JOHANN JOACHIM WINCKELMANN (1717—68)
GERMAN ART HISTORIAN AND THEORIST

From the moment of its initial publication in German in 1764, Winckelmann's most important book, the *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (*History of the Art of Antiquity*), had a far-reaching impact on the artistic and literary culture of the time. Its apologia for a purified and simplified Greek ideal in art played a formative role in that intensified engagement with the sculpture of Greek and Roman antiquity we now designate as neo-classicism. It also revolutionized and gave a new impetus to art historical and archaeological studies. Winckelmann became an internationally acclaimed writer on art and the foremost antiquarian scholar of his day, one who radically redefined this specialist field of enquiry to make it central to late Enlightenment speculation about the history of ancient and modern culture. His work was seen as foundational text at a time when art history and classical archaeology were being established as modern academic disciplines, and several of the paradigms that this book put in circulation continued to be replicated and contested well into the twentieth century.

In the longer term, his writing on ancient art played a formative role in the radical rethinking of artistic and cultural norms initiated by German historicizing thinkers such as Herder, Goethe and Hegel. All were great admirers of Winckelmann, and deeply indebted to his historical reconstruction of ancient Greek art for their pioneering speculation about the differences between ancient and modern culture. The richly evocative, and at the same time historically dense, image of classical Greek sculpture he fashioned functioned for them as a cultural ideal which they saw as foundational and yet as increasingly at odds with a modern outlook.

*The History of the Art of Antiquity* enjoyed such a high reputation among Winckelmann's contemporaries partly because of its sheer intellectual scope and ambition, offering as it did a new, and compelling, synthesis of what was known about the arts of the ancient world. While it discussed Egyptian and Near Eastern art, its central concern was the historical evolution and aesthetic and ethical ideals of the ancient Greek tradition, including its later vicissitudes among the ancient Romans. Winckelmann was also a very fine writer who provided easily the most eloquent analysis available of the distinctive beauty of the classic masterpieces of ancient sculpture. His richly invested apologia for the Greek ideal, coming at a moment of intensified engagement with classical antiquity, both among intellectuals and the wealthy and fashionable, guaranteed his book a wide audience that is only very occasionally the lot of specialist scholarly studies. Its longer-term reverberations, however, depend on something more intangible, a sense of mission and purpose, a promise of larger insight to be gained from a close engagement with the finest visual artifacts surviving from the ancient Greek and Roman world.

Two aspects of Winckelmann's history of ancient art in particular distinguish it from earlier writing in the area. First, there is its ambition and conceptual complexity. It combines a self-consciously conceptual analysis with a historical or chronological presentation of empirical detail, a little like Rousseau's treatise *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1755). This is foregrounded in the underlying structure of the *History of the Art of Antiquity*, which divides into two parts. Part one, as Winckelmann put it, deals with history taken ‘in the wider sense that it had in the Greek language’ and elaborated into a ‘system’. Part two, by contrast, is concerned with ‘the history of art in the narrower sense, that is in relation to its external circumstances’, and was conceived in a more conventional way as a ‘narrative of its chronology and alterations’. Winckelmann's account of the rise and decline of ancient art echoes a preoccupation with broader patterns of historical development in Enlightenment thought fed by a widespread concern with symptoms of progress or decline in contemporary culture. Among other important instances of such a way of imagining the history of the ancient world, one could cite Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776—88) and Montesquieu's *Thoughts on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decadence* (1734).

While the impetus behind Winckelmann's new history of art had a lot to do with such general tendencies in Enlightenment thinking, it also related to developments within antiquarian studies and the
art world. Most obviously, there was the new wave of excavating and collecting antiquities in Italy, of which the discovery of the Roman ruins at Herculaneum and Pompeii was the most striking instance. Wealthy connoisseurs and collectors were coming to Italy in increasing numbers, not only to see the masterpieces of antique art on display in the major Roman private collections, or the newly arranged public museums such as the Capitoline Museum, but also to acquire works for their own collections. For the less wealthy, Italy and Rome, in particular, gained new importance as the place of pilgrimage for an aesthetic education, a ritual which Winckelmann's writings on ancient art and his activities as a cicerone clearly fed.

Conditions of artistic taste were also important, above all the intensifying belief emerging in the mid-eighteenth century that a close engagement with the finest examples of antique art would lead to a renewal and purification of modern art practice. Winckelmann conceived his History of the Art of Antiquity, not only as making a contribution to antiquarian studies, but also as encouraging a revival of modern art through fostering a truer understanding of classical Greek models. Appearing in 1755, his first publication, Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst (Thoughts on the Imitation of the Works of the Greeks in Painting and Sculpture), a short polemical treatise arguing for a return to the true principles of art embodied by the Greek ideal, contained his famous slogan about the ‘noble simplicity and calm [or still] grandeur’ distinguishing antique from modern art. It was an unexpected international success, with translations soon appearing in French and English. Aside from the famous descriptions of key masterpieces of antique sculptures, such as the Laocoon, the Apollo Belvedere and the Belvedere Torso extracted from the History of the Art of Antiquity, this was probably his most widely read piece of writing.

A second novel aspect of Winckelmann's History of the Art of Antiquity crucial for its subsequent reputation was the emphasis it placed on visual and stylistic analysis. In the Preface, he described his aim as being, not only to define the rise, flourishing and decline of art, but also to account for ‘the various styles of different peoples, periods and artists, and demonstrate this, as far as possible, with reference to the remaining works of antiquity’. The finer classical Greek and Roman remains were to be seen not only as offering the modern art lover a series of exemplary ideal works, and the antiquarian a fund of motifs yielding information about the symbols, cults and everyday practices of the ancients, as had been the norm in the text-based and iconographically orientated work of classical scholars prior to the mid-eighteenth century. These artifacts were to be analyzed for what they revealed about the distinctive style of art among different peoples at different periods, while artistic style was taken to be symptomatic of people's material circumstances and characteristic mentality. Such an all-inclusive gesture proved very significant for the ambitions of later art history in its attempts to understand the aesthetic qualities of works of art in terms of the social and cultural circumstances that shaped their making.

As a result of Winckelmann's new historical synthesis, the classical artistic tradition no longer simply presented itself as a timeless ideal, but took on the character of a historical phenomenon, caught up in a cycle of development manifest in changes of style from the crudely archaic through successive refinements to a phase of classical perfection in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, and on from there to imitation and eventual decline. It is with Winckelmann that the modern distinction between an earlier, purer Greek tradition, and a later, imitative, and inherently inferior Greco-Roman one, first began to take hold. Such a historical perspective on the art of the ancient Greek and Roman world prepared the way for the flurry of archaeological activity in Greece and the Near East that got going at the turn of the century. Despite Winckelmann's claim to have introduced a new rigour in distinguishing true Greek work from later Roman or modern imitations and copies, it was still the case that almost all of the antiquities he thought might be associated with the ancient Greeks are now seen as Greco-Roman copies or adaptations. Statues such as the Apollo Belvedere which he represented as the finest surviving exemplars of the Greek ideal are now mostly valued for what they reveal about artistic taste in Imperial Rome and are considered to be very different from the archaic and classical Greek work excavated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on which modern conceptions of ancient Greek sculpture are based.
This new historical dimension Winckelmann brought to understandings of the classic art of antiquity touched on people's deeply rooted assumptions that the finest existing ancient Greek and Roman sculptures existed as fixed, universal ideals of excellence, even if Winckelmann himself was no historicist. Starting with the tribute to him elaborated by Herder in 1778, and continuing with the later ones by Goethe and Hegel, Winckelmann came to be seen as having delineated the antique ideal with a vividness and specificity that made apparent how radically different it was from any classicism that might be practiced in modern times. His historical schema provided later thinkers with a basis for viewing classical Greek art and culture from a perspective that problematized its status as a model for modern artists in ways that Winckelmann would have found unimaginable.

Later retrospective celebrations of Winckelmann, including those by Goethe and Hegel, still viewed his writing on ancient Greek art as a direct inspiration, at the same time that his mind-set came to be considered quite unmodern. He was seen as being able to embody the true spirit of the ancient world in ways that they were finding increasingly impossible. This ambivalent sense of Winckelmann as a figure whose writing provided a point of departure for a distinctively modern historicizing perspective, while he himself remained anchored in a pre-modern world, recurs in the most important tribute to Winckelmann from an English-speaking writer, Walter Pater's essay dating from 1867, which was incorporated in the first edition of Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873). Here, as with Goethe, Winckelmann was seen to be unselfconsciously living out the values of Greek antiquity. This image held a further charge for Pater because Winckelmann had written so eloquently and openly about Greek homoeroticism and had made an ancient Greek cult of male friendship and male beauty central to his whole outlook and way of life.

According to Pater, however, the qualities of Greek sculpture that Winckelmann had evoked with such passionate conviction and apparent immediacy, the ‘unclassified purity of life’ and the ‘exquisite but abstract and colourless form’, were slightly alien to a modern sensibility as well as being intensely captivating. He was acutely aware that the modern compulsions and anxieties that drew him to this ideal also distanced him from it. Though less self-conscious than Pater about the preoccupations shaping his outlook on ancient Greek art, Winckelmann too had been aware of a historical gulf separating him from the ideal that fascinated him. In the conclusion to his History of the Art of Antiquity, speculating on why he had lingered so long on the demise and destruction of the Greek tradition, he explained how ‘we have remaining to us, so to speak, only the shadowy outline of our desires: but this makes the desire for the objects we have lost ever more ardent’.

**Biography**

Johann Joachim Winckelmann was born on 9 December 1717 in Stendal, Prussia, the son of a cobbler. He studied theology at the University of Halle in 1738 and medicine at the University of Jena, from 1741–2. His first job was as a school teacher at Seehausen in Prussia. It was as librarian to Count von Biinau at Nothmitz near Dresden 1747–54 that he came into contact with ancient art for the first time. In 1754 he converted to Roman Catholicism, and in 1755 moved to Rome. In 1758 he was to enter the service of Cardinal Alessandro Albani. He was appointed Commissioner of Antiquities in Rome 1763, and published Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums (History of the Art of Antiquity) in 1764. The victim of a murder, he died on 8 June 1768 in Trieste.