

Winckelmann's "Philosophy of Art"

Winckelmann's "Philosophy of Art":
A Prelude to German Classicism

By

John Harry North

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Winckelmann's "Philosophy of Art":
A Prelude to German Classicism,
by John Harry North

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2012 by John Harry North

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4004-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4004-0

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abbreviations	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One.....	7
Winckelmann's Path to Recognition	
Chapter Two.....	23
A Prelude to German Classicism	
2.1 'Hellenism' - A German Utopia	
2.2 'Ideal Beauty' – The Essence of Art?	
2.3 Winckelmann's Contribution to the German Language	
2.4 Eroticism and Ambiguity	
Chapter Three.....	97
Narratives on Sculpture: Five Case-Studies	
3.1 The Apollo Belvedere	
3.2 The Niobe Group	
3.3 The Belvedere Antinous	
3.4 The Laocoön Group	
3.5 The Hercules Torso	
Chapter Four.....	149
Winckelmann's Profound Limitation	
4.1 His Narrow Perception of 'Art'	
4.2 Aesthetic Education – An Illusion?	
4.3 Enigmas and Textual Contradictions	
Chapter Five.....	179
Conclusion	
Bibliography.....	183

ABBREVIATIONS

Abhandlung	Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen. KS p.218 ff
Anmerkungen	Anmerkungenüber die Geschichte der kunst KS p.247
DTM	<i>Der Teutsche Merkur</i> (year, quarter, page) facsimile copies obtained from http://www.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/diglib/aufklaerung/
<i>Gedanken</i>	Johann Joachim Winckelmann, <i>Reflections on the imitation of Greek_works in Painting and Sculpture_</i> , Complete German text (1756) and English translation by E. Heyer & R.C.Norton.(La Salle IL: Open Court 1987)
<i>Geschichte</i>	Johann Joachim Winckelmann. <i>Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums</i> . Wien 1776, 2nd ed.(Mainz: Philipp von Zabern reprint2002)
JUS	Justi, Carl. 1889. <i>Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen</i> . 2nd ed. 3 vols. (Leipzig: FCW.Vogel repr.1956)
KS	<i>Johann Joachim Winckelmann - Kleine Schriften, Vorreden und Entwürfe</i> . (De Gruyter Texte 2nd edition) (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002)
MFW	<i>Il Manuscritto Fiorentino di J.J.Winckelmann</i> , ed. by. Max Kunze (Florence: Academia Colombaria, 1994)
<i>Monumenti</i>	<i>Monumenti Antici Inediti</i> , spiegati ed illustrati da Giovanni Winckelmann, Roma: MDCCLXVII (1767) Vol. I & II
Rehm	<i>Johann Joachim Winckelmann: Ausgewählte Schriften und Briefe</i> , ed. by Walther Rehm (Wiesbaden: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Sammlung Dieterich Band 52, 1948).

INTRODUCTION

I aim to to examine the pivotal role of *Johann Joachim Winckelmann* (1717-1768) as a major contributor to German art criticism. The key features of Winckelmann's treatment of classical beauty are evident in his famous descriptions of large-scale classical sculptures. Five case studies are offered below to demonstrate the academic classicism that formed the core of his philosophy of art.

Interest in Winckelmann and his œuvre began with his first publication in 1756: 'Thoughts about the Imitation of Greek works in Painting and Sculpture'.¹ This work was of importance among the literary elite of Germany and it continued to be read beyond his death in 1768. Winckelmann was one of the originators of the illusion that there had been in late antiquity democratic government in Greece; a government that fostered the freedom of the individual citizen and of the artist. The idea of such a cultural homeland, i.e. *Griechentum*, spread through the succeeding generations of German philosophers and historians, resulting in a second illusion: the notion that classical Greece was somehow ancestral to German culture, to *Deutschum*. This theory of an imagined German Hellenism persisted for centuries and came to a close only with the end of the Third Reich.

I plan to give an account of the reception which greeted his major works before they were incorporated into the structure of the full-fledged classicism of Weimar. This study will, however, be limited to the period before Weimar classicism came into being (approximately 1778-1780). The reason for this limitation lies in the complexity and the wide-ranging diversity of Weimar Classicism led by Wieland, Herder, Goethe, Schiller and Hölderlin whose works have already merited a large critical literature. I seek to identify the point at which Winckelmann's art theories, his knowledge of classical literature and his descriptive methods merged in his attempt to offer a coherent history of classical art. The recovery of classical aesthetic values by imitation and admiration should, he thought,

¹ *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst.*

be at the core of the education of artists. The admiration of classical art could form part of a general ideology of art and of its potential role in modern society.

These concepts formed one of the major contributions to German intellectual life in the second half of the eighteenth century and the doctrine of classical restraint which Winckelmann derived from his vision of ancient Greece exerted a strong influence upon German literature. It helped to shape the thoughts of Lessing, Herder, Wieland, Schiller and a host of lesser writers.

The intention here is not to trace a causal connection between the images of Winckelmann's life, his homo-erotic response to the naked male and the ideals of freedom he found in the Greek experience; rather it is to gain a more precise sense of what the Greek ideal would have meant for someone writing in his particular circumstances in the mid – eighteenth century. Winckelmann's ruling passion was a vision of ideal personal freedom that he thought lay at the root of the ability of Greek sculptors to create the 'inimitable beauty' of their sculptures. This obsession was clearly informed by his own experience of the blockages placed in his path while he was struggling to establish himself as an independent scholar and writer. The details of his arduous path to eminence were related by Carl Justi in his three-volume biography of Winckelmann.² However, Justi was writing one hundred years after the death of Winckelmann and his views often reflect nineteenth - century aesthetic and political attitudes. The facts of Winckelmann's early years, however, are clearly described and thus a short summary will be sufficient here.

Our sources for judging Winckelmann's theories are first, his published works and secondly, the extensive correspondence with his friends and pupils that give us insights into his social and emotional life. The third and most important document for the study of his creative process is the *Florentine Manuscript* which contains many essays and draft chapters of his published works.³ The fourth group of source documents are extracts that he copied from classical literature. Beginning in his early days as a librarian in Dresden, and continuing throughout his productive life, he

² Carl Justi, *Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Verlag von F.C.W. Vogel, 1898) hereafter referred to as JUS.

³ *Manoscritto Fiorentino di J.J. Winckelman*, ed. by Max Kunze (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore 1994) hereafter referred to as MFW

copied short paragraphs of classical literature that he felt were supporting his view of the ancient world and of his aesthetic theories. These four sources contain important criteria for judging the success of his mission, eventually casting doubt upon the merits of his absolute aesthetic judgment. Moreover, the validity of his educational theories will be questioned, since no major artist of his generation followed his proposed educational programme.

To understand Winckelmann's importance to art-criticism we need to consider his social and economic background. From the start of the eighteenth century, there was a gradual change in the economy of the German regions from the dominance of agriculture to the dominance of industry and trade. Politically and socially speaking, there was a slow shift from a strictly hierarchical to a more egalitarian configuration of authority, accompanied by a marked increase and widening of the spread of literacy and of economic power to the professional and free-thinking citizens. The success of these new movements depended on gradual changes within Germany that undermined the confident assumption of men like Spener (1635-1705) who thought that German ways were God's ways and that piety was the only way to salvation. The positive reception of Winckelmann's classicism was partly due to the emphasis placed by him on pagan models of 'nobility' and 'freedom' that he found in pre-Christian society and which he thought found expression in Hellenistic art.

In Germany of the mid-eighteenth century the unrestrained use of power by the leading aristocrats and prelates caused problems for many artists and philosophers. But the leading aristocrats also acted as employers and clients. Their sons were taught by resident tutors, their libraries were maintained by qualified librarians and the universities relied on their financial support. The Thirty Years War had ended with the Peace of Westphalia (1648) which had created many political problems of the German regions because it had created a large number of independent political units varying in size from single cities and small estates to large kingdoms such as Bavaria or Saxony. Winckelmann, in spite of his dependence on the support of patrons, prided himself as being a 'free writer' and he writes scathingly about the low quality of the northern aristocratic visitors to Rome, *Kavaliere* who sought his company as a guide – castigating in particular the French travellers for their ignorance.

Beginning in the early years of the 18th century some members of the intellectual upper class, mainly in the German universities, were engaged

in the search for fresh sources of moral and political authority, sources that were unconnected to the existing ecclesiastic or noble hierarchies. Some of these leaders of scholarly trends were ready to believe in an imagined Greek ideal, a model of freedom and democracy that they thought had evolved under the benevolent authority of the state. Winckelmann's vision of classical [Athenian] democracy can be seen as part of this rhetoric, and as part of the search for the true roots of a German cultural identity *Deutschtum* that might become the philosophical foundation of the Fatherland – of the unified German state that might one day become the guarantor of the freedom of the citizens and the artists.

In the following chapters I will explore the problems and contradictions intrinsic to Winckelmann's conception of the Greek ideal, remaining aware of the dominance of two issues that feature centrally and explicitly in his account of Greek art: the ideal of political and subjective freedom and the eroticism of images of ideal masculinity. Winckelmann's writings seem rather ornate, perhaps as an expression of his desire to stress the importance of his subject. It could also be due to his ambition to be recognised as a scholar of note, a reaction against his extremely difficult path to eminence. An important role in the development of Winckelmann's theories was played by the city of Rome. Winckelmann moved to Rome in 1755 and there he gained access to the highest levels of the Catholic hierarchy, a tolerant and cultured environment that accepted and furthered his scholarly researches into the ancient pre-Christian milieu.

A number of major problems face the interpreter of Winckelmann's work. The first is the wide gap that exists between his life time and his modern critics. Winckelmann's theories seem deeply embedded in the intellectual environment of eighteenth - century Germany. His theory of the evolution of art is based on the idea that styles in art, like human life, move from youth to adulthood and decline. Modern concern with the interpretation of the past and of Winckelmann's work in particular is timely since the distance in time gives greater clarity to the ever changing evaluation of past writing and of past art criticism.

Perhaps more importantly, a distance of more than two thousand years separates Winckelmann's vision of classical Greece from the actual creation of classical art.

Winckelmann does not explain the difference in time between his 'Heroic Style' which he dates to the time of Alexander (fourth century BC) and the

'beautiful style' which he dates to the time of Hadrian in the first century AD.

Winckelmann's very personal interpretation of classical notions of freedom and beauty are not considered to form a portent of modern critical art history. Moreover the examples of classical sculpture that he admired and through which he attempted to exemplify his theories, are no longer regarded as the summit of classical art by its critics. Beyond questions of time and taste Winckelmann's erudition and profound connoisseurship were somehow disconnected from his sensory experiences and from his emotional response to large sculpture. His general judgements were based on the examination of this art and intuition rather than erudition informed his judgements and interpretations.

His language is almost entirely German, which is a radical statement in itself, since access to the courts and the German nobility would have been in French and to the learned community mainly in Latin. The language he used and further developed was the basic Saxon version of the German language as used by Luther in his translation of the Bible, a language that was familiar to Winckelmann from his Protestant religious upbringing and from the dialect used in the region of his childhood.⁴ He engaged with his audience at a poetic level of German prose that was much admired in his day and there is, clearly, a further gap between what he wrote and what the reader of his time would have interpreted and assimilated. Winckelmann addressed educated readers who would have been guided by their own experience of art, by their sensitivity to works of sculpture and by their own interpretation of his scholarly vocabulary.

It is clear from Winckelmann's texts that he based his aesthetic theories on his emotional response to his visual experience. There is a difference between Winckelmann's attempts to apply critical or even logical terminology to the art of Greco-Roman times and at the same time, he uses highly emotional, at times even lyrical language. This dichotomy makes it difficult to identify personal aspects of Winckelmann, as neither his published works nor his letters give many insights into his true character, beyond his clearly stated ambition to be recognised as the leading authority on his chosen subject. This rather opaque aspect of Winckelmann's work makes it almost impossible to describe him in the

⁴ Stendal, the town where Winckelmann spent his childhood is not far from Wittenberg where Martin Luther had been priest.

terminology of German literary criticism. His work can not be described as belonging to the German Enlightenment, nor to Classicism, nor to the Romantic movement; it is unique and intensely personal.

There is a clear disjunction between Greek historical reality on the one hand and, on the other hand, the utopian projections of freedom and beauty in Winckelmann's account of ancient Greek art and of Greek society. A well-known study that deals with the myth of Greece in German literature is *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* by E.M. Butler. She takes, as the title indicates, an extremely negative view of the diachronic aspects of German Hellenism. Hellenistic ideas however, were significant in Germany because they were part of a set of concepts concerning European history (and the history of art) that were widespread among the educated German upper class of the eighteenth century. These notions cannot be regarded as Winckelmann's own creation since the idealisation of classical Greece was already part of the notions of cultural history that were held by the educated stratum of society. Winckelmann's contribution to German Classicism became of interest to succeeding generations of German poets and educators, culminating in the subsequent century in Weimar Classicism, a period that lies outside the scope of this work.

Winckelmann's gift lay in his ability to absorb and interpret the art-historical views of others, for instance Bellori, Junius, Öser, and his friend and confidant, the painter Mengs. The importance of Winckelmann's published work lies in the way it expresses the spirit of the time *Zeitgeist* of the mid - eighteenth century north of the Alps. His aesthetic judgments reflect in a complex way a polemic against the excesses of the Rococo, proposing a return to a simpler and perhaps 'nobler' art, especially in the sculpture of the human figure.

A balanced assessment of Winckelmann's achievement needs to include an outline of his arduous path to recognition as an authority on his chosen subject. Brought up in provincial poverty in rural central Germany, he succeeded in finding patrons who recognised his talents and who sponsored the publication of his work. His arduous path to eminence laid the foundation of his lifestyle as a German emigré during thirteen years of exile in Rome where he became the most erudite and highly esteemed guide to the surviving art treasures of ancient Rome.

CHAPTER ONE

WINCKELMANN'S PATH TO RECOGNITION

To understand Winckelmann's rise to distinction it is necessary to consider his progress from a village childhood in dire poverty to the position of eminence that he ultimately attained. His biographers give an adequate account of his early years and a short outline is sufficient here to illustrate the influence of his genesis on the ardour that permeates his writings on classical civilisation and its art.

Winckelmann himself tells us:

The only way we can achieve greatness and if possible to become inimitable is the imitation of the ancients and what some say of Homer that whoever has learned to understand him learns to admire him. The same can be said of the art of antiquity.¹

Perhaps one can apply the same principle to Winckelmann himself – the better we understand him, the more we may come to admire him. Better understanding of Winckelmann may result at first in astonishment rather than admiration. But on closer examination we find growing respect for the achievements of this singular personality. Winckelmann's biographers give an adequate account of his troubled life. But their studies were written more than a hundred years after his death, and had to rely on the collected letters of Winckelmann himself and on those of his contemporaries. Inevitably, nineteenth-century ideas formed part of their selection from the scant material available to them.

Winckelmann was born in 1717 as the son of a cobbler, a *Flickschuster* in Stendal, a small town in Central Germany, halfway between Hannover and Berlin. The area is known as Sachsen-Anhalt and it lies along the Uchte River, north of Magdeburg. Stendal was once the capital of the Altmark

¹ *Gedanken*, p.12 This quotation and all subsequent translations and quotations of Winckelmann's texts are based on *Johann Winckelmanns Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Joseph Eiselein (Donaueschingen: Im Verlage Deutscher Classiker, 1825).

‘Old March’, a division of Brandenburg, and its early settlers were Lower Saxons and Slavonic Wends. Winckelmann’s parents were Lutheran Protestants but they seemed to be hardly literate and took little interest in the progress of their only son. His father had been a migrant labourer from Silesia, from the border with war-ridden Poland; his mother was a local girl.

The first remarkable step in Winckelmann’s advancement was his gaining entry into the local Latin School – quite an unusual move given his upbringing in illiterate poverty; an advancement entirely due to a number of his teachers and benefactors who recognised his ability and his intense desire to succeed in the acquisition of knowledge. He was able to pay for his education by giving extra lessons to other students and by singing in the church choir. He contributed throughout his childhood to the upkeep of his parents. His success can be seen as an indication of the increasing esteem of secular knowledge among the teachers of his day, thus he was fortunate to have had an understanding teacher in primary school, who took to the child and relied on him when he himself, in early middle age, became blind.² Winckelmann became his guide and reader. For this he was paid a pittance, which he shared with his parents. To add to his income he sang at the weekly Catholic services at the Marienkirche in Latin and he also sang on festival days, at funerals and baptisms. He became, through his own efforts, the ‘Präfect (the leader) of the choir for which service he received 60 Thaler a year. He learned to help his fellow students to memorise Latin verbs; this meant that he himself became thoroughly familiar with the texts that he taught by rote. Throughout his later life he remained at all times conscious of his struggle to cover the cost of basic necessities and he records gratefully that he had received financial help from the town councillors at Stendal; he also had help in his studies from his tutors in Berlin and in Salzwedel, not far from Stendal.

When Winckelmann reached 17 years of age [1734], he realised that his studies would not lead to a qualification or to employment unless he were to seek work in an environment where he could have access to libraries and to university-level instruction. His blind mentor provided Winckelmann with a letter of recommendation to the headmaster of the *Kölnische Gymnasium*’ in Berlin.³

² Esaias Wilhelm Tappert (1666-1738)

³ Christian Tobias Damm (1698-1756)

On the basis of this recommendation Damm accepted Winckelmann as tutor of his children and granted him free board and lodging in exchange for their supervision. Winckelmann would take them to school and church and then he would repeat their lessons with them. In this capacity he made the acquaintance of the rector of the Grey-friars College in Berlin a protestant clergyman who had travelled widely throughout Europe including a period as interpreter during the wars against the Turks.⁴

In the Gymnasia of the time, Latin was the language of instruction. In the upper years the students were expected to address their tutors only in that language and they were encouraged to use only Latin in their conversations with each other. Winckelmann gained access to the Royal Prussian Library (which contained at the time some fifty thousand titles) Winckelmann's interest in ancient art seems to have been kindled by his study of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) and by his occasional visits to the collection of curiosities of the Prussian court.

Under the guidance of Damm he was introduced to the beauty of the classical Greek language and its literature. Damm says that 'only in the Greek language are the deepest thoughts of human self-knowledge *Selbsterkenntnis* expressed and not in Latin. 'The Greeks,' he wrote, 'have to be imitated if something worthwhile has to be written', and further: 'highly educated men and even women are beginning, to turn towards this [Greek] literature.' Damm thought that there was no possibility that a researcher *Gelehrter von Profession* could have made a living exclusively by their profession except in the universities or in the religious establishments. Damm does not mention service in noble households.

In 1736, the now 19 year old Winckelmann joined the Latin school at nearby Salzwedel where the rector punished him repeatedly for his inattention and disobedience in matters of theological studies. He described his pupil as a 'thoroughly unreliable heathen who found more pleasure in reading heathen literature than in the prescribed religious texts. Winckelmann then moved to Halle where he began theological studies. Theology was the first choice of many poor and aspiring students and Winckelmann was fortunate to find teachers who encouraged his studies. He hoped, like many poor students, that the priesthood might provide him with professional status and a good living. In the university of Halle he entered a famous centre of Protestant pietism and traditional theology.

⁴ Johann Leonhard Frisch (1666-1743)

There he gained a thorough knowledge and dislike of the abstract and petty philosophising of his mentors. There were only a few hours devoted to the study of history, geography and modern languages, or to the explanation and translation of pre-Christian literature.

The few profane Latin books that Winckelmann could access in the university library enabled him to find in them what he considered to be beautiful and intelligent comment. He extracted relevant passages, amassing a treasure of extracts that were more important to him than the study of Holy Writ and theological commentaries. The speeches of Cicero were the models that most attracted him. Exercises in rhetoric were part of the school curriculum and he delivered speeches in classical Latin ornamented with his own inventions of stylistic fireworks. Winckelmann was guided and encouraged by his mentor, the aforementioned Tappert. The exercise of rhetoric became a recurring theme of Winckelmann's works. Throughout his life he was always strongly influenced by his friends and able to adapt and incorporate their ideas in his work. Such original thought as can be found in his work seems to be mainly in the form of heightened emphasis and the further development of the ideas of others.

In 1740 he became private tutor to a noble family [von Grollmanns] in nearby Osterburg and from this position he supported his parents in Stendal. As soon as he could, he left Osterburg and enrolled to study medicine at Jena, but he could not continue (perhaps for monetary reasons). In 1742/3, he became private tutor to another noble family, the house of Lamprecht in Hallersleben near Magdeburg. Here he formed a close relationship with the son of the house and this may have been his first homo-erotic experience. In later years he continued to think of his loving relationship with the young Lamprecht as a unique and formative experience, a deeply felt but one-sided love.

Male friendship, Winckelmann thought, formed the highest gift of the gods to mankind. Love between men he felt to be part of a long lost tradition of passionate relationships. Friendship in this sense is fundamentally pre-Christian and of course heathen rather than Christian. It was the foundation and at the same time the culmination of antique life, of *Lebensgefühl*. There is a contrast between the monotheistic tradition which sees the Love of God as the core and measure of all things; in Platonic antiquity it was mankind itself, not God that was the measure of all things, and masculine love was seen as a form of piety.

In 1743 Winckelmann became schoolmaster at the village school in Seehausen. This was the most wearisome period of his life. In spite of his fondness and loving care for his young pupils and his success in teaching, he found his work extremely depressing. He writes in later years that he wished, even at this early stage, to gain knowledge of true beauty. He described how he had to shorten his nights, sleeping only four hours to gain time for reading. At this time he decided to abandon all other subjects of study (theology, law, mathematics, history and medicine) so that he could concentrate on classical literature and the arts. Nothing was to enter his life that could impede his central passion.

At that time, Winckelmann was reading Voltaire (1694-1778) who expressed his belief in the human virtues of savages *les sauvages*. Voltaire's optimism was supplanted in Winckelmann by his love of antique sculpture.⁵ In later years he looked back at this period of his life as most depressing and frustrating, although he cared for and made friends among his young pupils, he suffered from the narrow-minded and uninterested attitudes of the local peasantry (whose sons they were) who did not see why the boys should learn Latin.

Winckelmann escaped from this form of servitude in 1748 when he entered the services of the count (Reichsgraf Heinrich von) Büнау at Nöthnitz near Dresden. He worked as assistant librarian mainly engaged in research into documents of the early history of the German Reich and its emperors. This was to become the History of the German Emperors and State, the *Genaue und umständliche Teutsche Kayser- und Reichshistorie* which was the great work of his employer. Winckelmann was charged with listing and cataloguing the extensive library of Nöthnitz castle which was one of the greatest collections of books in private hands at the time. Later it became part of the great municipal library of Dresden. Winckelmann was allocated a room in the castle and a desk in the library. He was paid a pittance but he had his meals with the other servants and he could have had access to the great art collections of nearby Dresden, the capital of Saxony. These collections had become enriched and embellished by the previous king (August der Starke), who spent large sums on the acquisition of antiquities. The research into the *Reichshistorie* was undertaken with the clear purpose of creating a national mythology, an attempt to find historical justification for the unconstrained despotism

⁵ In his novel *Candide* Voltaire attacks the political evils of his time, the abuse of power and authority. Such views were never voiced by Winckelmann who was careful to restrict his ideas of freedom to ancient Greece.

practised in the German principalities by their innumerable noble families. Winckelmann's relationship with count Bünau was at all times that of a servant to his master, but he was able to form a lasting personal friendship with the count's son with whom he later maintained a friendly correspondence. He remained grateful to Bünau and his son for having supported him in his earlier years.

In June of 1753, when Winckelmann was 36 years old, he converted to Roman Catholicism.⁶ Early in the following year (1754) Winckelmann left the services of the Duke at Nöthnitz to move to nearby Dresden where he rented a modest room in the house of his friend and confidant, the painter Adam Friedrich Ludwig Öser (1751-1799). He wrote to his friend Berendis (12th June 1754): 'I would not really mind if my master would dismiss me – I would not be in the least unhappy.'

Dresden had been a centre of German Protestantism, where the population was almost entirely Lutheran. The hereditary Elector had always been Protestant and his titles included the phrase 'Protector of the Protestant Faith'. Augustus III was groomed to succeed his father as King of Saxony and of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He converted to Roman Catholicism in order to be able to succeed to the lucrative crown of Poland. With the support of Russian and Austrian forces he then engaged in the futile War of Polish Succession (1733-1738). To assist in the conversion of the whole Saxon court, the Vatican dispatched a Papal Nuncio to Dresden. This was Cardinal Alberico Archinto, an enlightened and worldly prelate who saw in Winckelmann a potential convert. He was instrumental in gaining for Winckelmann a stipend from the new Catholic Saxon court after he had converted.

Winckelmann's scholarly activities began to gain focus and direction around the time of his move from Nöthnitz to Dresden. He cultivated his friendship with the portrait painter Öser (who would later be art tutor to Goethe). Öser's favourite painter was the Venecian Giulio Carpioni (1611-1674) whose works Öser thought were an example of the 'gentle simplicity' that was so rare in Baroque and Rococo art. Öser introduced Winckelmann to Georg Raphael Donner (1692-1747) a well known art

⁶ Carl Justi, in his above mentioned biography of Winckelmann, devotes a whole chapter to the struggles of conscience that might have preceded the actual conversion. There were, however, also practical and financial considerations that weighed heavily in favour of conversion.

teacher. Donner explained to Winckelmann the ancient techniques of modelling and of sculpting in marble. Donner and Öser were important influences on the teaching of art and the development of a German history-based aesthetic. Öser wrote that the secret of Christian art lay in representation of the divine *die Versinnlichung des Göttlichen*. He cites the head of Christ by Guido Reni [in the Swabian Cabinet in Hamburg] as the high point of what is possible in the representation of divinity in human form. Öser continues: The calm grandure in every aspect, the calm and wise eye, the mouth that seems ready to speak, the noble simplicity of the hair draped over the shoulder. The words 'noble simplicity and calm grandure' *edle Einfalt und stille Größe* were adopted by Winckelmann to express his ideal of classical calm. We can see the influence of Öser in many more expressions used later by Winckelmann – a vocabulary of acclaim and praise for works of art of a bygone age.

During Winckelmann's year at Dresden, Öser was the recognized head of art criticism at Leipzig. The year in Dresden (1754/55) was thus fruitful. The conversations with Öser were concerned with the state of German painting and the decline of taste from the high point of the Italian Renaissance and its classical models to his own time. Details of Winckelmann's life in Dresden are not known. According to Herder, his eyes were opened by his experiences of ancient art in the Dresden gallery but apart from Raphael's *Sixtinische Madonna* (and her two famous 'putti') he seems not to have been impressed by the collection.

It was at that time that Winckelmann set his sights on a visit to Rome, a well-nigh mandatory pilgrimage for someone who was concerned with broadening his knowledge of classical antiquities. Winckelmann was able to prepare his notes and the manuscript of his first and probably his most important work published the following year (1756) as the 'Thoughts about the imitation of the Greek works of art in painting and sculpture'.⁷ The title page (vignette) was designed and engraved by Öser. The work was an immediate success. The tone and the lucidity of Winckelmann's prose in praise of classical art evoked acclaim among the contemporary literary intelligentsia and within one year Winckelmann was able to produce a second expanded edition with explanatory text and an accompanying anonymous circular letter, the *Sendschreiben*.

⁷ *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Wercke in der Malerey und der Bildhauer-Kunst*

He had already expressed his admiration of the Laocoön group in the first edition of *Gedanken* - a view he formed based on engravings. He had seen the three undamaged figures of draped women in the Museum at Dresden and Wolfgang Leppmann tells the story of the discovery of these sculptures.⁸

No collection of antique statuary in northern Europe could rival the riches on display in Italy, particularly in Rome. The city was the repository of all the better known antique sculptures, most of which were Greco-Roman works excavated in Rome and its immediate environs. Martin Disselkamp describes in the central and unique position of Rome as a centre of learning and as the home of Good Taste. *Die Stadt der Gelehrten*. He seemed to enjoy his status as expatriate, perhaps he felt that he was an outsider in Rome; it was not contemporary Rome, but the Rome of antiquity that was his spiritual home. Although he sought the company of senior prelates of the Papal entourage, he was never 'one of them' and remained an emigré throughout the thirteen years of his stay in Rome.

Close to Winckelmann in his attitude to the classical past was Johann Friedrich Christ (1700-1756), who was professor of history and poetry in Leipzig. He wrote a number of essays for the entertainment of his friends, collected and printed as *Noctes academicae* (1727-1729), about the art and life of the ancient Greeks and on the theme of the 'honnête homme', of the gallant man etc. It was Christ who introduced into the university curriculum of Leipzig the relationship between art and society, between ancient artefacts and social history. Good taste, Christ taught, was evident even in the domestic equipment of the Greeks and the art of the classical period was natural and true. We have no record how much of Christ's work was available to Winckelmann who wrote: 'I would have liked Herr Professor Christ to have given his opinion on my work.'

It was through Öser, Christ and Damm that Saxony became the centre of the new interest in ancient classical art, as Winckelmann exclaimed in his first work: Now Dresden will become the German "Athens" of the artists.

⁸ Wolfgang Leppmann, 1932; *Winckelmann: Ein Leben für Apoll* (Leipzig, Fischer-Verlag) p. 97: In the early years of the 18th century, the Austrian imperial troops had occupied Naples and the Austrian cavalry-general Emanuel Moritz d'Elbœuf, Prince of Lorraine, was having a villa built near the beach of Granatello near Portici. As the workmen were digging the foundations they came across a number of sculptures. Without realising it, they had dug into the Amphitheatre of the Roman city of Herculaneum.

German interest in classical art also received an impetus from excavations at Herculaneum and Pompeii which stirred the popular imagination, greatly increasing the interest in ancient life and art among the educated stratum of society.

At this time, Winckelmann increased his collection of extracts and references to classical sources and critical literature on classical sculpture. In particular, he extracted from Junius' thesis *De Pictura Veterum* (published in Amsterdam: in 1637), the idea that there was a sequence of styles in the art of antiquity, an evolutionary process in step with the history of the region. The reputation of Winckelmann as the father of eighteenth-century art-history may have been based on his ability to absorb and re-invent the ideas of his predecessors modified and accentuated by his own creative genius.

Winckelmann's trip to Rome was facilitated by a stipend from the Saxon court obtained by the mediation of the Catholic church. The King, like his son Frederic the Great, declared his conversion to Roman Catholicism 'a private matter.' The Papal Nuncio, Cardinal Archinto interceded with the king on Winckelmann's behalf in order to obtain an annual grant. It seems that Winckelmann's conversion to Roman Catholicism was primarily a matter of economic necessity. He wrote to Gottlob Genzner in March 1766 telling him that he was studying the Hebrew Bible and that he sang a protestant hymn every morning.

Winckelmann begins his *Gedanken* with the statement that Greek sculpture was based on the beauty of the male physique of the local citizens. Like the beauty of the Homeric poems, he thought the plastic art of classical Greece was a unique achievement based on the reality of their physique. The physical beauty of the Greeks, in turn, he thought was due to the temperate climate and the blue sky. Moreover, Greek men were trained athletes and they exercised naked in the gymnasia. He continues to describe the beauty of the men of the Aegean islands in glowing terms, never having been there. It is astonishing that he never refers to his religious beliefs in spite of seeking daily contact with Papal prelates. Might it not have been God himself who had so favoured the Greeks?

In Dresden Winckelmann had made the acquaintance of one of the most influential art *connoisseurs* of his day, Christian Ludwig von Hagedorn (1730-1780) and from this time onward he developed his respectful friendship in the form of regular correspondence. When Winckelmann was

at the point of travelling to Rome he promised to write to Hagedorn, giving his impressions of the Roman art treasures, since Hagedorn himself was not able to travel to Rome. Winckelmann wrote seven letters to Hagedorn addressing him as 'My dear friend'. The critical judgements of Hagedorn made an important contribution to the emotional response of Winckelmann to the beauties of classical art. In his circular letter *Sendschreiben* Winckelmann wrote: 'His [Hagedorn's] work has been conceived with much wisdom as well as recognition of the finest aspects of art' and in one of his private letters he wrote that Hagedorn's erudition was based on his travels in Europe but that he had little knowledge of the art treasures of Rome, as he had not visited Rome yet. For the last 16 years of his fruitful life, von Hagedorn was the head of the Saxon Academy of Art.

There are two important fragments from Winckelmann's Dresden years (1753-1754). The first of these was the description of the foremost pictures of the Dresden Gallery, (1753) which contained descriptions of paintings by twelve artists mostly of the late phase of the Italian Renaissance. Winckelmann speaks of the use of dark colours and shade and he criticises the brothers Carracci, claiming that they were ignorant of the 'correct' use of colour. He praises Guido Reni for his ability to express strong emotions but takes him to task for making the faces of his subjects too pale.

His second fragment contains his thoughts about the oral presentation of the latest general history of art: He writes about the importance of the useful *das Nützliche*, the beautiful and the most characteristic, without attempting to define the meaning of the terms. He writes about humanist ideals *Menschlichkeit* and he believes that Periclean Athens was an example of the happy state *die Kategorie des Glücklichen*. The sources of his Greek studies were limited in two ways: first, he had access only to the local libraries where the Greek sources were few; secondly he wrote extracts of the material he thought relevant to his theme and thus he accumulated his own selection from texts. These did not include Thucydides' *Peloponnesian Wars* in eight volumes (435BC), although copies and translations (by Reiske) were available at that time in the libraries.

The circumstances under which Winckelmann made his move to Rome in 1755 were still far from assuring him a secure future. His conversion to Catholicism was an essential step to ensuring eligibility for patronage by the Catholic establishment in Rome. In his early days there he lived on a

relatively hand-to-mouth basis, helped by a small and irregular stipend from the Saxon court until, in 1757, he entered the services of Cardinal Archinto as his part-time librarian. Archinto died in 1758 and Winckelmann was fortunate to gain employment as librarian to Cardinal Albani.

His employment provided free accommodation within the Vatican and it left him free to wander about Rome and visit the palaces of the Roman nobility. In the first part of the second edition of *Gedanken* he added an Introduction in the form of a pseudo-attack on his theories, which he followed immediately by a defence and explanation.

Beginning in 1756 he prepared a number of exercise books that he filled with inventories and descriptions of the sculptural treasures on display in the private collections of Rome. It was a form of written guide-book, an 'aide-memoire' for his guided tours. The hand-written exercise books are today preserved in the national library of Paris under the title *Ville e Palazzi di Roma*. In addition to his Roman activities, he was able to travel frequently to Florence where he prepared a descriptive catalogue in French of the collection of engraved seals and cameos accumulated by Baron von Stosch. He was renowned for his erudition and he was sought after to guide the young men, mainly sons of the German nobility, who came to Rome to improve their education. He was not paid for these guided tours, but he was probably happy to accept gifts such as the popular snuff-boxes or similar tokens of esteem from his pupils.

Winckelmann travelled to Naples with the painter Mengs (1758) to see the latest results of the excavations at Pompeii and at Herculaneum; His notes became the source of a report on the excavations at Herculaneum; published in 1762. In the following year he was appointed to the post of *Prefetto dell' Antichità di Roma*, which secured a small income. Two years later (1764) he published his 'Essay about the ability to experience beauty in art and the instruction in the subject' *Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst und dem Unterrichte in derselben*. Winckelmann shared with the painter Mengs the notion that 'wisdom in beauty' *Weisheit in Schönheit* was the guiding principle that informed the quasi religious experience of the comprehension of beauty. In the same year (1764) he travelled once more to Naples and published his 'Latest news about the excavations at Herculaneum'. He also brought his major work to conclusion and published his 'History of Art in Antiquity' *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* in two volumes, illustrated with vignettes of engraved stones which he thought were classical Greek.

In May 1764 he wrote to his publisher (G.C. Walther) offering him the publication of his latest work under the title of: ‘Attempt at a History of Art particularly about the Greeks until their collapse’. But the manuscript, if it ever existed, has not been preserved. Winckelmann was by no means the first to have attempted a general history of art, and the Italian successors of Vassari and Baldinucci as art historians were de Piles, Passeri and Bellori, followed by Ridolfi and Pascoli who were all attempting to systematise ancient sculpture and painting. Winckelmann does not refer to his Italian predecessors except in general and derogatory terms and his debt to Franciscus Junius remained unacknowledged.

The publisher Walther printed 1200 volumes of the *Geschichte* and in 1766 it was translated into French as *Histoire de l’art chez les anciens* (Paris: chez Salliant). The success of the work was almost immediate, although it clearly had a number of structural problems. It claimed to be what it was not; it was not a history of art, as will be argued below, but more a work of literature, a highly selective and personal work, more a confession than a work of scholarship. It did, however, turn the interest of the reader from the history of artists to the objects they had created. Under the influence of Öser, Hagedorn and Mengs, Winckelmann had acquired an analytical interest in the detail of late classical marble sculpture.

Winckelmann’s presence in Rome was a significant attraction for many visitors who came to Rome in search of culture. He went beyond being merely a participant in Italian travel and art circles and became himself part of the reason why so many cosmopolitan connoisseurs headed for Rome. It is important to investigate why this expatriate German acted as a focal point for Italian travellers who were interested in art. Historical and biographical coincidence undoubtedly played their part – he was certainly the right man in the right place at the right time – but to focus exclusively on these aspects of his rise to fame and consistent popularity would be misleading. Potential travellers would have been aware of the meteoric rise of this small-town German classicist to a position which gave him access to the most influential circles of the Vatican hierarchy, thus also gaining access to the great art collections of Rome that were to a large extent in private hands. Winckelmann’s life in Rome was punctuated by visits to Naples, to Florence and to nearby Tivoli, usually in the company of his carefully chosen friends. Osterkamp, in his review of Disselkamp’s analysis of Winckelmann’s letters describes his life as:

Excessive in controversy, excessive in endless work, excessive in eating and especially in drinking; this is how he himself described his life, this is

how his friends and admirers experienced the modern exponent of classical moderation.

It seems that his upbringing without a model of propriety influenced his lifestyle in Rome where, in the shadow of the Church, the permissive society allowed Winckelmann the freedom he could probably not have experienced in Germany. It is in his private correspondence, analyzed and commented upon extensively by Disselkamp, that we see him as he lived in Rome. His letters formed an important component of the culture of letter writing and of erudition in mid-century Germany.

Winckelmann's arrival in Rome gave impetus to his intensive engagement with the art of antiquity. Before he came to Rome, his experience of Hellenistic sculpture had been limited to the few examples in the royal collection of Dresden and to the engravings and small models of classical sculpture that he could have seen. Thus the impact of the massive sculptures in the Vatican collections made a great impression and would have confirmed his intention to write detailed descriptive texts as part of a major work on ancient art. He had obtained a copy of Franciscus Junius' *De Pictura Veterum* (1694)⁹ from which he extracted numerous references to classical literature that he then incorporated in the *Geschichte*. Junius (1589-1677) had created a compendium of classical sources with the aim of demonstrating the origins of classical art and its development during 'propitious times' (*publica temporum felicitas*). Moreover, Junius addressed art-critical questions such as proportion, symmetry and colouring. He wrote a rich compendium of classical sources and artists, a well-researched document, including chapters on the representation of the naked human. Winckelmann returned to the reading of Greek sources in 1756 because he found the collection of quotations prepared by Junius to be incomplete. The collection of Junius is incomplete because he had never seen Rome and art was not his metier, so he did not understand everything and he did not notice all.

Following the success of the *Geschichte*, Winckelmann published a number of minor essays: 'Attempt at an Allegory *Versuch einer Allegorie* followed by *Monumenti Antici inediti* in 1766 in Italian. He had hoped that this catalogue of sculpture would generate sufficient income to make him financially independent, but the costs of production and distribution

⁹ 'Francisci Junii Catalogus Architectorum, Mechanicorum, Pictorium, oliquorumque Artificium veterum secundum seriem literarum digestus.' (MFW, p.160) with comments by Max Kunze (ed).

proved too large. Earnings from his writings were never enough to guarantee him an adequate income. His financial insecurity was compounded by his efforts to remain independent. As a writer, he prided himself on being someone who worked entirely on his own initiative and did not undertake work on commission, although his engagements in Florence and in Naples seem to contradict this image of himself. He had a small pension from the Saxon, (later the Prussian) court and he was paid a stipend by the Vatican as curator of antiquities.

A large proportion of his last publication, the *'Monumenti Antichi inediti spiegati ed illustrati da Giovanni Winckelmann'* consisted of a catalogue of the highlights of the Albani collection. He was at pains to present the work as a catalogue of Roman monuments that he himself considered important. He also indicated clearly on the title page that the book had been published 'at the author's expense'. Winckelmann's meager earnings from his publications and the care he took to avoid official benefices that would demand too much time, meant that despite his grand accommodation in the Villa Albani, he was in no position to live in a manner resembling the life of a gentleman. The architect Erdmannsdorf, who met Winckelmann on a visit to Rome in 1766 remarked on how small his income was: 'He had no-one to serve him.' Winckelmann became the best known specialist guide to the sculptures in the public and private collections of antiquities in Rome. He might have been remunerated for his lectures by the visiting foreign students of art and the members of the aristocracies of northern Europe who came to Rome as tourists to explore the cultural treasures of the South.

In the spring of the year 1768 Winckelmann travelled to Germany in the company of the Roman sculptor Cavaceppi. The reasons for his visit are unclear and his biographers cannot explain what made him leave the security of Rome for the hardship of the transalpine coach journey. We may guess that his failure to attract artists to his lectures in Rome may have caused him to travel to Germany where the reception of his works among the literary elite was more positive. The journey may also have been undertaken because of his unease about his financial position in Rome and how it might compare with the kind of position to which he might have aspired in Germany as a professor at a university or as a chief librarian. When they reached Regensburg Winckelmann cancelled his further travel plans and instead followed an invitation to travel to Vienna, where he was received in audience by the empress Maria Theresa who

gave him a gold medal in recognition of his services. On the 14th May 1768 he wrote from Vienna to Muzel Stosch in Florence:

I arrived in Vienna two days ago after a very uncomfortable journey. I had left Rome five weeks ago. And here I found your lovely letter handed to me by Herr von Wallmoden. The journey, instead of entertaining me has made me very depressed since it was not possible to make the journey in greater comfort nor did I wish to continue, since it was not a pleasure. Beginning in Augsburg I forced myself to remain cheerful but my heart says no, and my aversion to further travel could not be overcome. My friend! I would have liked to write more but I am unwell and not as I would like to be. In a few days I will take the land-coach to Trieste and from there by ship to Ancona. I kiss your hands with heart-felt sadness and remain your eternal Winckelmann.

He complained of a state of mind of sadness, or he might have been suffering gastro-enteric problems that would have made a continuation of long-distance coach travel uncomfortable. (He would not have written about such matters to his friend.) He was on his return journey, waiting in Trieste for a ship to take him back to Rome (via Ancona) when he was murdered by a casual acquaintance in his rooms at a harbour-inn on the 8th June 1768.

In order to gain a clearer view of the importance of Winckelmann's art historical theories it is necessary to consider the state of German art history of the time and the reception of his work in the German literary environment of the late century. This will become the subject of the next chapter.

