, when he states that one ought to "imitate the ancients," is referring not to single exemplary Greek artifacts but to Greek art as a conglomerate whole. While the copy attends to a single object, imitation properly addresses itself to a *range* of exemplary objects and, within Winckelmann at least, this range

of objects is composed of a collection of artifacts produced within a distinct *historical* epoch.

It is therefore, not surprising to find in the opening paragraph of Winckelmann's celebrated four volume *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, in a summary remark pertaining to the methodological approach his work will adopt, the statement that:

> In both parts [of the *Geschichte*] the principle object is the essential [in] art, on which the history of the *individual* artist has little bearing [*in welches die Geschichte der Knstler wenig Einflu hat*]; the reader, therefore, need not expect to find here those details which have been gathered together on this point by others.(Winckelmann, *History* 3, emphasis added)

The passage marks the point at which Winckelmann parts company with traditional, biographical histories. He refrains from telling the stories of individual artists (*Knstler*) and instead takes up the decidedly more prodigious narrative of artistic development independent of individual personalities. It is this early reluctance to consider individual lives as having a consequential bearing on aesthetic history that opens the way for his most extraordinary proposal: that objects are capable of telling their own stories, that, independent of any attribution to a particular artist, the works themselves narrate their own development by way of the aesthetic characteristics they display in their design. Aesthetic details, at least to the trained eye, are understood as always also historical details. So as with imitation, which is distinguished from copying by its refusal to take "a single artist" as its model, so too Winckelmann's proposal for a history of art likewise avoids a relation to "the individual artist" so as to treat its proper subject all the more adequately. The semblance is not incidental.

But the question still lingers, what, if not individual works of art, does the imitator imitate? What, quite simply, does Winckelmann intend as the proper object of imitation? For one to imitate that which endures beyond the works of individual artists, as Reynolds instructs, one must be capable of thinking the thought of artistic beauty as something distinct from the discrete artifacts that embody it. Beauty must be understood as persisting beyond, or perhaps between, particular objects, as something which evolves over time, and if we follow Winckelmann, as something which develops in accord with broad historical trends independent of the discreet decisions of individual artists. It appears then, that this *historical* conception of beauty, the object of Winckelmann's four volume *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, is also the proper object of imitation about which Winckelmann speaks.

For Winckelmann the very idea of a form of imitation motivated by the promise of inimitability emerges out of the theoretical possibility of thinking of beauty in terms of history, i.e. in terms of culture rather than in terms of individual authors. And this idea of beauty as an historical object, this idea of beauty which is also that which imitation takes as its proper object, is invoked by a very specific terminology, that is, by the concept of *style*. Greek art is, therefore, presented as the model for imitation only insofar as art in general has been understood from the vantage of stylistic development. Only by being analyzed in terms of style, a quality which is both beautiful and historical, can the object of art be the source of a demand for imitation which does not result in a mere copy. And it is precisely this stylistic quality of beautiful objects that Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, with all its attention to detail, sets out to document. Winckelmann writes, famously, and in the outline of the project on which he is about to embark, that: "*The History of*

Art is intended to show the origin, progress, change, and downfall of art, together with the different styles [*verschiedenen Stile*] of nations, periods, and artists, and to prove the whole, as far as it is possible, from the ancient monuments now in existence" (Winckelmann, *History* 3).

Proving this stylistic whole, i.e. the task of coming to know what a particular style (*Stile*) is comprised of and what characteristics it is identified by, became the task of art history which surfaced in its incipient disciplinary form at the end of the eighteenth century. The burgeoning discipline of art history, as a professional, university-based tradition within the German-speaking academy, in part grew out of an engagement with Winckelmann's stylistic approach to beauty and utilized it to determine the boundaries of a disciplinary space between the strictly formal demands of philosophical aesthetics and the archaeological techniques of antiquarian scholarship. Winckelmann's understanding of *Stile* fixed a link between the visual arts and cultural history which gave art history its distinctive focus, its appropriate object of study. To imitate was to imitate this *Stile*, and to do so was to participate in art insofar as art participates in history. To understand this relation, to make sense of what imitation means as a *practical* response to beauty, was to comprehend not simply art, but an "art history." As Jacob Burckhardt put it in 1843 for an encyclopedia article on the history of art, "The history of style ... begins with Winckelmann, who was the first to distinguish between the periods of ancient art and to link the history of style with world history. It was only after him that art history became a branch of cultural history" (Potts 70).

The unique contribution of Winckelmann to aesthetic thought was that he gave beauty a history; he transformed ancient objects, those artifacts exhumed from the dirt, into moments of history, and in doing so took the transcendent notion of an ideal

beauty fashioned by metaphysics and deposited it, irrevocably, within the immanent course of human history. If there was an ideal beauty its form would be found among human artifacts, not among metaphysical ideas or Platonic forms, and therefore, if one wished to produce great work the paradigm one imitated was *not* an idea nor a concept, but a tangible object whose stylistic quality was expressed nowhere as adequately as on its tooled surface.

There is in Winckelmann no aesthetic ideal which is outside of history, no purely mental concept that approaches in thought what the *Farnese Hercules* or the *Apollo Belvedere* embody in material form. It is for this reason that Winckelmann ends his 1763 *Abhandlung von der Fhigkeit der Empfindung des Schnen in der Kunst* with both frustration and a plea: frustration that beauty cannot be adequately described in words and a plea to the reader that if they wish to know beauty they must abandon textual descriptions and conceptual formulas and confront it face-to-face. He concludes:

> This can be considered to be sufficient for the intention of this outline, which is meant to be general. The greatest clarity cannot be given to things which rely on feeling, and here not everything can be taught in writing [*und heir lt sich schriftlich nicht alles lehren*], as, amongst others, is proved by the criteria which Argenville presumes to give in his lives of the artists about drawings. Here it is stated: Go hither and look [*gehe hin und sieh*]. (Winckelmann, *Essay* 103)

The imperative to look for oneself, to *gehe hin und sieh* was realized by tourism. If one wanted to imitate art, and if to imitate art involved an imitation of style, and furthermore, if style was communicated not in words but through experience, then travel was essential. To encounter ancient objects was not merely to see beautiful artifacts, but to see history itself. The trans-national

migration of the Grand Tour, at least in its later period, not only assisted in codifying the values of neo-classicism celebrated by Winckelmann and accustomed travelers to the relationship between taste and history, it also served to bring the discussion of history into the realm of experience. The artifacts of Rome made history empirically accessible. These antiquarian objects were, above all, visible and those empirical, face-to-face encounters prized by European travelers fostered a relationship to the past that was as experiential as it was theoretical. The accumulated memories of these travel experiences became memories of the historical past *as such*; coalescing into a collective European nostalgia not simply for the distant past but for a past which, due in no small part to the attention paid to the concept of *Stile*, was both contemporary and explicitly aesthetic.

By addressing the past in terms of aesthetic style antiquity remained pertinent to the Enlightenment not merely because it fostered an awareness of ancient history but because in doing so it also conveyed to observers trans-historical lessons about taste, judgment, and culture which academic philosophy—due to its unwillingness to consider cultural history as relevant to epistemological and axiological questions—had hitherto been slow to provide. The notion that beauty had an ideal form and that this form was present in history suggested that the aesthetic ideal was also universally applicable, i.e. *something which could be made the subject of a general rule*. It was the rule of imitation, which appears over and over again in eighteenth-century discussions of aesthetic education, which took as its subject the universal applicability of an ideal beauty, and in so doing implicitly appealed to a universal subject to whom that rule would apply.

It is this universal subject, the subject of a general rule of imitation conceived in alliance with a universal history of beauty and its stylistic development, which ultimately returns us to the

paradoxical form of the rule of imitation: once again, "The only way for us to become great," Winckelmann writes, "or, if this be possible, inimitable, is to imitate the ancients (Winckelmann, *Reflections* 5)." The rule demands that one imitate precisely that which is itself inimitable, but as we have seen this inimitable object, which Winckelmann associates with the greatness of the ancients, is not strictly speaking an object at all, but rather a certain aesthetic style, a quality that persists *between* objects. It is, in other words, not an object but a relation. While the copyist must conform to the literal demands of the object, the imitator need only be faithful to the relational qualities of style. In this way, imitation (*Nachahmung*), in as much as it reproduces a style (*Stile*), leaves open the possibility for originality and does so *even under the form of a rule*. Even though the form of the rule is entirely prescriptive, it concedes, in its paradoxical formulation, the impossibility of ever being adequately followed, and this in turn allows for a necessary break with the rule which, unexpectedly perhaps, permits originality. This breaking point is at once an *abandonment of the rule and its fulfillment*.

In describing judgments of taste in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Kant invokes much the same situation when he speaks of taste as a "lawfulness without a law [*Gesetzmigkeit ohne Gesetz*]" (Kant, *Critique* 92). As in Winckelmann, the rule seems to extend beyond its possible sphere of application. Even without a law (*Gesetz*) there is a lawfulness or legality (*Gesetzmigkeit*), even after the rule is abandoned it achieves its fulfillment. In both cases it is the possibility of achieving originality that is at issue, and more specifically an originality which, while it occurs in the absence of a rule, nevertheless conforms to the spirit of a rule. To quote Kant again, it is a "*lawfulness* without a law (emphasis added)."

By way of conclusion then, I would like to suggest that in the paradoxical form of the rule of imitation, and particularly in concert with the history of aesthetic style, what the rule regulates is not a specific demand but a domain in which such a paradoxical demand becomes possible. Over and over again in eighteenth-century discussions of aesthetic education, imitation is prescribed as the means to originality and in each case what is left unspoken is any acknowledgement of the discursive arrangement that makes it possible for that paradoxical formula to be considered plausible. What I am contending is that the rendering of beauty as an historical object facilitates this plausibility in as much as it attributes distinct importance to the concept of style. The rule of imitation, particularly as it appears in Winckelmann's writings, but perhaps even more generally, is regulative not because it commands and proscribes, not because it simply requires imitation, but because it first of all invokes the sphere of its own reference which it does by implicitly adopting an historical perspective, a perspective exemplified by Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst der Alterthums*. In its operation the rule both stabilizes and presupposes the conditions of this reference which Winckelmann's historical treatment of style helped construct.

So there is a substantial affiliation between Winckelmann's historical methodology and the imperative to imitate the ancients. They are cut from the same discursive cloth. In both cases their object is style, and in both cases style involves beauty never treated in the form of a single artist or artifact. If style is, as we have seen, the proper object of late eighteenth-century notions of imitation, and in particular the demand for imitation as it figures in Winckelmann's *Gedanken ber die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Mahlerey und Bildhauer-Kunst*, the way one comes to understand what style is, and hence what the proper

object of imitation is, is by means of the type of historical methodology Winckelmann inaugurates. Winckelmann's historical method gives the rule of imitation its object. In confronting the question of beauty from the vantage of history Winckelmann and those who followed his lead expanded the concept of style into a full-blown historical category, i.e. into *something of which there can be a history*. Style as such has no identity outside of this history. Its status as an object of both study and imitation varies in direct proportion with the institutional relations that invest it. Its nature as a practice, as that to which the rule of imitation refers, depends on the institutions, the texts and the agents which define it and set it to work. It is only within these discrete and definite conditions of existence that aesthetic style, as the material of a cultural history and as the object of artistic imitation, is made both meaningful and legible. Its history has no a priori unity, no permanence or truth beyond its collected enunciations. And it is this collection of enunciations, of which Winckelmann is but an important fraction, we must study—not style as an object itself—to comprehend the role of imitation as a practical, and for this no less paradoxical, response to the historical treatment of beauty. Thus, Winckelmann's history does not merely *narrate* the transformations of style across historical epochs, rather it effectively *produces* style as an object of that history, and in so doing occasions the possibility of an imitation not shackled by the merely reproductive processes of copying.

Works Cited

Kant, Immanuel. *Kritik der Urteilskraft.* Prussia, 1790.

——, *Critique of Judgment.* Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.

Potts, Alex. *Flesh and the Ideal*, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994.

Reynolds, Sir Joshua. *Discourses on Art.* 1769-1790. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1997.

Winckelmann, Johann J. *Gedanken ber die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Mahlerey und Bildhauer-Kunst.* Dresden, 1755.

——, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture.* Trans. Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton. New York: SUNY Press, 1987.

——, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums.* Rome, 1764.

——, *History of Ancient Art.* Trans. G. Henry Lodge. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1968.

——, *Abhandlung von der Fhigkeit der Empfindung des Schnen in der Kunst, und dem Unterrichte in Derselben.* Dresden, 1763.

——, "Essay on the Beautiful in Art," *Winckelmann's Writings on Art.* Ed.David Irwin. New York: Phaidon Publishers, 1972.