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ART AND ILLUSION

A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation

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IV

Reflections on the Greek Revolution

> Our sculptors say that if Daidalos were born today and created such works as those that made him famous, he would be laughed at.
>
> PLATO, *The Greater Utopias*

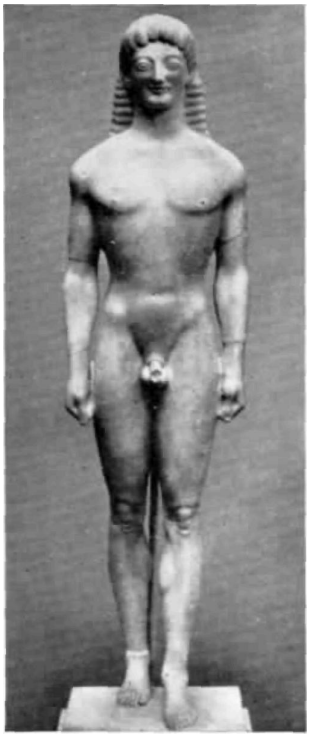
IF I had to reduce the last chapter to a brief formula it would be "making comes before matching." Before the artist ever wanted to match the sights of the visible world he wanted to create things in their own right. Nor is this true only of some mythical past. For in a way our formula dove-tails with the findings of the preceding chapter, that the matching process itself proceeds through the stages of "schema and correction." Every artist has to know and construct a schema before he can adjust it to the needs of portrayal.

We have seen that Plato objected to this change. What the artist can match, he reminded his contemporaries, is only "appearances"; his is the world of illusion, the world of mirrors that deceive the eye. Were he a maker, like the carpenter, the lover of truth could put up with him. But as an imitator of this shifting world of the senses he leads us away from truth and must be banished from the state.

The very violence with which Plato denounces this trickery reminds us of the momentous fact that at the time he wrote, mimesis was a recent invention. There are many critics now who share his distaste, for one reason or another, but even they would admit there are few more exciting spectacles in the whole history of art than the great awakening of Greek sculpture and painting between the sixth century and the lime of Plato's youth toward the end of the fifth century B.C. Its dramatic phases have often been told in terms of the episode from "The Sleeping

Princess" when the kiss of the prince breaks the thousand-year-old spell and the whole court begins to stir from the rigors of unnatural sleep. We are shown how the stiff and frozen figures we call Apollines, or *kouroi* [85], first move one foot forward, then bend their arms [86], how their masklike smile softens, and how, at the time of the Persian wars, the symmetry of their tense posture is finally broken when their bodies receive a slight twist, so that life seems to enter the marble [87]. There are the refined figures of maidens, the *korai,* to confirm this picture. There is finally the history of Greek painting, as we can follow it in painted pottery, which tells of the discovery of foreshortening and the conquest of space early in the fifth century and of light in the fourth. The whole process looks so logical and inevitable that it appears easy to arrange the various types of figures so as to show their gradual approximation to life. It is true that in creating these sequences classical archaeologists may not always have escaped the danger of a circular argument. What is more rigid is called "early,"" and what looks "lifelike" is dated later. There are not many monuments from this crucial period that can be dated on independent evidence. But even though our reading of the history of Greek art may have made it look a little too tidy, the essential lines of this astounding development have been established beyond any doubt.

85 Apollo of *Tenea* VI *century* B.C., *Parian marble*



86 *Apollo of Piombino. c.* 500 B.C. *bronze*

87 *The Kritian Boy. c.* 480 B.C., *Parian marble*

It is a development which neatly illustrates our formulas of schema and correction, of making before matching. Indeed, it was in this area that Emanuel Loewy at the turn of the century first developed his theories about the rendering of nature in Greek art that stressed the priority of conceptual modes and their gradual adjustment to natural appearances. Archaic art starts from the schema, the symmetrical frontal figure conceived for one aspect only, and the conquest of naturalism may be described as the gradual accumulation of corrections due to the observation of reality.

As a description of what happened, Loewy's account still seems to me unsurpassed. But in itself it explains little. For why was it that this process started comparatively so late in the history of mankind? In this respect our perspective has very much changed. To the Greeks the archaic period represented the dawn of history, and classical scholarship has not always quite shaken off this inheritance. From this point of view it appeared quite natural that the awakening of art from primitive modes should have coincided with the rise of all those other activities that, for the humanist, belong to civilization: the development of philosophy, of science, and of dramatic poetry.

It needed the extension of our historical horizon and our increased awareness of the art of other civilizations to bring home to us what has rightly been called the "Greek miracle," the uniqueness of Greek art. Indeed it was an Egyptologist, Heinrich Schafer, who extended Loewy's findings and brought out the Greek achievement through his analysis of the Egyptian ways of rendering the visible world. Schafer stressed that the "corrections" introduced by the Greek artist in order to "match" appearances are quite unique in the history of art. Far from being a natural procedure, they are the great exception. What is normal to man and child all over the globe is the reliance on schemata, on what is called "conceptual art." What needs explanation is the sudden departure from this habit that spread from Greece to other parts of the world.

II

AS HISTORIANS we have learned to use the word "explanation" with caution. The scientist can test his explanations by a systematic variation

of conditions in experiment, the historian obviously cannot. But this need not prevent him from rejecting spurious explanations, such as "the evolution of mankind" or "the spirit of the Greeks," and searching instead for conditions that would make the adoption of one or the other way of rendering nature intelligible. It is precisely because mankind can hardly have changed in the period which separates us from the archaic Greeks that we are entitled to expect these conditions still to be intelligible if we ask the simple question of how the function of an image will influence its form.

As soon as we approach pre-Greek art from this angle, the familiar comparison between the conceptual modes of child art and that of the ancient Orient lets us down. From the point of view of function, the child art of our age is a most impure example. The motives and purpose for which children draw are very mixed. They grow up in our world where the image has already assumed its manifold functions: to portray, to illustrate, to decorate, to entice or to express emotion. Our children know picture books and magazines, the cinema and the television screen, and the pictures they make reflect this experience in more ways than the child psychologist realizes. In a "mosaic test" a high score was given to a child who used its geometric shapes to represent a fox, seen from behind, in the act of watching something in front of him. No doubt the solution was ingenious and the high score well deserved, but it is most unlikely that this child ever saw a fox in that attitude. It must have seen picture books, and one of them may have offered a convenient schema ready-made for adaptation to the medium of mosaic. Children make such pictures to amuse themselves, to show off, or because their mothers want to keep them quiet. All the time they are absorbing and adapting the standards and schemata of the grown-up world, even though they may not all be as sophisticated as the four-year-old son of a German philosopher who was questioned about his drawings: "What is this?'-"A steamboat." "And that scribble over there?"-"That is art." The approval which such "creative activity" earns from the adults must soon reassure the child that it is safer to be naughty on paper than in real life. But the very idea of this license presupposes the belief that art is a kind of fool's paradise, a realm of phantoms where we develop our dreams, the belief, that is, that aroused the protest of Plato.

Those who want to study the relation between form and function in a

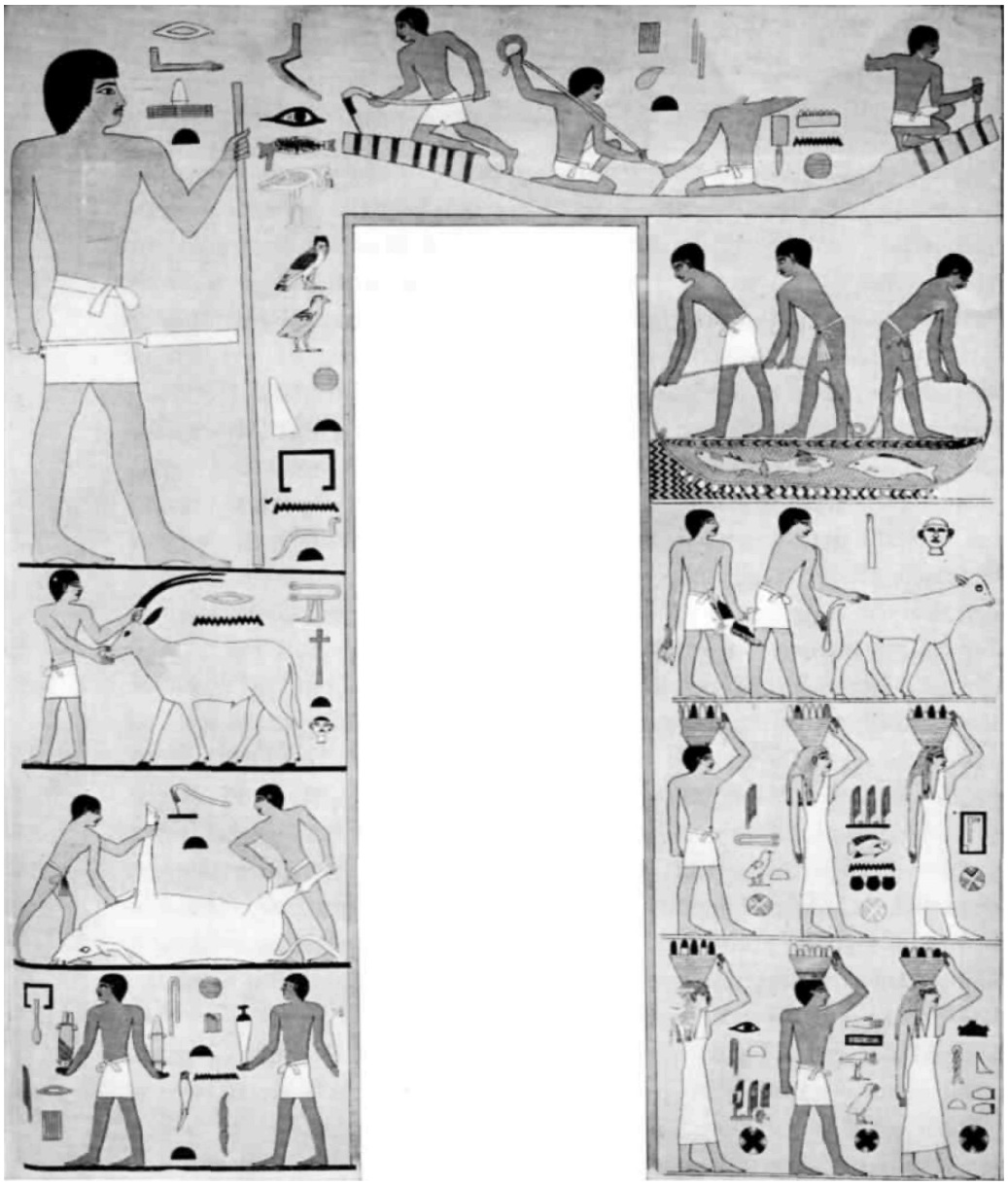
contemporary setting may do better to turn from child art to the rigid context of games. For here the purpose of the image or symbol imposes strict limits on the fancy of the designer. This purpose demands one thing above all: clear distinctions. It does not matter whether the fields of the checkerboard are white and black or red and green so long as they remain distinct. And so with the colors of the opponent's pieces. How far the pieces themselves will be articulated by distinctive features will depend on the rules of the game. In checkers, where each player needs only two categories of pieces, we make our own queens simply by putting one checker on top of the other. In chess we must distinguish more categories; no designer of chessmen, however, will be concerned with the real appearance of castles or bishops, knights or kings, but only with the creation of clear, distinctive features which set off one piece from the other. Provided these distinctions are respected, he is free to indulge his fancy in any way he likes. I have chosen this rather farfetched example of games because it allows us to study articulation, the creation of distinctions without the intrusion of the problem of likeness or representation. But we also know of contexts in our culture where some degree of "representation" is admitted into symbolism without being allowed to blur the conceptual clarity demanded by its function. Maps are an example. The map maker will generally represent water by blue and vegetation by green. Where the purpose of the map demands a distinction between fields and forests, he will introduce a further articulation of his greens and select the darker shade for the woods. But beyond the indication of this difference, the "real" tones of the particular scenery will obviously not concern him.

III

IF ONE READS SCHAFER's analysis of Egyptian conventions, one is more often reminded of such conventionalized representations than one is of child art. The Egyptian painter distinguished, for instance, between a dark brown for men and a pale yellow for women's bodies. The real flesh tone of the person portrayed obviously mattered as little in this context as the real color of a river matters to the cartographer.

It is for this very reason that the analysis of such a style in terms of "knowing" and "seeing," or of "tactile" versus "optic," does not appear to

take us very far. Would the Egyptian embalmer have known less about the human body than the Greek sculptor? May not the conceptual, diagrammatic character of Egyptian images which has so often been described have as much to do with the function of these images as with the hypothetical "mentality" of the Egyptian? It would be tempting to equate this function with the idea of "making" which was the concern of the last chapter. But we may do well to remember that this ideal can never survive on the surface, as it were, without being modified by the harsh realities of frustrated dreams. No belief in magic ever extinguished the sanity of man; and the Egyptian artist surely knew that in this world he is not a maker. That this aspiration lay closer to the surface than it does in other cultures we need not doubt. Has it not been suggested that the Great Sphinx was not conceived as the representation of a divinity but rather as a watchful guardian in his own right? There is no doubt, however, that Egyptian art had long been adapted to the function of portrayal, of presenting visual information and memories of campaigns and ceremonies. The records of an expedition to the land of Punt and of plants brought back from Syria by Thutmose III [54] would suffice to remind us of this possibility. But what these records confirm is the interest of Egyptian artists in distinctive features. It is sometimes thought paradoxical that the Egyptian artists showed themselves such keen observers of animals and foreign races |81] while they were satisfied with the conventional stereotypes of the ordinary human figure. But from the point of view of a diagrammatic art, this habit looks less puzzling. Whenever the difference between species matters, the schema is modified to admit the distinction. What may confuse the issue in these discussions is only the word "observation." There must have been keen observers among the Egyptians, but observation is always for a purpose. The Egyptian had sharpened his eyes to the different profiles of Nubians and Hittites, he knew how to characterize fish and flowers, but he had no reason to observe what he was not asked to convey. Perhaps only lkhnaton demanded that his personal, distinctive features should be entered on the map of history, but even these became a stereotype that was applied to the whole royal family. Admittedly the art of Tell el 'Amarna is altogether richer in schemata and also more flexible, but these diagrammatic refinements, however striking they may be, should not mislead the historian into



8B WALL PAINTING FROM *THE TOMB OF TA-HATEP*, C. 2600 B.C.

speaking of a naturalistic revolution. To do so is to obscure the cataclysmic effect of the "Greek miracle."

We must never lot get that we look at Egyptian art with the mental set we have all derived from the Greeks. So long as we assume that images in Egypt mean much the same as t h e v did in the post-Greek world, we are bound to see them as rather childlike and naive. Nineteenth-century ob-