CHAPTER ELEVEN

‘POPULAR’ AESTHETICS AND PERSONAL ART APPRECIATION IN THE HELLENISTIC AGE

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1. Introduction

The study of ancient aesthetics and aesthetic theory has recently undergone a renaissance. Varied studies and scholarly offerings have investigated this traditional field in new ways and have illustrated how diverse the application of ancient aesthetics can be. The main thrust of these studies, understandably, has been the analysis of those few ancient authors who explicitly deal with aesthetic issues, chiefly Plato and Aristotle. These ‘professional critics’, for want of a better term, were primarily interested in aesthetic criticism as it related to the interpretation of text. This is most clearly seen in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but parallels can be found in such diverse authors as Callimachus and Quintilian. This is not to say that Aristotle or others had no interest in non-textual matters—far from it—but more often than not discussions of paintings, sculpture, and other artwork were limited as *exempla* to illustrate the broad aesthetic ideas being presented.

Still, the work of such philosophers was to lead to the creation of aesthetic valuations of art, ‘art history’ if you will, during the Hellenistic period. These Hellenistic professional critics, such as Xenocrates and Antigonus, were to create a series of writings whose aesthetics were primarily concerned with objective issues such as form and technique. These works, now lost but seemingly transmitted via later Roman sources, were in the tradition of earlier technical treatises such as Polycleitus’ *Kanôn*, which looked for τὸ κόσμον (the beautiful) through the idea of σύμμετρα (symmetry). Various philosophical and literary critics also added to this corpus of material

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1 As examples: Fowler 1989; Halliwell 2002; Tanner 2006; Elsner 2007; Netz 2009; Bychkov and Sheppard 2010. One could add the growing number of ‘art and text’ monographs that often deal with aesthetic issues.
that looked at concepts such as τέχνη (skill), μίμησις (imitation), φαντασία (invention), and even the debate between the aesthetics of Asian versus Attic oratory illustrated the ‘parallel worlds of art and text’. This then is the ancient background that would ultimately lead to the rather formalist aesthetic philosophies of such scholars as Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Heinrich Wölfflin. Yet this view of the history of aesthetics belies the origins of even contemporary aesthetic philosophy in a far more popular or personal view of ancient art.

The origins of modern classical art history find their beginning primarily in two authors: Giorgio Vasari and Johann Joachim Winckelmann. These two authors, both seen as working within an interpretive tradition dating back to classical philosophers, also had an important contribution to make in the field of aesthetics from a personal standpoint. Vasari was a secondary painter of the Italian Renaissance who worked throughout Italy, but mostly in his home town of Arezzo, in Rome, and in Florence, in the early to mid cinquecento. While in Rome in 1546, Vasari was having dinner at the court of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese when a conversation arose about biography and art which ultimately led to Vasari’s decision to write his most famous work: The Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Architects, Painters and Sculptors from Cimabue to our Times. The Lives was a culmination of Vasari’s lifelong interest in and affection for artists and over the next four years he organized his own notes while also examining a host of other sources and models. This included the only surviving classical model for an account of artists and their work, Pliny’s Natural History, but also such works as Plutarch’s Lives, the Lives of the Philosophers of Diogenes Laertius and other more contemporary material. Vasari viewed his own Lives as a work of ‘history’ and so divided Renaissance art into three phases, or ages, which corresponded to the fourteenth century, where classical art was ‘reborn’, the fifteenth century, when the highest goal of art, the imitation of nature, is almost achieved, and the sixteenth century, when artists bring all these technical discoveries to their fruition. It is in this last age when artists have the ability to fully triumph over nature (a variation of mimetic theory) and finally

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3 ‘Formalist’ is used here adjectively and not in the sense of the more modern theories of aesthetic formalism (though Wölfflin was instrumental in its origins). These critics have also been discussed within a neo-classic tradition that looked back to the Platonic ideas of δόγμα and μίμησις, whereby ‘form’ was the dominant aesthetic evaluative characteristic even when constructing historical periodization schemes. For general overviews, see Davies et al. 2009, s.v. ‘aesthetics in antiquity’ and ‘eighteenth-century aesthetics’.