4.3 THE CLASSICAL CANON

As counters to that last point, in this and the following section I shall discuss two different principles on which sculpture has been seen and may be seen as a coherent category. To apply either one is to generate some tension with the other. The first concerns the idea of a classical canon. While there may not be many existing museums or galleries of sculpture, collections of sculpture actually lay at the heart of many early museum foundations, the British Museum among them. The sculpture in question was of a specific type and period. It was Greek and Roman sculpture, with images of the human figure accorded particular prominence. Art history itemises various European renaissances and classical revivals, from the ninth century to the early nineteenth, referring to particular phases when artists and their supporters looked back to Greek and Roman times and deliberately adopted ways of representing that accorded positive authority to classical precedents. We have already seen how artists in fifteenth-century Italy drew on the legacy of Roman culture in developing architectural and pictorial styles ordered on mathematical and geometrical lines. While classical buildings surviving more or less intact or in ruins provided Italian architects with measures of possibility and of ambition, whole or fragmentary classical statues maintained a similar hold over the imaginations of Italian sculptors. Donatello was one of the generation, mentioned in section 2.3, who helped to transform the status of art in Florence. Probably in the 1440s, he matched the technical achievements of Greek and Roman artists by making the first full-size free-standing sculpture of a male nude that had been cast in bronze for a thousand years, using a biblical character as the pretext for a distinctly novel exercise in grace and sensuality (pl. 152).

It was not only in the form of the quantities of monumental Roman architecture and sculpture surviving above ground that the classical legacy was accessible and effective during the intervening periods. Although the Roman Empire collapsed in the west in the fifth century CE, for at least the next millennium, while the eastern church adopted Greek as its official language, Latin remained the principal language of formal and written record and exchange among those throughout western Europe who could read and write. Latin was the virtually exclusive language of the Bible and of religious ceremony until early in the sixteenth century in the countries of northern Europe that underwent Protestant reformation and it remained so into the late twentieth century where the authority of the Catholic Church was maintained.

The art of the Greeks was also substantially represented in Latin texts. Among those that had been preserved from classical times were several that referred to specific Greek artists and to their works: the painters
The young David is shown standing on the severed head of the giant Goliath, whose sword he holds. This work was made in response to a commission from Cosimo I de' Medici and was originally installed in the courtyard of the Palazzo Medici in Florence. The casting was delegated to a specialist foundry. Recent technical examination of the statue has shown that details such as David's hair were originally gilded.

This statue was probably discovered in Italy before the end of the fifteenth century. It was installed in the specially designed Belvedere Courtyard in the Vatican in the early sixteenth century, after which it became celebrated as one of the greatest works of antiquity and as an ideal representation of the youthful male figure. Its status was affirmed over the next three hundred years through casts, smaller copies and engravings. The possibility that the statue might be a Roman copy from an earlier Greek work was not raised until the early nineteenth century. The missing right forearm and parts of the left hand were restored in the 1530s.

Apelles, Zeuxis, Timanthes and Parrhasius, the sculptors Praxiteles, Phidias, Scopas, Lysippus, Leochares and Heliodorus. Some of these texts, such as Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, offered detailed descriptions of specific works. These were highly influential. It was on Pliny's authority that Praxiteles was understood to be the author of three notable figures
of Venus, while Pheidias was recorded as the maker of a giant statue of Athene in the Parthenon and was consequently for long assumed to be the author of the Parthenon marbles. The *Natural History* was one of the first classical documents to be made available in a modern printed edition, issued in Venice in 1469. Although there was virtually no remaining Greek painting except on vases, assumptions about its excellence were made on the basis of such texts and of the sculptures that had survived, albeit mostly in the form of Roman copies. In fact it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that serious attempts were made to distinguish between Greek and Roman art and that historians and archaeologists first began to argue for the superior and definitive virtues of Greek art and architecture of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Until that point it was Rome rather than Athens that was seen as the centre of the classical world.

A particular prestige was attached to a number of figure sculptures carved from marble that were excavated in Rome and first put on display in the early sixteenth century. Most of these are now thought to be Roman copies but they were regarded until recent times as Greek originals and in many cases identified with specific statues by artists named in the classical texts. It is not hard to imagine the excitement that must have been felt when a marble figure was unearthed that appeared to match the account given in Pliny’s *Natural History* of an Apollo by Leochares or a Venus by Praxiteles, or the reluctance there would have been to believe that the figure was a copy at best (pls 153, 154, 155). These statues had an immediate effect on both painters and sculptors in Italy, Michelangelo prominent among them. His uncompleted marble carving of
Medici Venus, Greek or Roman, 1st century BCE, perhaps after an earlier Greek original, marble, h. 153 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

In the sixteenth century this statue was in Rome but at the end of the seventeenth was sent to Florence and installed in the Uffizi, where it was widely regarded as a model of female beauty. It is one of the most extensively copied sculptures of all cultures and ages. The base is engraved with the name of Cleomenes son of Apollodorus. Although not original, this may be a copy of a signature from an earlier version, possibly a bronze of the classical period. Both arms were missing from the statue before its arrival in Florence, when they were added by a local sculptor. The head has been broken and re-set. A Venus of a similar type and pose is in the Capitoline Museum in Rome.

Belvedere Torso, Greek, (?1st century BCE, marble, h. 159 cm, Vatican Museum, Rome.

This partial figure is first recorded in the 1430s. Early in the sixteenth century it was installed in the Belvedere Court in the Vatican. It is one of the few celebrated antique statues that remained unrestored at the time. Over the next three hundred years numerous casts and copies were made. A small terracotta version dating from the mid-sixteenth century is in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. According to Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first President of the Royal Academy in London, 'A mind elevated to the contemplation of excellence perceives in this defaced and shattered fragment... the traces of superlative genius.' The work is signed Apollonius, a name unrecorded among the various Roman accounts of classical sculptors.
a caryatid was clearly made with the late Greek Belvedere Torso much in mind (pl. 156).

In the culture of the west from late in the sixteenth century until the end of the nineteenth, it was to a large extent the restricted canon of these classical works that defined what sculpture was and should be; specifically how the human figure was properly represented both in sculpture and in painting. Poses and proportions derived from them reappear constantly in the art of the period from early in the sixteenth century to the nineteenth (pl. 158). The ability to produce images of an ideally proportioned human figure that conformed to the stylistic canon these classical works represented was taken as a crucial measure of accomplishment in sculpture, equivalent to the demand made of painters that they be able to situate plausible scenes and objects in a coherent pictorial space. Surviving figures of Venus were taken for models of the aesthetically pleasing female form, figures of Apollo of the male. During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, acquaintance with these canonical classical statues grew not only as a consequence of the first-hand experience of travellers but also through the distribution of plaster casts and marble copies, through the circulation of Michelangelo's 'Atlos Slove', c. 1520, Carrara marble, h. 278 cm, unfinished, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence. One of a number of works intended to form part of an ambitious tomb for Pope Julius ii to be installed in St Peter's, Rome. The impossibility of completing this project in the face of changing proposals and other demands haunted much of Michelangelo's career. Although the figure has been only partially roughed out, it provides a clear demonstration of the artist's recorded admiration for the Belvedere Torso.
Numerous small bronzes such as this were made in Italy after the more celebrated classical statues. The dolphin supporting the leg of the original marble could be ignored when the figure was translated into bronze.

Apart from the sheer prestige of classical culture, largely conferred on account of surviving texts and monuments, there were two connected reasons for the admiration accorded these works. The first was their life-likeness. Not only were they impressively accurate in modelling physical proportions and poses, musculature, features and so on, but where the figures of Egyptian and pre-classical Greek sculpture had appeared relatively rigid and static (pl. 160), those that had their prototypes in carvings of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE or later were animated by the more dynamic equilibrium of their poses and by an impression of mobility in

This print by Marcantonio is based on a lost drawing by Raphael. It shows Paris judging a beauty contest between the goddesses Athene, Hera and Aphrodite (Venus is her Latin name). He awarded the prize of a golden apple to Aphrodite, who had promised him the love of Helen of Troy. She is shown as the central figure of the three at the left of centre, in a pose that appears partly derived from the Medici Venus (see pl. 154). A resemblance to the Belvedere Torso (see pl. 155) can be seen in the reclining male ‘river-god’ figure at the extreme right. (For Marcantonio see also pls 110 and 117.)

Jan de Bisschop, four views of the Medici Venus, from Signorum veterum icones, 1668, engravings, each 24 × 8.2 cm, author’s collection

Jan de Bisschop was a Dutch draughtsman and etcher, who produced two substantial and influential collections of prints. The icones is composed of a hundred etchings after classical and classicising sculpture, some, as here, shown in multiple views. He was dependent on material available in the Netherlands and many of his prints are based on drawings made by other artists from Roman figures that had been heavily restored. His work played a significant part in the revival of the classical tradition in the Low Countries at the end of the seventeenth century. In the introductions to his publications, he condemned those contemporary Dutch artists who found artistic virtue in ‘ugliness’, rather than submitting to the ‘guiding hand’ of antiquity.

158 (facing page top right) their gestures and facial expressions. The second reason was that they appeared not so much as accurate transcriptions made from individual people but as exemplifications of ideal forms – representations of the human in a state of perfect health, life and well-being. They thus permitted a kind of reconciliation of the values of the life-like and the ideal, values that we might normally think of as tending to pull in different directions.
The concept of an ‘ideal form’ brings together two of the most slippery terms in talk and writing about art. I shall try to provide some clarification. The notion of the ideal derives from the influential theories of the Greek philosopher Plato. He believed that what allows us to group forms and objects into categories is the ideal form that is the essence of each. Rather than identifying a given category by a particular example, the lover of truth and wisdom will seek to grasp this essence. The notion of the ideal is thus formed in contrast with the real. Every person I encounter has a specific physical manifestation—his or her individual appearance. I may be attracted to some more than others and may classify people as more or less beautiful, though not necessarily for the same reason that I find them...
If asked to imagine 'beauty' given human form, I may call some real person to mind. However, were that person to be faithfully represented in paint, stone or bronze, the very marks of individuality would always be liable to persist as limits on the power of the resulting image to exemplify physical beauty as a universal or abstract value. To conceive of a representation as ideal is to see it as transcending both the particularities of character and the mere personal preferences of artist or viewer. The notion of the ideal thus carries connotations of detachment or disinterest—the ability to suspend personal loyalties and desires and investments in favour of a standard or model or principle transcending the brute necessities of the real world. The classical statues labelled as Apollo, Bacchus, Hercules, Venus or Niobe were not viewed as portraits of individuals but as personifications of gods and goddesses or of characters from myth. Their forms served as representations of ideas: Art, Pleasure, Strength and Valour, Love, Grief and so on. They were 'beautiful' in so far as they were perfect exemplifications of the physical type that could be associated with these ideas. In the European philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ideas were generally seen as superior to—or refined from—merely sensory responses or perceptions.

The coupling together of 'ideal' and 'form' thus associates beauty with those works of art that, though they may represent human figures or other natural subjects, are seen as somehow transcending or outranking the particular in their proportions, their details and their dispositions, appealing instead to the realm of ideas and to a sense of value abstracted from the everyday. What is required for the appreciation of beauty as thus conceived is a lofty aesthetic sense (pls 161 and 162). This is what we might call the classical aesthetic sensibility: a set of high-cultural attitudes towards art in which the concepts of form, ideal, beauty and disinterest are connected in this way. What happens in practice is that the philosophical authority associated with the pursuit of ideal forms translates into a kind of kudos attaching to the concept of taste; taste ('good' taste) comes in turn to be associated with responsibility—with the obligation and right to take decisions and to act on behalf of others—and thus, of course, with the justifications given for academic values and for aristocracy. The authority of 'good taste' thus comes to function as a kind of cultural equivalent of the temporal power that capital confers on those who control it.

162. Joseph Wright of Derby, Three Persons viewing the Gladiator, 1764–5, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 121.9 cm, private collection
Wright of Derby was particularly skilful at candle-lit scenes such as this—a speciality associated with earlier Dutch and Flemish painting and thus not generally approved for painting in the 'grand manner'. He shows three connoisseurs gathered to admire a small copy of the celebrated antique statue, from which one is making a drawing.
It is a predictable corollary of such attitudes that, while ‘grotesques’ in the classical manner may be admitted, little sympathy will generally be shown for any kind of art that finds its subject matter among the actually imperfect, the everyday and the idiosyncratic. This was indeed the case as regards the painting of low life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the Realist art of the nineteenth. Such works might be allowed to be well executed and ingenious but, where classical aesthetics held sway, they were excluded from the canon of high art—the art that appealed to a refined and educated taste nourished on the cultures of Greece and Rome, particularly on what survived of their sculpture. In the case of artists like Donatello and Michelangelo, whose works at different times exhibited both the kinds of expressive characteristics associated with late Gothic sculpture and the more decorous styles associated with the classical canon, it was sculptures in the latter vein that ‘good taste’ generally preferred, at least until early in the twentieth century. It is significant that while various kinds of genre painting flourished in the Protestant countries of Europe in the seventeenth century, as we have seen, there is no strong vein of ‘realist’ sculpture that can be set alongside them. This absence may be explained on the one hand by the greater hold that the classical tradition exercised over sculpture and on the other by the greater relative cost of three-dimensional work, which limited its appeal to the bourgeois collector who might have been happy to pay for a small painting.

The tendency to see classical sculpture as the realisation of ideal forms was encouraged by the apparent purity of its typical material. White marble quarried in the area of the eastern Mediterranean gave a certain satisfying homogeneity to collections of statues and fragments and of course it contrasted nicely with a background of mown lawns and clipped hedges. In fact, though the Romans generally preferred their statues unpainted, we now know that the great majority of even classical Greek sculpture was once brightly coloured (as was the majority of Gothic sculpture and architecture). It was not until 1815 that the evidence for such practices was first made public, however, and it was some time before it was generally absorbed. A large carved sarcophagus of Greek origin now in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul retains sufficient traces of pigment to allow a plausible reconstruction (pls 163 and 164). It is hard to imagine that the classical aesthetics of the eighteenth century could easily have accommodated so garish an object.

A long-term consequence of the more or less unqualified respect in which the achievements of classical artists were held in the academies of art, by the members of the ruling classes and by the artists who advised and supplied them, is that sculptures from the Roman Empire and to a lesser extent from Greece are common and still prominent in the museums
of Europe and America. They are not all nowadays accorded the same level of respect, however. Such authenticated Greek works as the Parthenon marbles and the Venus de Milo (pl. 165) justly maintain their considerable reputations and their attraction to museum visitors, but there are many other works in both public and private collections that have been subject to a degree of redescriptions over the last century or so. This is hardly surprising. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the widespread admiration for classical sculpture led to a high demand for authen-
This famous statue was excavated in 1820 on the island of Melos or Milos. It was acquired on behalf of a French ambassador and presented by him to Louis XVIII, who in turn donated it to the Louvre. When found it was accompanied by a block bearing the signature 'Alexandros of Antioch on the Meander'. That it was never restored is largely due to uncertainty about how the missing arms would originally have been disposed. It is generally thought to be a Greek work from the Hellenistic period.

The reclining figure was discovered early in the seventeenth century and entered the Borghese collection. It was restored and the mattress added soon after. In 1807 it was bought by Napoleon. A bronze copy was made for Philip IV of Spain after 1650 (now in the Prado, Madrid). Other marble versions of the figure exist in the Uffizi in Florence and the Villa Borghese in Rome.

tic-looking pieces. As the essential destination for travellers making a Grand Tour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Rome itself was the centre of a flourishing trade in excavated antiquities catering to wealthy collectors. Although the great majority of Greek and Roman statuary found in the Mediterranean area was carved in marble and was relatively fragile, and though as a consequence little of it survived intact over the ensuing centuries, large numbers of apparently whole figures were
acquired by members of the English aristocracy and others. Many of them are now to be found in stately homes and museums throughout continental Europe and in the British Isles, surprisingly complete with all their limbs, fingers and noses intact. Close examination will reveal that a high proportion of these are composites, with certain formerly missing parts supplied by the Italian craftworkers of the time, specialists in the more or less imaginative reconstruction and often ‘improvement’ of excavated fragments. A torso that might have started in Roman times as part of a relatively humble funerary statue dedicated to a specific individual could end up composing part of a ‘Dionysus’ or an ‘Apollo’, presented in apparent entirety with the attributes necessary to elevate it to the realm of ideas (pl. 166). Some of this work of completion or improvement was done by sculptors with considerable reputations as artists in their own right, among them Gianlorenzo Bernini, by far the most successful sculptor working in Rome in the seventeenth century (pl. 167).

There is one further point to be made. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the language of classical taste had become firmly established as the dominant discourse about art. Although challenged by artists and writers associated with the Romanticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it remained the language of a kind of high-cultural authority until the middle of the nineteenth century. That authority was significantly secular. Yet respect for the classical tradition generally proved reconcilable with the ecclesiastical and temporal authority in Europe that wielded the weight of the Bible and the doctrines of the church. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Catholic Church had proved adept at Christianising certain classical myths and archetypes. It is also of note that among the collections of antique sculpture available to view in Italy

166 (above) Dionysus, Roman, first half of 2nd century, with 18th-century additions, marble, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

This statue was acquired in Rome as a figure of Dionysus, the god of wine. In fact the ancient parts consist solely of a portrait head on a naked youthful torso, a combination associated with private funerary statues. The arms and lower legs were added in the eighteenth century. Originally in the Arundel collection, the statue was presented to the museum by the Dowager Countess of Pomfret.
in the early sixteenth century, none was more prestigious or influential than that assembled by Pope Julius II which was displayed in a specially designed courtyard in the Vatican in Rome. During the period of the Renaissance, painters had sometimes employed expedients to suggest the victory of a new religious order over the pagan classical world, such as setting the Christian subject of the Nativity in the ruins of Roman buildings (pl. 168), but the tendency of artists working under the aegis of the Catholic Church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – painters and sculptors alike – was to combine the two sources of authority by treating religious subjects with a classical decorum. One way to conceive of the Baroque style that emerged in Italy late in the sixteenth century and spread throughout Europe in the seventeenth is as a bringing together of the idealism of the classical tradition with a heightened expressiveness partly driven by the emotional content of religious themes. This was consistent with the demand made by the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation that greater emotional expression should be pursued in art as a means to inspire religious devotion (pl. 169). From that point on the two types of authority were effectively reconciled, at least where the management of public culture was at issue.

At the end of the eighteenth century, however, art on Christian themes tended to become increasingly rhetorical and sentimental. At that point a revived and repurified classicism became the dominant stylistic mode in painting (see pl. 79), impelled in part by revolutionary anti-clericalism and by admiration for what were seen as the virtues of the Roman Republic. This direction was largely followed by sculptors in France, and in the early
Antonio Canova, The Three Graces, 1814-17, marble, 173 x 97.2 x 57 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

This sculpture was commissioned from the artist in Rome by the 6th Duke of Bedford, who had admired a previous version carved for the Empress Josephine (now in the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg). It was installed in a special Temple of the Graces in the sculpture gallery at Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire, where it remained until 1990.

Preliminary stages included a terracotta sketch model and a full-size plaster version, on the basis of which the rough carving of the marble was done by assistants before finishing by Canova. In classical mythology the Graces were daughters of Jupiter and attendants to Venus: Thalia (youth and beauty), Euphrosyne (mirth) and Aglaia (elegance).

years of the nineteenth century an increasingly bureaucratic neo-classicism was sustained by the pretensions of the Bonapartist state in France and by the enthusiasm of its supporters. The notion that the post-revolutionary Louvre was the rightful home of canonical works of classical art led to the transportation of a large number of works from conquered Italy, among them the Apollo Belvedere, the Capitoline Venus and the Belvedere Torso (see pls 153–5). Once in Paris they were paraded through the streets in Roman-style triumph under a banner that read: ‘Yielded up by Greece, lost by Rome, their fate has changed twice and will not change again.’ The implication was that the new French state was the rightful guardian of the classical canon. In 1815, however, following the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, the great majority of the appropriated paintings and sculp-
tures were returned. Prominent among those who worked for their restoration was the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova, who had previously discharged commissions from Napoleon and had carved his portrait. Besides being by far the most highly rewarded artist of his generation, Canova was also perhaps the last sculptor successfully to exploit the icy sensuality that the classical tradition of marble carving had come to encourage before it descended rapidly into bombast and kitsch (pl. 170). (In modernist theory, kitsch refers to the garish, pretentious and sentimental forms in which the mere appearances of art are offered.) The rapid decline of neo-classical sculpture was to some extent the consequence of its massive popularity, as successful masters became increasingly reliant on assistants and copyists to satisfy the demand for new figures and versions.

In sculpture as in painting, the modernist reaction against academic traditions and values marked an end to the effectiveness of both the various denominations of Christianity and the classical tradition as practical regulating forces on the appearance of new works of art. It did not altogether extinguish the authority that classical aesthetics represented, however. The association of the classical tradition with civilisation – and its effective reconciliation with the moral authority of the church – can be read particularly clearly from the outward appearances of those museums in Europe and America that often had Greek and Roman sculptures at the heart of their collections. To approach almost any major museum in the west built in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries is to be confronted with a broad flight of steps leading up to an entrance between fluted columns supporting a triangular pediment (pl. 171). This is the language of classical architecture. To be more specific, the reference is to the design of Greek temples.
and to the Roman temples and other public buildings in which that design was continued. The implication is that the museum is a place in which a tradition of public and spiritual values is upheld and continued. Its classical facade conveys a sense of responsible authority and of proper guardianship, as it does when applied to such other institutions as schools, colleges, offices of public administration and, indeed, many of the churches built throughout Europe and America between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, from the new St Paul’s cathedral designed in London by Christopher Wren to the Napoleonic church of La Madeleine in Paris. In the view of those who implemented such designs until as late as the very end of the nineteenth century, there could be no questioning the appropriateness of a classical style to an institution devoted to the civilised purposes of instruction, enlightenment, religious devotion or the maintenance of civil order, for it was by reference to a classical tradition that civilisation itself was still largely defined. In the twentieth century such beliefs were associated with the more extreme forms of political conservatism, particularly with Fascism.

4.4 THE VARIOUS HUMAN IMAGE

The second principle on which sculpture might be conceived and classified in thought and in practice takes a different direction from the first. Indeed, what is now proposed offers a kind of counter to the idea that the classical tradition is central. From this alternative perspective that tradition may be regarded as merely one strand drawn out of a rich and complex geographical and historical texture. What this second principle has in common with the first is the observation, already made, that of all the subjects represented over the ages in the various sculptural media, by far the most prevalent has been the human figure. Yet what we are now imagining is that it is this figure itself which provides the organising principle, not as conceived in terms of any particular stylistic canon but in all its modes of representation. In this case, it is not adherence to a classical style that provides the parameters for a notional survey of sculpture but rather the range and variety that sculpture of the human figure has to offer, whether conceived in the guise of a god or goddess or as an ancestor, as an idealised type of the male or female, as a personification of some natural force or as a portrait.

While there are many cultures without a continuous tradition of painting, there are few that have not produced some significant three-dimensional images based on the human figure—whatever function they may originally have been intended to satisfy. For all the extraordinary variety with which the human image has been interpreted and adapted,