The Whiteness of Beauty: Weimar Neo-Classicism and the Sculptural Transcendence of Color

In examining writings by Winckelmann, Goethe and Hegel, the essay demonstrates that within the neo-classical tradition arguments emerged that had clear racial implications. While eighteenth-century classicism started off dismissing color as a factor in judging beauty, this very dismissal of color became an argument in favor of whiteness – not just of marble but also of the skin. Consequently, some of the most esoteric discussions about the nature of Greek sculpture could be transformed into a justification for asserting white supremacy.

In his canonizing essay for the volume Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert, Goethe summarized the tremendous significance Johann Joachim Winckelmann had for later German intellectuals by comparing him to Columbus. Winckelmann, Goethe writes, began his explorations of ancient art by defining the style of fifth-century sculpture, but then, by broadening his historical understanding of Greek art, he discovered an entire culture.

Doch bald erhob er sich über die Einzelheiten zu der Idee einer Geschichte der Kunst und entdeckte, als ein neuer Kolumbus, ein lange gehautes, gedeutetes und besprochenes, ja man kann sagen ein früher schon gekanntes und wieder verlor-nes Land.¹

Like other Idealist comparisons,² Goethe’s analogy seems curious at first, perhaps even inappropriate. The Victorian critic Walter Pater, who adored Goethe endlessly, still felt compelled to ascribe the analogy simply to “a German biographer of Winckelmann,” adding that “it was not the aptest of comparisons.”³ For Pater there seemed to be no obvious link between exploration and art history, yet the awkwardness of the analogy may have more to do with the different associations global exploration had for a Victorian Englishman than for an eighteenth-century German.⁴ For Goethe, explora-

² Some famous examples are Kant’s invocation of Copernicus, and Schlegel’s famous parallel between the French Revolution, Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre and Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister.
⁴ Russell Berman argues that German colonial references needs to be understood in terms of Germany’s specific marginal position within Europe, and not simply as part
tions were more explicitly imaginary expeditions, undertaken as a readerly adventure, which entailed pouring through travel accounts or piecing together a lost culture from ruined remnants, whereas for an English critic, colonial contact with native peoples brought with it a host of political and economic relations that would not have existed in Weimar. Indeed the best way to make sense of Goethe’s comparison is to accept it metaphorically, for even as he draws the analogy, Goethe shows the differences between Columbus’s discovery and Winckelmann’s.

Greek was of course not literally discovered in the eighteenth century, anymore than Columbus “discovered” a continent fully occupied by native peoples. Greece had always been known to Europeans. Indeed to Goethe’s sensibility it was the origin of European culture, however the Ottoman occupation and the decline of Classical studies had meant that prior to Winckelmann’s “discovery” ancient had faded from the geographical imagination of European intellectuals. Winckelmann’s Geschichteder Kunst des Altertums altered the European understanding of its own status vis-a-vis other cultures. Antiquity, like the native cultures of the Americas, placed Europeans in a context they had not imagined before. The artifacts of Greece and the travel reports from the Americas presented stark alternative to the cultural norms of early modern Europe. Although antiquity was placed within the genealogy of European society, it was nevertheless shared characteristics with Native American cultures. For example, Rousseau suggested that Sparta and the early Roman Republic shared a primitive innocence with the “savage” people of the Americas. Yet for all the similarities that Rousseau’s writing provided, the ancient distinction between “civilized” and “barbarian” peoples also implied a clear difference. Indeed the distinction, I will argue, lies at the heart of Goethe’s analogy.

If Columbus had traveled westwards across the Atlantic, Winckelmann moved across the Mediterranean, having started in northern Europe, settled of a generalized “European” colonial discourse. His comparative reading of the travelogues written by Captain James Cook and the young German philosopher, George Forster, makes clear that epistemological interests can vary significantly even within the crew of a single ship. Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture. Lincoln 1998. Pp. 9-11, 21-64.

For a detailed discussion of antiquity in European art collections before Winckelmann, see Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny: Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500-1900. New Haven 1981.