

The Implicit Politics of Physical Beauty and of Artistic Taste in the Aesthetics of Winckelmann

Aura Yanping Gao

Abstract: *This essay argues that Winckelmann’s analysis of the “Greek profile,” a study of what he described as a critical feature in the facial contour of good Greek statues, has its implicit political issue relating to racism, anthropology, and social hierarchy. Focusing on this artistic-political nexus, I begin with the Greek profile, then consider how the superiority of Greek physiognomy and culture introduces factors of environmental privilege and racial superiority, and finally turn to the implicit politics of Winckelmann’s theory of artistic taste.*

Keywords: *Winckelmann, Greek profile, physiognomy, racism, climate theory*

Introduction

In the process of empowering German culture to rebuild its national identity during the Enlightenment period, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), author of the influential *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* and widely recognized as the father of art history and archaeology, based his thinking on the study of Greek culture and particularly Greek plastic art. He called his people to imitate the greatness of the Greeks in order to cultivate themselves and achieve, in Germany, a greater culture than currently existed. His admiration for the Greeks as culturally preferable to other civilizations, however, had implications and consequences beyond art history and archeology. It strongly influenced the cultural theories (and resultant attitudes of cultural politics) among German philosophers, especially Hegel’s, where the elements of cultural racism and Eurocentrism become far more explicit. Today, we can better appreciate some of the problematic dimensions of Winckelmann’s views. For example, his analysis of what he called the “Greek profile,” a study of what he described as a key feature in the facial contour of good Greek statues, relates not only to the environmental factors of climate but to physiognomic views that contributed to cultural racism, which was also encouraged by developments in European anthropology. Winckelmann’s views suggest politically problematic hierarchies not only relating to the beauty ideal of the human body but also to the sociocultural conditions necessary for the proper appreciation of artistic beauty, in other words to the politics of the judgment of taste, a central concept for eighteenth-century aesthetics that still has relevance for debates today regarding the logic of aesthetic evaluation and the relative value of high versus

popular art. My paper is structured on three issues of this artistic-political nexus. I begin with the Greek profile, then consider how the superiority of Greek physiognomy and culture introduces factors of environmental privilege and racial superiority, and I ultimately turn to the politics of Winckelmann's theory of artistic taste, although implicit.

I. The Greek profile

In his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764) whose English translation is titled *History of the Art of Antiquity*, Winckelmann writes that the “the so-called Greek profile is the chief characteristic of high beauty. This profile consists of a nearly straight or gently concave line, which describes the forehead and nose on youthful heads, especially female ones” (Winckelmann 2006, 210).¹ The key to the Greek profile for Winckelmann mainly lies in this approximately straight line between the forehead and the nose. Although his discussion primarily focused on sculpture, Winckelmann also thinks a portrait would not be beautiful without this profile. In “Erinnerung über die Betrachtung der Werke der Kunst” (*Recalling the observation of Works of Art*), he argues: “This line is so inherent to the beauty that a face that appears beautiful when seen from the front, would lose much charm when seen from the side, when its profile deviating from the gentle line” (Winckelmann 2020,5). Winckelmann mentions in “*Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*” (“Thoughts on Imitation of Greek Works and the Art of Sculpture,” 1754) that the image of the Greek profile appears very often in Greek statues and coins, “The profile of the brow and nose of gods and goddesses is almost a straight line.” Additionally he remarks, “From the same ideas the Romans formed their Empresses on their coins” (Winckelmann 1972,65).

According to Winckelmann, the excellence of the “Greek profile” has at least two common traits. First, the line of the profile is continuous. In “Erinnerung über die Betrachtung der Werke der Kunst,” Winckelmann argues: “The form of true beauty has no abrupt or broken parts. The ancients used this as the basis for the profile of a young man; which is neither linear nor whimsical, though seldom to be met with in nature ... It consists in the soft coalescence of the brow with the nose” (Winckelmann 2020,5). Winckelmann's criterion implies that one should avoid abrupt breaks in the alignment between the parts in order to maintain a continuity of line on the face. “Broken, pitted jaw and cheek lines cannot be the form of true beauty” (Winckelmann 2020,5). From this, Winckelmann argues that the Medici Venus with its more collapsed jaw could not be regarded as highly beautiful” (Winckelmann 2020, 5). (See Fig.1).

¹ I use Harry Francis Mallgrave's translation, *History of Art of Antiquity*, in this article, but occasionally I might make some changes according to the German text which I refer to: Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, Text: Erste Auflage Dresden 1764, herausgegeben von Adolf H. Borbein, Thomas W. Gaethgens, Johannes Irmischer und Max Kunze (Main am Rhein: Verlag Philipp Von Zabern, 2002).

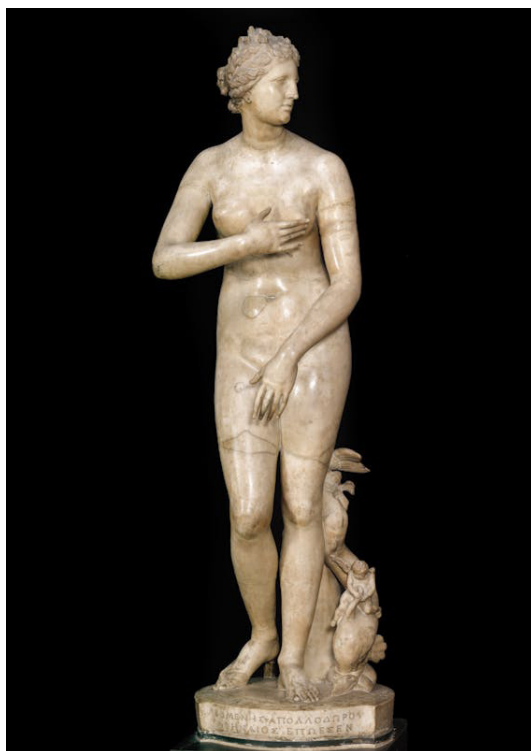


Figure 1 Medici Venus, Late 2nd century B. C. - Early 1st century B. C., Uffizi.

Secondly, for Winckelmann this nearly straight or gently concave profile outline never falls into thinness or sharpness, it maintains a certain degree of fullness (it is *völlige*, as the German term denotes). He writes, “On a really beautiful face, the protruding parts are 'blunt' (*stumpf*) and the protruding parts are not 'broken,' for example, the eye bone is raised in a gentle way, and the jaw forms a well-rounded arch” (Winckelmann 2020,5). The “blunt” (rather than sharp), gentle and continuous line create a quality of “fullness” in the looks of the face. In “Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst,” Winckelmann points out that being round is different from being bulging or bloated (*überflüssigen*). In contrast, to Winckelmann’s Greek idea, he sees the images created by more modern painters (i.e. those of the Renaissance) as either failing in beauty by being excessively full (hence bulging) or being too thin, i.e. not full enough. According to Winckelmann, even the great Michelangelo could not create a portrait whose profile was properly full in roundness yet not bulging or bloated.

Among Greek statues, the formation of the Greek profile also depends on the appropriateness of the structure of the various parts of the face. This requires that the forehead should be low; the eye forms an angle that opens toward the nose. With the head pointing in this direction, the angle of the eye plunges toward the nose, and the outline of the eye terminates at the height of its curve or arch, that is, the eyeball itself is in profile (Winckelmann 2006, 210-212). Winckelmann also explains, “The more oblique the eyes, as in cats, the more this line deviates from the basic and fundamental form of the face, which is a cross, by which the face is divided equally, from the crown of the head down, lengthwise and widthwise, such that the vertical line bisects the nose, while the horizontal line passes through the eye sockets. When the eye lies obliquely, then it cuts across a line drawn horizontally through the eye's center” (Winckelmann 2006, 193-194). The nose should never be flat, for the stronger the indentation of the nose, the more it deviates from beautiful form. The lower lip is supposed to be thicker than the upper lip, and the chin is always

full and flat, so that the profile of the head acquires a continuous and full line, implying a noble and cheerful look. Thus, anything that might impair the straightness and fullness of the contours is not welcomed. For example, a flat nose would make the line between the forehead and the nose sag, while a high forehead or a small and flat chin would not contribute to the fullness of the profile.

In point of fact, however, this line does not always exist in Greek art. The profile of satyrs, the drunken woodland gods, does not have this line; the satyr has a sunken nose; and the heroic figure Hercules sometimes has prominent eye bones and thus a deep depression between them. In his *Geschichte*, Winckelmann defines the image of fauns as comic elegance, because the faun's upturned corners of the mouth and flat nose together combine to create a sunken profile. Later artists (such as Bernini and others) failed or refused to express Winckelmann's preferred Greek profile in their art, because they thought the line did not actually exist in reality, whereas Winckelmann (influenced by Platonic ideas) focused on the idealized beauty of the human form rather than the accurate representation of a particular concrete person. As we see, in Bernini's sculpture "The Ecstasy of Teresa" the contours of the faces of both angels and nuns are concave and thus are nothing like the Greek profile. Similarly, Winckelmann also observes that Italian Renaissance painters, especially from the Roman school, do not create the ideal Greek profile. In Federico Barocci's painting, some of the figures have a concave nose, while Pietro da Cortona "is known for heads with small chins, flattened underneath" (Winckelmann 2006,193).

This is not to say that Winckelmann does not recognize that there are practical reasons for shaping the contours differently than his ideal Greek profile. He notes the visual constraints of viewing sculptures presented in the open air and through distanced viewing. He mentions that the eyes of the ideal head are always set deeper than in nature and that the upper part of the eyeball appears very prominent; he justifies this not only through his belief that deep set eyes are a feature of grandeur but also because when viewed from a distance, the deep-set eyes can impress the spectator more, while also bringing light and shadow to the face, adding vigor and strength (Winckelmann 2006,211). The modern German sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand also points out that the clarity of the outline was crucial to Greek sculptures placed in the open air (Hildebrand, 1907,96)²

Inspired by Winckelmann's Greek art studies and nearly seventy years after the publication of Winckelmann's *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1754), the philosopher Hegel praised Winckelmann for having "opened up for the spirit a new organ and totally new modes of treatment" of art and culture (Hegel 1975 II. 63). Hegel interprets Winckelmann's "Greek profile" in his lectures on aesthetics and fine art and strengthens the idealism of Winckelmann's approach to the extreme. Drawing on the Dutch physiologist Petrus Camper³, who "characterized this line more precisely as the line of beauty in the face since he finds in it the chief difference between the formation of the human face and the animal profile" (Hegel 1975 II., 728).⁴ Hegel praises the Greek profile as a symbol of human

2 Adolf von Hildebrand writes here, "The clearness required of a representation necessitates a somewhat different treatment of the work according as it is to be placed in the open air or indoors. In the open air, clearness is obtained by means of a characteristic outline, a silhouette. This is necessary whenever sculpture is to be effective at a distance, because the inner visual details gradually disappear as the figure recedes. A clear and expressive silhouette carries farther than any other characterization of an object. The Greeks made great use of silhouette in order that their sculpture might appear clear and effective at a distance."

3 For Hegel's utilization of Camper's theory, see Steven Decaroli, "The Greek Profile: Hegel's Aesthetics and the Implications of a Pseudo-Science," *The Philosophical Forum* Vol. 37. No. 2 (2006): 138-151.

4 Hegel writes here, "In general, this line does in fact provide a very significant distinction between the human and animal appearance. In animals the mouth and the nasal bone do form a more or less straight line, but the specific projection of the animal's snout which presses forward as if to get as near as possible to the consumption of food is essentially determined by its relation to the skull on which the ear is

spirituality: “(i) it is that facial formation in which the expression of the spirit puts the merely natural wholly into the background, and (ii) it is the one which most escapes fortuitousness of form without exhibiting mere regularity and banning every sort of individuality” (Hegel 1975 II.,730-731).

Hegel’s description is powerfully based on Winckelmann’s observation on Greek statues in his historical study of ancient art with its explanation and highlighting of the ideal of the Greek profile. However, whereas Winckelmann’s preference for the Greek profile is meant to affirm the superiority of Greek aesthetics, Hegel transforms it to an ideal of beauty conveying the universal value of spirituality. Hegel argues that the upper part of the face, the forehead, is indicative of the theoretical and spiritual faculties, while the lower part of the face – the mouth and jaw – is indicative of practical activity. In Greek sculpture, the protruding forehead and deeper-set eyes make the intellectual part of the face predominate, thus suggesting “a depth and undistracted inner life, blindness to external things, and a withdrawal into the essence of individuality” (Hegel 1975 II.,734). The nose, as the feature connecting between the theoretical part and practical part, is made more akin to the forehead and therefore, by being drawn up towards the spiritual part, acquires itself a spiritual expression and character” (Hegel 1975 II.,730) . To show a certain absence of desire, the ideal lips should not protrude like an animal, such protrusions suggesting an uncontrolled desire for seizing food. Hegel cites the lips of the artist and thinker Friedrich Schiller as an example of the nobler, more spiritual shape of lips (see Fig.2), alongside the examples from Greek sculpture, and he adds that a full chin gives the impression of certain satiety and repose.⁵ We can already see here how this critique of flat noses and protruding lips has politically problematic racial overtones, suggesting that Asian and African features fall short of beauty and spirituality. We will elaborate this issue in the next section of this paper.



Figure 2 “Friedrich Schiller,” by Gemalt von A. Graff, from 1786 to 1791.
Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

placed further upward or downward, so that the line drawn to the root of the nose or to the upper jaw (where the teeth are inset) forms with the skull an acute angle, not a right angle as is the case in man.”

⁵ Decaroli suggests Hegle’s interpretation of Schiller’s well-proportioned lips is based on Lavater’s highly favorable estimation of facial traits. See Steven Decaroli, “The Greek Profile: Hegel’s Aesthetics and the Implications of a Pseudo-Science,” *The Philosophical Forum* Vol. 37. No. 2 (2006): 150.

II.

Winckelmann has an explanation for the existence of the Greek profile as an idealized beauty created by talented Greek artists. According to him, their superior, idealizing art was a product of actual Greek life. In *Gedanken*, Winckelmann claims that the idealized Greek statues are "not only nature which the votaries of the Greeks find in their work" (Winckelmann 1972, 62). The Greek profile was made "according to those ideas, exalted above the pitch of material models" (Winckelmann 1972, 65). This profile is indeed an idealized elevation but it is based on the beautiful natural contours of the Greeks. He claims it is grounded in the reality of the environment surrounding Greek artists, while asserting that this profile line is not seen in the art of other peoples in ancient times because those peoples or cultures lacked the appropriate models in reality to form this ideal. For example, the real physical appearance of Egyptians is not able or suitable for inspiring the ideal of beauty that the Greek profile expresses.

In his *Geschichte*, while celebrating the "Greek profile," Winckelmann writes that "the most readily seen proof of the Greeks' superior form...is that among them there are no flattened noses, which is the greatest disfiguration to the face" (Winckelmann 2006,120). He thus seems to denigrate or mock the appearance of Chinese, Japanese, Egyptian, Kalmyk and Moors because of their oblique eyes, flat nose, thick mouths etc. "Such eyes, therefore, when found among us, and in Chinese, Japanese and some Egyptian heads, in profile, are departures from the standard. The flattened nose of the Chinese, Kalmucks, and other distant nations, is also a deviation, for it mars the unity of the forms according to which the other parts of the body have been shaped. There is no reason why the nose should be so concave, instead of following the line of the forehead; however, if the forehead and nose were formed out of a straight bone, as in animals, such a line would contradict the variety of our nature" (Winckelmann 2006,194). He immediately goes on to critique the looks of Africans and other non-Europeans. "The thick, pouting mouth that the Moors have in common with the apes in their land is a superfluous growth and a swelling caused by the heat of their climate, just as our lips swell up from heat or from sharp, salty moisture or, in some men, with violent anger. The small eyes of the inhabitants of remote northern and eastern lands are consistent with their defective stature, which is short and small" (Winckelmann 2006,26). In his *Gedanken* Winckelmann expressed the same idea, "According to those ideas, exalted above the pitch of material models, the Greeks formed their gods and heroes: the profile of the brow and nose of gods and goddesses is almost a straight line... Perhaps this profile was as peculiar to the ancient Greeks, as flat nosed and little eyes to the Kalmyk and Chinese" (Winckelmann 1972,65). For Winckelmann, the fact that the Kalmyk and Chinese have flat noses and small and oblique eyes is something that destroys the unity of the form of the face and constitutes a deviation from the norm of beauty identified with the Greek profile.

Why were the Greeks physically suitable to provide the materials for the idealization of beauty, both in face and in figure? As a staunch supporter of anthropological climate theory, Winckelmann deems climate to be crucially influential in many human domains, inclusive not only physical matters but also language and culture. To back his point, he likes to quote the main ancient proponents of that theory: Polybius, Cicero, Hippocrates, and Lucian. In reality, he draws much of his line of argument from his contemporaries, such as Abbé Dubos's *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, (1719) and Baron de Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des loix* (1748). Winckelmann maintains that climate affects not only the physical form of people but also their inclinations. He believed that in countries with a mild climate in the south of the Alps, such as Italy and Greece, people are graced with a more noble appearance.

In *Gedanken*, Winckelmann praised the Greeks: “The most beautiful human body of ours would perhaps be as much inferior to the most beautiful Greek one” (Winckelmann 1972,62). In Winckelmann’s view, the closer one was to the Greek climate, the more beautiful, sublime, and strong were nature’s human creations. In other words, the temperate climate of Greece plays a crucial role in the creation of the beauty of Greek bodies, which in turn plays a role in their ability to perceive and create idealized beauty in art. He argues that due to its geographic location “between hot and cold,” Greece benefits from luxuriant vegetation, which contributes to healthy food, strong and well-developed bodies, and handsome and harmonious features. People there don’t have a flattened nose, which ruins the straight line between the forehead and the nose. To quote Winckelmann directly from his *Geschichte*, “the closer that nature draws to the Greek climate, the more beautiful, lofty, and powerful in appearance are her human creations. Thus, in the most beautiful part of Italy we rarely find people with incomplete, ill-defined, or insignificant facial features, as is often the case on the other side of Alps. Rather some appear sublime, some clever, and their facial form is generally large, full and harmonious in its parts. This superior appearance is so evident that the head of the most negligible man among the common people could be sued for the most sublime historical painting; and among the women of this class, it would not be difficult to find a model for Juno in the most negligible place. In Naples, which more than any other part of Italy enjoys a mild climate, and more constant and more moderate weather because it lies very close to the latitude of mainland Greece, one can frequently find forms and appearances that could serve as models for a beautiful ideal and which in terms of facial form, and particularly the strongly defined and harmonious parts of the same, appear to be created for sculpture, as it were” (Winckelmann 2006, 119).

Whereas Baron de Montesquieu located the geographic border between North and South Europe at the Apennine mountains in Italy,⁶ Winckelmann took the Alps as the geographically determining line of division. Just as Montesquieu’s contrast between North and South was elaborated in terms of religion and politics, Winckelmann also highlighted the cultural distinction between South and North. However, he reversed the hierarchy of the North’s superiority over the South, at least in terms of physical appearance and cultural sensibility. As mentioned above, in Winckelmann’s theory, the southern European countries Italy and Greece are on the superior side, while the northern countries, including his own country Germany, are on the inferior side. Two corollaries can be drawn from this. First, Winckelmann’s Hellenism could not be automatically transformed into Eurocentrism, since for him, Europe is not a unified concept. Second, Winckelmann is far from a German chauvinist. Indeed he expresses dissatisfaction and harsh criticism regarding the country where he was born, while praising other peoples and cultures. However, his glorification of Hellenism inspired others in developing a rationale for racism and the superiority of the German people.

Winckelmann’s notion of the ideal Greek profile is clearly not a mere aesthetic whim or idealist fancy, but is instead grounded in principles of physical anthropology and environmental shaping. That is why some contemporary scholars, like Elisabeth Décultot, have revisited Winckelmann’s writings in the project of eighteenth-century anthropological and ethnological research (Décultot 2018,69-80). The anthropological and ethnological implication in Winckelmann’s work was developed by Petrus Camper (1722–1789), a Dutch surgeon, skilled anatomical illustrator, and avid numismatist. It is he, whom Hegel cited as his main scientific source for affirming the idealism of the Greek profile. But it was Winckelmann whom Petrus

6 For a very helpful clarification of Montesquieu’s politics of south and north in Europe, see Roberto M. Dainotto, *Europe(in theory)*, chapter 2, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Camper praises for having the observational skill to notice and describe the Greek profile, noting how he “enjoyed the opportunity of consulting the excellent observations of Winckelmann” (Camper 1794 ,4).

Drawing on Winckelmann’s description of the “Greek profile,” but appealing to the principles of the alleged science of phrenology, Camper developed his theory of the “facial line” or “facial angle.” This is the angle measured at the intersection between a horizontal line drawn from the earlobe to the tip of the nose and an approximately vertical line from the top of the forehead to the advancing part of the upper jawbone. Adopting this system, Camper measured various species of animals including varieties of apes and humans from different races. His findings noted that the tailed monkey had a facial angle of 42° while the orangutan had an angle of 58° . As for human races, he found that the Angolan and the Kalmuck both had angles of 70° while the European had a facial angle of 80° (See Fig.3). In sculpture, due to the idealization Winckelmann suggested, the facial angle in works of Roman statuary ranged from 85° to 90° , and in Greek statuary an angle that reached 100° (Hodne 2020, 19). Echoing Winckelmann’s judgements, Camper claimed that the Apollo Belvedere represented the embodiment of perfect human beauty, while the flat noses of Chinese and Kalmucks were deemed an offence against beauty.⁷

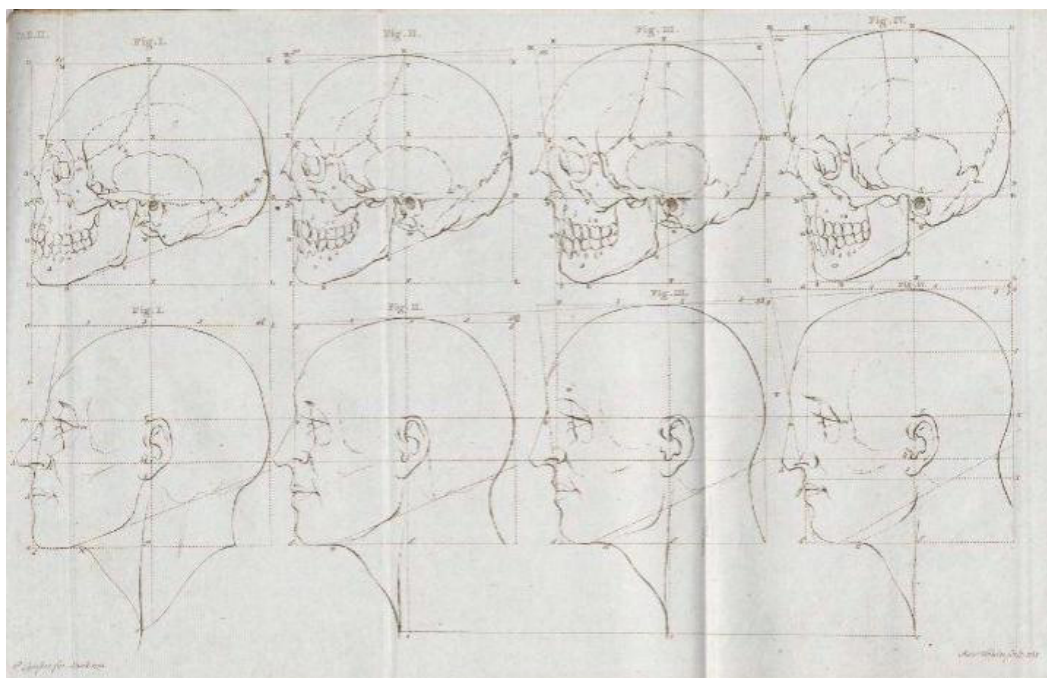


Figure 3 Petrus Camper facial angles by son Adriaan Gilles ,1791. Koninklijke Bibliotheek, public domain.

As Hegel claims, Camper “not only finds the chief difference between the formation of the human face and the animal profile, but also he pursues the modification of this line in the different races of mankind” (Hegel 1975 II,728). drawing from the observations of Winckelmann. It is therefore historically clear that Winckelmann’s artistic study and privileging of the Greeks over African and Asian bodies and art helped inspire the science of Western racism, later developed by the scientists Josiah Nott and George Gliddon’s in their well-known book *Types of Mankind*

⁷ For Petrus Camper’s research project especially basing on Winckelmann’s work, see Lasse Hodne, “Winckelmann’s Apollo and the Physiognomy of Race.” *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* No. 59 (2020), 19-21.

(1854). As George L. Mosse confirms, the body stereotypes that emerged from Winckelmann's analyses of ancient art "have a direct bearing upon the appeal of racism, and upon its relation to nationalism ... [because] racism from its origin to modern times adopted a neoclassical male aesthetic, encouraged by anthropologists who liked to contrast natives and Europeans based on their resemblances to or differences from the idealized Greeks" (Mosse 1995, 165–166).

III.

Through his theory of how human nature is shaped by climate, Winckelmann, in his aesthetics and art theory, argues for a correspondence between the presence of beautiful human bodies and superior aesthetic sensibility. The claim is that the climate not only shapes the human body but also influences its inclinations and sensitivities. Moreover, the presence of a multitude of beautiful bodies provides excellent materials for developing a discriminating taste for bodily beauty both in life and in art. Winckelmann cogently argued that through its favorable climate, Greek culture fostered athletic pursuits that developed and displayed the beautiful body and that therefore also inspired the representation of beautiful bodies in art. These factors helped develop in the Greeks an especially refined aesthetic sensibility.

Before Winckelmann, the French thinkers Montesquieu and Jean-Baptiste Dubos asserted that climate partly determines our sensibilities. Montesquieu pointed out in *The Spirit of Laws* (1748) that the temper of the mind and the passions of the heart are extremely different in different climates. "A cold air constricts the extremities of the external fibers of the body; this increases their elasticity, and favors the return of the blood from the extreme parts to the heart. It contracts those very fibers; consequently, it increases also their force. On the contrary, a warm air relaxes and lengthens the extremes of the fibers; of course, it diminishes their force and elasticity (Montesquieu 1989 ,254-255). Dubos argues in *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719) that very cold weather freezes our imagination while hot weather stimulates the body as much as the spirit; hence the temperate zone of moderate weather is the best for humans in terms of developing their spirit and sensibilities. Winckelmann holds a similar view, that climates with mild weather poised between warm and cold contribute to the residents of such climates having not only a more beautiful appearance but also greater sensibility to beauty, the culture and climates of Greece and Italy exemplifying such connections. "Their imagination was not exaggerated, ... and their senses, which acted through quick and sensitive nerves on a fine-woven brain, discovered instantly the various characteristics of a subject and concerned themselves chiefly with reflecting on that subject's beauty" (Winckelmann 2006, 121). In contrast, people living on the other side of the Alps, such as the Germans, are physically less attractive and have lower aesthetic sensibilities as well.

Winckelmann applies this understanding of levels of sensibility still further in his observations concerning taste in his own contemporary European society. What is particularly interesting is that he adds a sociological or sociopolitical dimension to the climatic anthropological approach (Shusterman 2019,19). He argues that the physically beautiful men of noble social rank are more likely to be sensible to the beauty of art. Winckelmann formulates this theory in his *Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst und dem Unterrichte in derselben* ("Treatise on the Capacity for Sensitivity to the Beautiful in Art and the Method of Teaching It",1763), an essay addressed to the young baron Friedrich Reinhold von Berg, with whom Winckelmann fell in love when the nobleman visited Rome. Winckelmann takes von Berg as an example of the linking of somatic beauty and good taste. "Your physique led me to conclude the

existence of that which I desired, and I discovered in a beautiful body a soul made to be virtuous, one that is gifted with the appreciation of beauty” (Winckelmann 2013,149).

We should remember that Winckelmann was openly gay and had a number of young lovers. It is not unreasonable to connect part of his admiration for Greek bodies and Greek culture to the Greek traditions of pederasty that find expression in Platonic dialogues like the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, even if Plato’s Athenian finally rejects homosexual love in his later work the *Laws*. However, Winckelmann privileges youth over adults more generally in terms of aesthetic sensibility. He argues that the natural gift for perceiving the beautiful in art is stronger in young people because they have “greater sensitivity,” and this superior sensitivity is the somaesthetic result of their having young bodies that are typically in better condition, more impressionable, and more vigorous than older bodies; hence they have greater capacities of perception and of feeling, which makes them “more passionate,” and this, in turn, makes them more capable of appreciating beauty, which, for Winckelmann is a matter of “feeling” (*Empfindung*)(Winckelmann 2013,152).

The somaesthetic dimension of Winckelmann’s artistic theories have been noted in earlier work by me and others. Despite of that, Winckelmann’s theory of artistic perception and judgment relies heavily on previous discussions of taste as a mental faculty distinct from merely bodily, sensual gustatory taste. These discussions of the mental sense of taste developed in seventeenth-century Europe and eventually flourished in eighteenth-century British aesthetics, most notably in Francis Hutcheson (famous also for his theory of the moral sense) and David Hume. German aesthetics drew on this notion of taste. Kant’s aesthetic theory’s analysis of the beautiful, for example, focuses on “the judgment of taste,” while Alexander Baumgarten, the founder of modern aesthetics and an influence on Kant, also employed the notion of taste as not limited to physical taste. Winckelmann follows Baumgarten (who was his teacher when Winckelmann was a student at Halle University) by distinguishing a mental sense of taste, and more generally a distinction between “inner” and “outer sense.”

Winckelmann puts more emphasis on the inner sense. For beauty to be properly perceived, the outer and inner senses must both perform successfully. “The former must be accurate and the latter sensitive and fine” (Winckelmann 2013, 153). Describing the qualities characterizing this “finer inner sense” for beauty, Winckelmann writes, “This inner sense... must be ready, delicate, and imaginative [*fertig, zart, und bildlich*]” (Winckelmann 2013,155). As for this imaginative capacity of the inner sense, he argues that this “third characteristic of [beauty’s] inner feeling... consists in a lively depiction of the Beautiful...[and] is a result of the first two and cannot exist without them. But its strength grows, as memory does, through practice” (Winckelmann 2013,155).

The idea that one’s sense of beauty develops “through practice” is something that calls for attention from a sociopolitical perspective, because it involves issues of social and economic privilege in the pursuit of artistic beauty and understanding. We should note that not only did Winckelmann keenly appreciate the beauty of youth, he also greatly admired the class of nobility and tended to attribute to both a superior capacity for taste, even if this superiority is not innate. Winckelmann acknowledges that “like the poetic spirit, [the capacity for sensing beauty in art] can develop only poorly by itself, and without instruction and teaching it would remain empty and lifeless”(Winckelmann 2013,150). Although Winckelmann believes sensitivity to beauty is an innate gift, he insists that the proper development and cultivation of taste depends on education and other cultural conditions, which themselves were much conditioned by class hierarchy in eighteenth century. For cultivating fine inner feeling, Winckelmann strongly advises young

people interested in art to observe original works of art instead of copies or reproductions, because “a true and complete knowledge of the Beautiful in art cannot be gained in any other way than through contemplation of the original images themselves” (Winckelmann 2013,175). The more original works of excellence one was exposed to, the better one could practice and experience in discriminating the qualities of beauty.

However, Winckelmann also recognizes that at his point in time, such observation of numerous originals can be properly done primarily in Rome and at institutions belonging to the rich aristocracy of the nobles or of the Church (Winckelmann 2013, 157-158). Winckelmann insists that “without being in Rome,” “one must be content, as many lovers have to be, with the glimpse of a sigh, that is to say, with valuing highly small things and what is mediocre(Winckelmann 2013, 158). In his letter[1763/1764] to his student Herrn von Baron Riedesel, Winckelmann mentions, whoever has already stayed in Rome for more than one year really doesn’t need to ask his advice in art (Winckelmann 2020,63). More generally, he maintains that, even among nobles, it is important to dwell “in a large city” in which quality artworks are located and accessible rather than being a nobleman who is confined to the countryside. Further, Winckelmann affirms that the proper appreciation of art and the true exercise of taste require having a strong degree of economic independence. This means not only being free from worrying about how “to earn [income] sufficient for their daily bread” but “also [to] have the means, opportunity, and leisure” to access and study art in a concentrated way. Leisure, Winckelmann claims, “is especially necessary. For the contemplation of works of art is, as Pliny says, for people of leisure” (Winckelmann 2020,156). Besides all these requirements for successfully pursuing practice in appreciating the beautiful in art, a good teacher is further required to give “oral instruction.” Here again the conditions of cultivation of the sense of beauty in art seems to imply class (and gender) privilege, as only boys from the nobler and wealthier strata of society could attract and afford real experts in artistic beauty for such “private teaching” and could enjoy the social power for access to the private homes and institutions where fine original artworks could be observed(Winckelmann 2020,157). We see here an elitist approach to beauty resting on while reinforcing clear sociopolitical hierarchies: aristocratic over common; urban over rural; rich (in leisure and access) over poor. Winckelmann’s complacent elitist stance can be contrasted to the British art critic Jonathan Richardson, who, in *Discourses, An Argument in behalf of the Science of a Connoisseur* (1719), argued that art appreciation could be a means of promoting popular enlightenment and thus contribute to social democracy (Disselkamp and Testa 2017, 195).

Conclusion

By focusing on Johan Joachim Winckelmann, the eighteenth-century German thinker generally claimed as the father of art history and archeology, this essay has shown the intimate connections between, on the one hand, his artistic notions of representing the beauty of the human body and aesthetic theories about our differential human capacities for perceiving it, and, on the other hand, anthropological views concerning the physiognomy of bodily beauty and its relation to climate and to racial difference. These connections made by Winckelmann have problematic political dimensions suggesting European supremacy in both human form and cultural distinction. Moreover, the political injustice of this racial hierarchy is compounded by assertions of aristocratic privilege. The aesthetic ideal thus becomes the young, handsome European nobleman, even if Winckelmann began with the idealized ancient Greek profile. This European privilege, rooted in ancient Greek art, was adopted both by influential philosophers like Hegel

and influential theorists of race. The connection between quality of attractive somaesthetic appearance and the quality of sharpness or insight of aesthetic perception is surely debatable; the connection of good artistic taste with leisure and the privilege of access and education for “practice” in judging art is much more difficult to challenge.

References

- Beiser, Frederick C. (2009). *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing*. New York: Oxford University.
- Camper, Petrus. (1794). *The Works of the Late Professor Camper, on The Connexion between the Science of Anatomy and The Arts of Drawing, Painting, Statuary, &c. &c.* Trans. Thomas Cogan. London: C. Dilly.
- Dainotto, Roberto M. (2007). *Europe (in theory)*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Dubos, Jean-Baptiste. (1748). *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*. Trans. Thomas Nugent. London : Printed for J. Nourse.
- Decaroli, Steven. (2006). “The Greek Profile: Hegel’s Aesthetics and the Implications of a Pseudo-Science.” In *The Philosophical Forum* Vol. 37. No. 2, pp.138-151.
- Décultot, Elisabeth. (2018). “Eighteenth-Century Anthropological and Ethnological Studies of Ancient Greece: Winckelmann, Herder, Caylus, and Kant.” In *Kant and his German Contemporaries: Volume II: Aesthetics, History, Politics, and Religion*. Ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hildebrand, Adolf von. (1907). *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*. Trans. Max Friedrich Meyer & Robert Morris Ogden. New York: G. E. Stechert & co..
- Hegel, Georg. (1975). *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols, Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Hegel, Georg. (2019). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. Terry Pinkard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hodne, Lasse. (2020). “Winckelmann’s Apollo and the Physiognomy of Race.” In *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, No. 59, pp.6–35.
- Mosse, George L. (1995). “Racism and Nationalism.” In *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 1, no. 2 (1995), pp.165–166.
- Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*. (1989). Ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, Harold Samuel Stone. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nott, Josiah. & Gliddon, George. *Types of Mankind*. (1854). London: J. B. Lippincott & Company.
- Shusterman, Richard. (2018). “Winckelmann on Taste: A Somaesthetic Perspective.” In *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 76 (2), pp.175-186.
- Shusterman, Richard. (2019). “Body and Society in Winckelmann’s Theory of Artistic Taste.” *AION Series Minor* 1, pp.14-28.
- Winckelmann, Johann. (2020). “Sendschreiben Von der Reise nach Italien. Entwurf und insbesondere nach Roman Herrn M. Franken.” Winckelmann, *Römische Schriften. Text und Kommentar*. Hrsg. von Adolf H. Borbein, Max Kunze und Axel Rügler. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern.

Winckelmann, Johann.(2020). “Erinnerung über die Betrachtung der Werke der Kunst.” In *Römische Schriften: Text und Kommentar*. Ed. Adolf H. Borbein, Max Kunze und Axel Rügler. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern.

Winckelmann, Johann. (2013). *On Art, Architecture, and Archaeology*. Trans.& ed. David Carter. Rochester:Camden House.

Winckelmann, Johann. (1972). *Winckelmann: Writings on Art*. Ed. David Irwin, London: Phaidon Press Limited.

Winckelmann, Johann. (2016). *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, in *Dresdner Schriften*. Ed. Borbein, Max Kunze and Axel Rügler, Mainz: Verlag Philipp Von Zabern.

Winckelmann, Johann. *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums, Text: Erste Auflage Dresden 1764, Zweite Auflage Wien 1776*. Ed. Adolf H. Borbein, Thomas W. Gaethgens, Johannes Irmscher und Max Kunze. Main am Rhein: Verlag Philipp Von Zabern.

Winckelmann, Johann. (2006). *History of the Art of Antiquity*. Trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave. Los Angeles: Getty Publications.