

Johann winkelmann essay sample

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On a spring day, in the village of Tripiti on the island of Milos, a young man discovered something beautiful. The year was 1820 when the young, Yorgos Kentrotas, discovered a statue buried within ancient ruins. The statue was broken into several sections and fragments but the torso and legs were intact in two pieces. The statue is believed to be that of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty and was later to be termed, the Aphrodite of Milos, or the Roman version, Venus de Milo. The German scholar of ancient Greek and Roman art, Johann Winkelmann established many of the methods used to analyze the Venus de Milo. In his book “ The History of Ancient Art”, published posthumously in Dresden in 1764, 44 years prior to the discovery of the Venus de Milo, Winkelmann established many important methods in the history of art and archeology. The book was the product of several years of study in Rome. Winkelmann uses Vasari’s methods as a stepping-stone, he follows the biological cycle but modifies the approach by insisting the individual artist has little to do in the grand scheme of art history. He is the first scholar to approach this subject as a history of art rather than a history of artists.

Winkelmann criticized that previous scholars only knew of art from books and had not seen the work with their own eyes. He demands that one must spend at least two years in Rome to even begin to write about ancient art. The scholar must see works in person and multiple times. Winckelmann only observed Roman copies of Greek sculptures and in fact did not know that some of the works he studied were copies, including the Apollo Belvedere. He in fact never got the chance to travel to Greece before his tragic death. However, there is much to learn from Winckelmann’s contributions of

understanding ancient art. He established the concept of connoisseurship and was the first to coin the distinctions between Greek, Greco-Roman and Roman art.

The art historian is to differentiate styles from: nations, periods, and artists by careful examination of the artwork, looking with the artist's eye, analyzing technical progress, defining and identifying ideal beauty and the study of original documents. The history of art is intended to show the origin of techniques and how these techniques progressed and changed and eventually declined. The art historian should also consider the climate, the constitution and government, the habits of thinking as well as the use and application of art. These considerations may provide invaluable clues to the reasons a work was created, even insights into the everyday lives of the artist. A warm, peaceful, freethinking society is better equipped to facilitate the growth of artistic prowess as apposed to a cold, hungry, wartime, and dominated society. Winkelmann establishes the idea of cultural history.

The Venus de Milo was created during the Hellenistic period between 130 and 100 BC, this time period is considered to be approaching the decline. The statue is carved by Alexandros of Antioch out of several pieces of white parian marble. Originally, the statue was painted and elaborately decorated, but all that remains today is the bare surface of the white marble. The Venus de Milo is slightly larger than life size, standing at six feet and eight inches. The form of the body has a delicate curve and the hips are twisted, rather than facing purely forward. The stance is in contrapposto, with one knee bent severely. It is believed that the arms were lost during the journey to France. Drawings and descriptions made at the time of the discovery suggest <https://assignbuster.com/johann-winkelmann-essay-sample/>

that the left arm must have been stretched out and holding an apple and that the right arm crossed over the body to hold the draped fabric that is wrapped around her hips and legs. The draped fabric creates an erotic tension, as the fabric appears fluid and that it could fall. One year following the discovery, the Venus de Milo was eventually presented to King Louis XVIII and thus placed in the Louvre Museum in Paris, where it remains to this day. The acquisition of the Venus de Milo was a great success for France, only six years prior, the French returned the Venus de' Medici to Italy, considered the best example of Greek sculpture at the time. The discovery of the Venus de Milo created a shift in opinion and the statue is considered by some to be the epitome of ideal beauty.

Winkelmann establishes three main stages of art, including: necessity, understanding beauty and superfluous leading to decline. Beginning with necessity, informational drawings would be important tools, especially in societies where the majority of the population was illiterate. Out of necessity we find beauty. Everyone experiences beauty but not everyone agrees on what is considered beautiful. Winkelmann distinguishes individual beauty as purely originating from one source found in nature such as a human, animal or plant, while ideal beauty is created when the best parts of many individuals is combined.

This defining and identifying of ideal beauty is the beginning of connoisseurship. However, a work can be ideal and not beautiful, as with ancient Egyptian artwork that maintained a similar level of craftsmanship and style over long periods of time. Also with the work of the Etruscan's, it was regular but angular, expressive but hard and frequently exaggerated.

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When beauty becomes superfluous the techniques are said to be in decline. The earliest documents report that the first drawings were merely outlines of shadow. From the rough outlines proportions were established followed by exactness. Gaining exactness in technique and craftsmanship gives the artist confidence in their endeavors. This confidence leads to success and grandeur. This impressive momentum leads to high beauty. After ideal beauty has been attained the inclination is to add superfluous embellishment, this in turn leads to profuseness and decline.

The Venus de Milo exemplifies ideal beauty because the techniques used were of a skilled and confident artist. The proportions, however idealized, are accurately female and not just general outlines of form. The Etruscan Sarcophagus of the Spouses is an excellent example of crude proportions; the female figure has broad shoulders similar to the male shoulders and there is an over stiffness to the work. The Venus de Milo has movement and fluidity. Even with the missing arms, one can ascertain that the statue contains a contrast of relaxed and flexed limbs: one arm was holding the fabric while one arm is stretched out, one leg is bent severely and one leg is straight. This creates a dynamic quality to the statue.

The Venus di Milo expresses grandeur by the scale; the statue is slightly larger than real life, standing at six feet and eight inches. This size is just enough to be impressive but still small enough to have ideal beauty. The Hellenistic age is considered to be near the decline of an era. Perhaps the Venus de Milo expresses some attributes of profuseness when considering the statue was originally painted and elaborately decorated. It is important to remember these ideas as a contemporary viewer. The missing arms and <https://assignbuster.com/johann-winkelmann-essay-sample/>

the absence of paint must have a profound effect on how we appreciate the Venus di Milo. This is why Winkelmann wants the scholar to consider the cultural that the artwork came out of and to use the artist's eye and to understand what the artist was trying to do.

In 2007 A. A. Donohue asked “ But is there any place for Winckelmann within the ongoing study of the subjects with which he concerned himself? She answers, “ Yes, because many of the visible and invisible assumptions that guide our scholarship proceed from his work and influence, and without understanding the sources of our ideas, our work is incomplete.” I agree with A. A. Donohue, there is room for Winckelmann in the ongoing study of ancient art. It is important that the research of previous scholars be included in a contemporary curriculum to establish a strong foundation. Winckelmann established the rules for which the game is to be played. He defines the methods and expectations to be used by a scholar of ancient art. Opinions and tastes change over generations and they should be noted and considered when analyzing an ancient artwork. Contemporary eyes will undoubtedly see an ancient work completely different than the people who created it.

Perhaps the Venus de Milo is beautiful to the contemporary eye because of the missing arms and absence of paint. This is why it is important to consider past generation's opinions and tastes. The concept that the individual artist has little to do within the grand scheme of art history could be translated to the idea that the individual historian has little bearing either. Winkelmann perhaps provided a solid foundation but never the less; he is just a small piece in a larger machine. Variables such as climate, political environment, <https://assignbuster.com/johann-winkelmann-essay-sample/>

the habits of thinking and the use and application of art could be applied to the historian as well. The time they were from influences their options about what they analyze just as much as what they are studying. The Age of Enlightenment no doubt influenced the thinking habits of Winkelmann. The idea of a biological cycle, as originally proposed by Vasari and modified by Winkelmann and others after him, can still be applied to the analysis of ancient art. The methods he established are relevant today because they are the foundation for the methods created after him.