Contents

Foreword ix

Acknowledgments xi

PART 1: CLASSICAL

Chapter 1 Democracy and the Greek Ideal 1
Nicholas Gage, Introduction to The Greek Miracle: Classical Sculpture from the Dawn of Democracy, 2
Robert Hughes, The Masterpiece Road Show, 6
Eva C. Keats, Introduction to The Reign of the Phallus, 10

Chapter 2 The Parthenon and Patrimony 14
Gavin Stamp, Keeping our Marbles, 15
Melina Mercouri, 1986 Speech to the Oxford Union, 21

Chapter 3 The Classical Tradition 29
Michael Greenhalgh, What is Classicism?, 30
Henri Zerner, Classicism as Power, 32

Chapter 4 Portraits and Politics 37
Sheldon Nodelman, How to Read a Roman Portrait, 39
Arm Marie Seward Barry, Political Images: Public Relations, Advertising, and Propaganda, 45
Chapter 3: The Classical Tradition

Classicism as Power

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There are many uses of the words “classical” and “classicism.” Each of us may approve, or disapprove of one or the other. What interests me here is as much their diversity—one might even say their incompatibility—as what they term “classical” primarily refers to Greco-Roman antiquity, and it is extended to periods that draw their inspiration from this ancient classical world, especially the Italian Renaissance or the seventeenth century in France.

There has been an effort to refine the use of the term by narrowing its application. It used to be that all the art of antiquity from Myron to the late Roman Empire was considered classical. As late as the middle of the last century, Delacroix thought that the art of classical antiquity was a unity:

The antique is always even, serene, complete in its details and of an ensemble which is virtually beyond reproach. One would think that its works were done by a single artist: the nuances of style differ in the various periods, but do not take away from a single antique work that peculiar value which all of them owe to that unity of doctrine, to that tradition of strength with reserve and simplicity which the moderns never attained in the arts of design nor perhaps in any of the other arts.1

Today we view the art of Greece and Rome as totally disparate. Historians tend to restrict the classical to the late fifth and early fourth century in Greece and to Roman art of the Augustan period. In Italy, it is only the High Renaissance that now qualifies, whereas many works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are rejected as preclassical, Mannerist, or “classicotizing” rather than properly classical. S. J. Freedberg has gone as far as anyone else towards

One comes to feel that anything can be called classical. The concept of the classical implies the establishment of a norm, of a hierarchy; and what this takes is power. The connotation of class in the social sense in the word "classical" goes a long way back, and is as strong as the original one of the classroom—the classics being the great examples proposed to students. As a suprahistorical concept, then, there is no reason to believe that classicism has any meaning beyond this: the art of authority, authoritative art. The power that gives a chosen kind of art this authority can be at its inception, as in the art of Julius II or Louis XIV, but it can also come later, and appropriate a body of art that already exists. Impressionist painting, for instance, whatever its original status may have been, has become a kind of Park Avenue classicism. And where Brancusi is revered by the dominant culture, Cycladic sculpture appears as classical. The content, the forms involved, seems indefinitely extendable. So that if a hieratic and archaic type of art is dominant, there is no reason why it should not be considered classical in the wider sense of the word.

The fact remains that the art of Greece in the fifth century B.C. has been able, in its various aftermaths, to hold authority over long stretches of our culture. If the classical is simply the art that has authority and power, it is striking to what extent a particular type of art has been able to assume this role (Figure 3). In modern times, in America especially, banks and government buildings have displayed the columns, capitals, and pediments of the Greco-Roman tradition with extraordinary assertiveness. Why it is so remains an interesting question. Of course, one reason may be simply the lasting power of authority, and the association of this art with a glorious moment of Greek history. But this is not enough as an explanation because there have been times when the authority of Greek classicism disappeared. We need to understand how it could reassert itself. I believe it has to do with the development of a particular kind of naturalism in fifth-century Greece and that this kind of naturalism is able to make one believe that the authority of this art is grounded in nature. Then it should no longer surprise us that such an art would be resurrected under different circumstances. What should be better for a power in place than to make us believe that it is not simply there by an act of force, but that its authority is inscribed in nature herself? This rhetoric of nature is obviously present in the sculpture and painting of the Greco-Roman tradition, and it was always understood in its architecture as well. It is worth pointing out that in our century the one kind of architecture that was, at least temporarily, able to displace the Greek-Roman model—the modernist architecture sometimes called the International Style—makes a comparable claim to being grounded in nature, not as the representation of nature but as the direct result of the nature of the materials and the function of the building. Similarly, insofar as the painting of Mondrian made claims to a new kind of classicism, it was on
the ground that it represented the underlying principles of nature, if not its appearance.

I would say this: as a descriptive term for specific historical phenomena, classicism has become narrower and narrower, while as a theoretical tool it has indefinitely expanded. It would be my contention that, as a universal category rather than a specific historical occurrence, classicism means nothing more than an assertion of authority, of power under whatever form. But the urge to naturalize power has favored certain forms of art, principally the kind of naturalism first developed in ancient Greece, and has time and again restored it to a position of authority.

NOTES:

Chapter 4

Portraits and Politics

Portraits are unexpectedly complex images. Most viewers assume that the sole purpose of a portrait is to capture the likeness of the sitter, but portraits do much more than this. They not only record what people look like, but they also present us with information about who the people are and how they want to be seen by others.

One of the most interesting series of portraits in Western art was produced in Rome during the time of the Civil Wars in the first century B.C.E. Initially, modern viewers are struck by the remarkable realism of these works. However, in his article, “How to Read a Roman Portrait,” Sheldon Nodelman suggests that beneath the realistic mask of each Roman portrait lies a carefully conceived political agenda.

These message-conveying portraits can be compared with modern political advertising. As Ann Marie Seward Barry points out, carefully constructed images in politics often create their own larger-than-life reality [Figure 6].