

# Editor's Statement: The Problem of Classicism: Ideology and Power

By David Freedberg

For all the justifiable attacks on the use of stylistic labels like “mannerist” and “baroque,” art historians, like architects, continue to use the term “classicism” abundantly. But they have ceased to try to define it quite as desperately as they once did. This set of essays—and the symposium on which it is based<sup>1</sup>—did not set out to define it either. They were not planned as an effort of revival (although in architectural circles the subject may have seemed to be fashionable or prescient). Rather, they were conceived as an attempt to assess what the residual interest and the ideological implications of the term might be—however exhausted it may have seemed.

The issue, of course, also involves the related notions of “classic” and “classical” (“classicizing” seems less problematic). As soon as one tries to define the relations—or the distinctions—between them, the ground turns out to be even swampier than expected. Every field has a host of writers who have sought to find the classical, or to define it; but their interests have rarely been interrogated. There are even classic texts—the fundamental ones—which are generally acknowledged to have refined the term “classicism” most effectively or to have provided the most definitive and thoroughgoing evaluations of classic periods, classic ages, and classic styles.

No one, any longer, can doubt the laxity of the conventional and traditional usage of terms like “classic,” “classical,” and “classicism.” Everyone acknowledges some sort of link between the two forms of usage—that is, between the qualitative use and the hierarchical use, where “classic” is used as somehow equivalent to the highest or

most superior degree in the canon or hierarchy. The problem of assessing the connections between formal qualities called “classical” and the authoritative or normative aspect of what we call “classic” will emerge with some acuteness in the essays presented here.<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, some art historians who persist in seeking the classical, or even in attempting to define it, and who do so unreflectively and unaware of the ideological burdens both of the descriptive attempt and of the very forms they wish to describe. The symposium now presented in the pages of this issue of *Art Journal* was conceived in the hope that such pitfalls might be avoided, and that ideology might be more plain than obscure.

For all this, there seems to have been some recognition of the advantages of a less radical and more complaisant position. Say one simply admitted the hypostatized status of classicism, on the grounds that it served useful terminological and classificatory possibilities. Such a position—in other words, the heuristic one—would justify a rather coarser use of the term than one might otherwise be inclined to allow. Of all the papers printed here, Jean-Claude Lebensztein’s most strongly exemplifies the benefits of this stance, although most of the others share it to a somewhat lesser degree. John Hay remains the skeptic in the group, at any rate with regard to his insistence on the fundamental cosmological differences between Western values based on morphologies of order and Chinese ones based on change and becoming. Henri Zerner insists most strongly on the ideological basis of classicism and proposes the extent to which the power attributed to it is and has to be rooted in

nature. By concentrating on particular examples, Natalie Boymel Kampen and Martin Powers demonstrate the ideological dimension and the political uses of what is taken to be classic or classical or both. Powers makes an eloquent case for the social and political purposes of classical revivals in China, while Kampen develops a view that makes the ideological point most trenchantly of all: the view that classical modes are used to reinforce masculinist norms of morality and to persuade the Other, notably the female Other, to become like Self. Hay, in demonstrating the difficulty of assessing the problem of classicism in non-Western traditions, concludes that “the dialectic of order and nature is quintessentially Western and lies at the root of many of our greatest achievements”; but William Childs’s analysis of the sculpture of what is unanimously regarded as the quintessentially classic period in Western art subverts even this seemingly unexceptionable view. He asserts that what we now conventionally assume to be the characteristic features of classical sculpture can by no means be taken for granted, and should be critically reconsidered; in short, instead of the qualities of idealism and abstraction generally associated with it, Childs insists on its descriptiveness and its eminent realism.

We seem, once more, to be on the brink of reopening the box of definitions; but at the same time Childs’s revelation of the straitjacket of the traditional view of fifth-century Phidian art poses the ideological question yet again. By the time the reader has done with this set of essays he or she may feel that at least one question has been settled: and that is that any transhistorical view (and by

implication any transcultural view) is neither possible nor decently libertarian. We may smile in approval, for example, when Zerner reflects on the apparent bizarreness of the coupling of archaism with classicism and then goes on to show that when archaism or primitivism is, in some sense, "dominant," such a coupling is altogether possible.<sup>3</sup> It produces forms that are considered both classical and authoritative, "classic," in other words. Indeed, both Hay and Powers illustrate quite precisely the ways in which the archaic serves the classical. The same, of course, may go for any other quality held to be classical or to be an ingredient of the classic, *classical*, or *classicizing* object.

**B**ut perhaps the pendulum has swung too far in favor of ideology. At the time the symposium was devised, it seemed that there was another area to explore—or at least to broach—with regard to the problem of classicism: that of psychology, and cognitive psychology in particular. To do so need not imply—as critics of such explorations usually insist—the independence of cognition; my aim was to bring to the fore an issue that art historians in their recent, most contextual modes seem to have forgotten—perhaps willingly and deliberately. In any event this particular possibility remained entirely unexamined. I still believe it deserves more.

This is how the final prospectus for the 1986 Symposium ran:

The history of art in its traditional mode has been much concerned with the varieties of classicism. It has applied the term classical in a loose and generalized way, but it has been unable to achieve any kind of consensus about its description and meaning.

The aim of this symposium is to develop new approaches to the complex of problems subsumed under the heading of "classicism." It will not primarily be concerned with stylistic labelling, nor with the identification of classic periods.<sup>4</sup> It will address the problems of the relationship between what is regarded as the classical on the one hand, and prevailing ideologies on the other; it will assess the usefulness of stylistic and dialectical approaches; and it will reconsider the relevance of canons, ideals, and the analytic worth of the identification of classic traditions and revivals.

When we speak of classicism, or of the classical, do we speak of ways of describing the qualities of

objects; or are we talking about relational matters, about the relations of objects to past ideals, and to forms perceived through the veils of nostalgia? Or do we speak of the very opposite—in other words, of the ways in which forms are defined for ideological motives by those who behold and use them? By those who use them for immediate political aims, or who place them in self-justifying historical relations?

Still further questions arise when the problem is seen in terms of stylistic issues. One might, for example, identify any number of artists or works, over wide chronological spans, in which we sense the arresting effects of what we term hieratic, stylized, formal, severe, or austere qualities; of firmly grouped and clearly disposed arrangements of figures; of the bleak and underexpressive gaze; of frontality, profilarity and isocephaly—for example. But do we need such terms at all, and are they significantly comprehensive? Are these appropriate categories, and how are they to be grouped in terms of both style and effect? Finally one might ask what ideological burdens they carry, and what the consequences are for the relationship between the contexts of production and reception.

The intention is to address problems like these over as wide a range as possible. At this symposium the issues will be approached by two speakers from each of three backgrounds: from Ancient Greece and Rome, from China, and from the modern period in the West.

In the earlier version of the prospectus—in the 1985/86 "Call for Papers"—I declared more explicitly that the mention of stylistic qualities often associated with classicism was absolutely not to hypostatize it; but at the same time I more strongly suggested that the kinds of qualities broadly described by the terms above might be recurrent, and have loosely recurrent effects. The suggestion had no resonance. Instead, the speakers—all of whose papers are reproduced here—chose to concentrate on qualities that depended more obviously on the beholder's context, more specifically on the beholder's social and political context. They were the kinds of qualities described by terms like purity, order, rationality, idealization, abstraction, simplicity. They were assessed, as the

prospectus required, with respect to ideological load and to the relations between contexts of production and reception. The matter became clearest—as it does in these essays—when classicism is most closely related to the classic, to rules and to models: rules that are governed, as the proponents of classicism allege, by reason; and models that are—by definition and deservedly—to be followed. But it may be that the combined force of the papers—with the exception of Childs's—has the effect of somewhat exaggerating the degree to which such terms are ideologically burdened; the question of degree is precisely what the symposium left open. Indeed, it was not even raised; whereas the question of the relations between canonicity and classicism received constant attention, and may be said to have been treated with conviction.

Little attempt, therefore, was made to arrive more closely at a means of speaking about the relationship between particular styles (however named; but in this case under the rubric Westerners call "classical") and particular kinds of response. There was no effort to plot the interlocking data that mark the dialectic that arises, but is also implicit, between specific works and beholder; and then to probe beneath that surface-plotting to achieve a theoretical basis for a neurophysiology of visual and psychological responses to particular forms—and to the kinds of forms that seem to be more closely related to each other than to other kinds (as we assume, for example, in the case of classicism). With the neurophysiological reduction at stake one has to make the assumption of a certain invariance and a certain recurrence across ages and across cultures. This is not to make any claim for the priority of cognition over context; but to say that no style is unideological is not, in the end, to say a great deal.

It may perhaps be felt that such expectations are pitched too high. One cannot, after all, expect art historians to undertake tasks of which they are not capable (say, neurophysiology). But to pose the cognitive question is, in the first instance, to insist on full theoretical reflexivity; and, in the second, to suggest one way in which students of the history of images may enter into the dialogue with a field from which it has perhaps wrongly alienated itself. Even if the latter hope is too ambitious, the former is simply to reclaim the potential of psychological analysis—*mutatis mutandis*—for the historical endeavor.

**I**n any event, a more rigorous insistence on both the conscious and the unconscious political implications of

classical and classicizing styles may help to purify art history of loose talk about classicism. Since Wölfflin there has not been much progress. Talk of classicism has been mixed promiscuously with talk of classical epochs and classical mentalities. Rationality and classicism have become uncritically tautologous. When rational epochs—as they are called—are deemed classical, and the seemingly unclassical works they are said to contain are called “unclassical” (or even, say, “baroque”), then the confusions become clear, as in any number of surveys, including many volumes of the Pelican History of Art series. There may be apologists who more rigorously claim that the only way to deal with the untidiness of history is to see the stylistic manifestations of a particular period or area binomially, but in such cases one has again to raise the problem of cognition, since some claim is also being made for binary operations of mind. These days this may be moot; but the problem is for other fields to delineate.

In the papers presented here, therefore, the reader will not find definitions of the classical, since each writer knew that it might be defined in different ways; they also knew that there was no one such thing at all. Instead, readers will find a consistent search for the relations between style and ideology in a variety of different cultures, and for adequate ways of viewing those relations, usually from outside. The dialectic of classicism and power emerged as the main theme of the symposium. What did not emerge, and what will not, therefore, be found in these pages is any attempt to examine the relations between style and cognition. Of course such relations are implicit throughout; but for any sketch of the possibilities of the study of the relations between social and aesthetic style (on the one hand) and the structures of mind and behavior (on the other), the history of art still remains unprepared.

#### Notes

- 1 “The Problem of Classicism,” 1986 Annual Meeting of the College Art Association, New York.
- 2 I do not here refer specifically to the crudely generalizing way in which “classic” is used to refer to the notional epitome of a period taken in the broadest sense, as when people speak or write of the classic moments within particular periods or cultures. They speak of “the classic eighteenth century” or “classic eighteenth-century snuffboxes”; but obviously such use is related to the authoritative canonical senses of the term, as when one refers to classic snuffboxes (or, indeed, the classic snuffbox). It may be possible to codify the chief characteristics of snuffboxes and then determine which particular one (or group) partakes of most of them; and then call that one (or group) classic. But by and large this adjectival use of “classic” betrays more clearly than most other usages the ideological and contextually skewed dimensions of the term. Judgments like these also clearly betray the ways in which they depend on notional agreements between the form of groups of objects; and with the attribution of a common spirit to a particular period or culture (or to a large enough segment of one or the other).
- 3 One doesn’t have to think very long before one generates the methodological and historiographic ironies. “Primitive” art forms are often taken, in the West at least, to precede classic art; but with the passage of time what is regarded as primitive easily becomes an ingredient of the classical—and so on.
- 4 I omitted as self-evident the problem of the dictionary meanings and the semantic differences between terms like “classic,” “classicizing,” “classical” (cf., also n. 2 above). One might, of course, have asked about the degree to which such terms are loosely synonymous and the extent to which they preserve categorical differences; but the parameters of this particular kind of problem emerge, I think, with sufficient clarity in the contributions printed here.

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