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- Examines the influence of what it regards as two important philosophical currents on the conception and development of ancient Greek art, namely, the philosophy of Pythagoreanism and the ideologies associated with the Sophists. Remarks that while the former was reflected in art works in the conception of beauty as numerical and mathematical proportion, the latter created the notions of the reproductibility of nature and distortional perspective.



Two Philosophies and Classical Art

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WLADYSLAW TATARKIEWICZ

Two Philosophies and Classical Art

THE INFLUENCE OF PHILOSOPHY on art, though it has been weaker at certain periods than others, has usually tended to be strong. Classical antiquity is an example of it at its most conspicuous. What made it even more remarkable was that not one, but that two different, even opposed, philosophies stamped themselves on art, sometimes on the same work.

I

1. During the classical period the Pythagorean philosophy attracted many followers in Greece. Pythagoras himself was dead but his teachings had been propagated by disciples. Though of remote origin—Pythagoras flourished far off in Italy in the 6th century—his philosophy penetrated in the 5th century to Athens, the center of contemporary culture. Its basic tenets were as follows: beauty lies exclusively in order and harmony; and order and harmony are nothing but simple numerical proportion. It is this proportion which rules the universe; it is the source of its harmony and makes it the “cosmos” (which means order). The seeker after the true, the good, and the beautiful will find it in the universe; therefore he should contemplate the universe and arrange his life and his art in accordance with its eternal laws.

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The Pythagorean view of beauty and the world is well documented. Aristotle (*Metaph.* N. 5) writes: “The so-called Pythagoreans who were the first to study mathematics hold its principles to be the principles of all existence and have discovered that harmony depends on numerical properties and proportion. . . . They saw harmony and number in the whole of the heavens.”

From late antiquity there is the evidence of Stobaeus, who says (*Ecl.* IV. 1) that according to the Pythagoreans “order and proportion are beautiful and useful, disorder and lack of proportion ugly and useless.” Elsewhere (*Ecl.* I, proem.) he writes: “You can see the nature of number and its power not only in the things of the gods but everywhere in human works and in words, in all the products of art and music.”

The Sceptic, Sextus Empiricus, states (*Adv. Math.* VII, 106): “No art is created without proportion and proportion lies in number. It can be said that it is number which gives beauty to all things. This is what the Pythagoreans maintain.” Theon of Smyrna writes (*Mathematica* I) that in their view music is simply the embodiment of the whole order of the world, which takes the form of harmony in the universe, of law in the state, and of sensible living in the home.

The Pythagorean concept of beauty was, therefore, primarily numerical and mathematical and held that beauty resided in proportion. Another feature of this concept was that it was *cosmocentric*: it maintained that beauty appeared in the universe and in na-

ture, and that the artist's only task was to discern this cosmic beauty and transfer it to his work.

2. At the same time as this cosmocentric doctrine was being brought to Athens by Doric teachers, Ionian thinkers in the city itself were developing a completely different philosophy. Theirs was an *anthropocentric* doctrine: it hinged not on the universe, but on man, and was summed up in Protagoras' famous dictum: "Man is the measure of all things." The true, the good, and the beautiful are referable, not to the universe, but to man. The proper business of philosophy is to study man. This was a doctrine shared by Socrates and the Sophists; although the gulf between them in other matters was wide, they both upheld this principle and this humanist outlook. The result was inevitably a conception of beauty and art different from the Pythagorean.

Judging from the sources that survive, Socrates was the first to expound the idea that the function of arts like painting and sculpture is to imitate reality. "On entering the house of Parrhasius the painter one day," Xenophon relates (*Mem.* III, 10), "he asked in the course of a conversation with him: 'Is painting a representation of things seen? Anyhow, you painters with your color represent and reproduce figures high and low, in light and shadow, hard and soft, rough and smooth, young and old.' 'True,' he replied. 'And further when you copy types of beauty, it is so difficult to find a perfect model that you combine the most beautiful details of several, and thus contrive to make the whole figure look beautiful.'"

The reproduction of reality by the painter or sculptor in paint or in marble—and similarly by the poet in verse—must, if it is to act on the spectator or the listener, create an *illusion*; it must to a certain extent trick them, contrive a fake reality where it does not exist. This was the conclusion drawn by the near-Sophist, Gorgias: "The word is a great conqueror," he wrote (*Helena* 8); "it achieves the most divine things. The power of song united with the imagination of the soul charms, seduces, and changes it with its spell. It is an art

of magic and witchcraft, of deceiving the soul and deluding the imagination. But this deception and delusion is justified and right, for it lies in the very nature of art." Gorgias said, "we are told by Plutarch (*De Glor. Ath.*, 5, 348c) that he who deceives is juster than he who does not, and he who lets himself be deceived wiser than he who refuses."

Thus a theory of art evolved from the Sophist philosophy completely different from the Pythagorean: for the latter art was a matter of consonance with the universe; for the former, with fiction; one saw its key in truth; the other, in illusion.

Plato followed the Pythagoreans in his views on beauty and art. He considered that only those proportions which ruled the universe were perfect and that art should conform to them; it should, like every honest human undertaking, cling to the *truth*. On the other hand, he saw that the art of his day had followed the directions of Gorgias into a different course: it took account of human *illusions*, of the imperfections of human vision and the deformations of perspective, and correspondingly changed the proportions of things, distorted and falsified them.

He wrote about true beauty and art in the *Philebus* (64 E): "*Measure and proportion* are everywhere identified with beauty and virtue. . . . If we cannot catch the good in one idea, let us run it down with three: beauty, proportion, and truth." Again in the *Timaeus* (87 C): "If the artist is intent upon what is unchanging and uses this as his model, when he tries to realize its shape and power, the result is consummate and beautiful."

He contrasted this with art and beauty, as they were sometimes understood by his times, in the *Sophist* (235 Eff.): some artists, he says, when making statues or painting pictures *change the proportions* in order to please the eyes of the spectator. Plato was persuaded that those who act in this way are wrong because they are producing not likenesses but shams and so are guilty of forgery and repudiation of the proportions which are truly beautiful. He distinguished between two different and contradictory

philosophies of art: the Pythagorean, which was his own, and the Sophist, which was the philosophy of his enemies.

II

With these philosophies holding sway in classical Greece, what was the effect on art? Did it follow the Pythagorean or the Sophist ideology, or did it take some other course?

1. It is certain that the Pythagorean doctrine had a distinct influence on art. The main token of this was the imposition of *canons*. "Canon" is the name given in art to those of its forms and proportions in particular which are to be universally accepted by all artists, and which are obligatory and incumbent on them. At different times canons are mandatory for different reasons, but usually out of religious and social considerations; in Greece the source of their authority was less religious and social than philosophical and aesthetic; they derived from the belief, disseminated by the Pythagoreans, that there is a perfect proportion and that it alone should be the standard. It should be noted that the word "canon" originally meant no more than a straight rod as used by builders, and only later acquired the sense of a perfect and obligatory measure. In fact it was a popular tradition among the Greeks that Pythagoras was the first man to give it this meaning. This story epitomizes the influence of his philosophy on art. The imprint of Pythagorean canons can be seen in architecture as well as in sculpture and handicrafts.

(a) In *architecture*, says Vitruvius, the ancient authority on this subject, good composition "arises from proportion, and proportion consists in taking a fixed module, both for the parts of the building and for the whole" (III, 1, 1). By module was meant some accepted unit. In other words architecture was a matter of calculation and number—in keeping with the views of the Pythagoreans. Number decided the shape of the temple as well as that of the theater, of the whole building as well as of each detail. Vitruvius wrote in late antiquity,

but his examples were drawn from the architects of the classical era.

For the *temples* the module used to calculate proportion was the triglyph. It was axiomatic that the column has a breadth of two modules. The proportions of the portico and the whole temple were also canonical: for instance, a 6-column portico, as in the Theseum, had to have a width of 27 modules; each column was two modules, the intervals between the two outside columns 2.7 modules and between the inside columns 3.2 modules. The basic ratio between column and interval was 2:3:2, that is 5:8. The same ratio obtained between triglyph and metope.

Theaters also had their architectural canon. Their construction was a geometrical exercise performed with line and compasses. Circles and squares marked out the limits of the stage, the proscenium, the orchestra, the division of the auditorium into blocks of seats, and the direction of the steps. However big the theater, the proportions of its parts were specified by the canon; Vitruvius describes it (V, 6 & 7) but it had been enforced for many centuries before his day (we find it already in the Theater of Dionysus in Athens).

The canons applied not only to the whole of the building but also to its *details*. An example is the fluting of the column: the Doric column had twenty flutes, the Ionic twenty-four. Their depth was also canonical and geometrically measured: in the Doric column the flute was the arc of a circle whose center was the intersection of the diagonal of the square on the chord of the flute; in the Ionic column it was designed with the help of the "Pythagorean" triangle.

(b) The canons also prescribed the proportions of *artistic handicrafts* such as *vases*. According to the research of the American scholars, Hambidge and Caskey, these proportions, though they cannot be expressed in integers, follow a geometrical ratio:

$$1:\sqrt{1}(1), 1:\sqrt{2}, 1:\sqrt{3}, 1:\sqrt{4}(2), 1:\sqrt{5}.$$

(c) *Sculpture* is discussed by Galen (*De Plac. Hipp.* V): "Beauty resides in the pro-

portion of finger to finger, of finger to wrist, of wrist to hand, of hand to elbow, of elbow to shoulder as laid down in the 'Canon of Polyclitus.' " Vitruvius states (III, 1) that the face (from the hairline to the chin) should be $\frac{1}{10}$ th of the body and divisible into three equal parts: the forehead, the nose, and the chin. The proportions of the statue were not arbitrarily decided by the sculptor; they were legislated in the canons in accordance with Pythagorean philosophy and its belief that only one proportion was perfect.

(d) No *painting* from the classical era survives (except on vases), but it can be presumed that this too was subject to the canons. Vitruvius is referring not only to famous sculptors but also to famous painters when he wrote that "they used their knowledge of proportion and thereby earned themselves eternal and undying glory."

We still have to clarify the nature of the canon adopted in classical architecture, sculpture, and painting.

(a) It was a "physiometric" canon, (as Panofsky calls it)—that is, it was derived from nature and the anatomy of living men and was not claimed to be the invention of artists. On the contrary, it was employed in art precisely because it was the rule of nature.

(b) For the artists of classical Greece the canon was an ideal towards which they groped rather than a ready-made blueprint that was available for all time. There was a moment when they seemed on the brink of its discovery; but they changed their calculations and continued to search. For some time the proportions of the human body followed the canon of Polyclitus; later these rules were revised by Euphranor and the proportions became more slender.

(c) The canon was always set out in very simple mathematical terms; but there were two possibilities—either arithmetical numbers or geometrical figures like the circle or the square. The canon laying down the proportions of the human body was expressed not only in the statement that the well-built body has certain specified numerical proportions but also in the phrase *aner tetragonos, homo quadratus*, meaning

that when he stretches his legs and arms he can be enclosed in a square, a geometrical figure.

(d) The canons of the classical Greeks were arrived at partly by observation and measurement of living beings (in painting and sculpture), partly by the rules of statics (in architecture), but above all by philosophical deduction: perfect proportions are fulfilled in the universe; human works must therefore follow them, for no others can be perfect. Since nature has fashioned the human body in a certain way, writes Vitruvius (III, 1, 4), the ancients were right to plan their buildings according to the same proportions.

This outlook is of course the result of philosophical influences on art. They came from a doctrine which avowed the perfection of certain numbers and geometrical figures. They were introduced by the "so-called Pythagoreans," as Aristotle called them, and reinforced by Plato, who adopted their views.

2. The classical art of Greece, however, also reflects traces of the philosophy of Gorgias and the Sophists. For it made allowances for the way in which optics and perspective change the shape of objects perceived. The Greek artist took account not only of the nature of the universe but also of the nature of man.

(a) We know from literary sources (since there are no remains extant) that this idea asserted itself strongly in *painting*. It was during the classical period, in Plato's lifetime, that perspective was introduced; this kind of painting was known as "skiagraphy." When we look at a circle from below, we see an ellipse; if we are to see a circle, the artist must draw an ellipse. This was known by both artists and theoreticians in antiquity. It was stated, for instance, by the Greek mathematician and engineer, Damianus (ed. R. Schöne, 28), who wrote that a circle has sometimes to be drawn as an ellipse if it is to appear a circle; likewise a square must be drawn as a rectangle; in particular, objects which are placed at a height appear to have different shapes from those which they have in fact.

Classical painters were also aware that distance changes and blurs outlines; a me-

ticularly painted figure will be unrecognizable from afar, whereas brush strokes which are formless at close quarters will give the impression of a human figure seen at a distance. This was the same principle as that ushered in by the impressionists in the nineteenth century. The Greeks discovered it in the fifth century B.C. when they began painting theater scenery and had to allow for the distance at which it would be viewed. They therefore called their impressionistic painting "scenic" or "scenography."

It was skiagraphy and scenography which aroused the protest of Plato, the upholder of the Pythagorean tradition and thus a firm believer in the beauty of the universe, who looked upon any attempt by the artist to change this beauty or to seek another beauty as madness. On the other hand, there were different reactions from other philosophers of the day; the naturalists, for instance, were intent on studying this problem in detail and on finding the laws of optics which account for alterations in the shape of things seen. Democritus and Anaxagoras, who were the best of them, sought to "show how, if a fixed center is taken for the outward glance of the eyes and the projection of the radii, we must follow these lines in accordance with a natural law such that from an uncertain object uncertain images may give the appearance of buildings in the scenery of the stage; and how what is figured on vertical or plane surfaces can seem to recede in one part and project in another" (Vitruvius, VII, pr. 11).

(b) Similar speculations on the need for distortion and illusion appeared in sculpture. This requirement was dictated in cases where the sculptures would have to be viewed from a distance, mainly when they were placed high above the ground. Those who produce some large work of painting and sculpture, writes Plato, do not follow the proportions of the original, in length, breadth, or depth. "For if they reproduced the true proportions of beautiful forms, the upper parts would seem smaller and the lower parts longer than they ought, because we see the former from a distance, the latter from near at hand. . . . So the artists aban-

don the truth and give their figures not the actual proportions but those which seem to be beautiful" (*Sophist* 235 E ff.).

There is a famous story about Phidias related by the Byzantine scholar Tzetzes, who despite his living as late as the tenth century is a reliable source (*Historiarum variarum Chiliades*, VII, 353 ff.). Commissioned to carve a statue of Athene which was to stand on a tall column, Phidias made the goddess' head bigger than the canon prescribed. The people of Athens took exception; their views on art were as realistic and cosmocentric as Plato's, and they shared his abomination of distortion and of art which created an illusion. Phidias was hard put to defend his statue, but he appealed to them to wait until it was in its appointed place. It was only then that the Athenians understood the great sculptor. The final formulation of this approach was the words of Lysippus recorded by Pliny: "The artist of old showed people as they were; I show them as they seem to be" (*Hist. Nat.* XXIV, 65).

(c) Similarly in *architecture*, as Vitruvius writes (III, 3, 12), "what the eye cheats us of, must be made up by calculation." Taking this into account, the Greek architects thickened the middle of the column and broadened the outside columns of the portico, which would otherwise have seemed more slender because of the stronger light shed on them. This illusion also needed to be corrected; the Greeks varied the width of the columns so that the viewer would have the impression that they were all the same. Vitruvius wrote (III, 3, 13) that "unless we flatter its [the eye's] pleasure by proportionate alterations of the module . . . , an uncouth and ungracious aspect will be presented to the spectator." To achieve an effect of symmetry in some places, additions have to be made to the *real* symmetry (*adi-ctiones*) and deductions from others (*de-tractiones*). He called these alterations *ad-justments* (*temperaturae*). This idea is as crucial in the theory of Greek architecture as the canon.

In classical Greek architecture there are other departures from the rule and other adjustments, namely, deviations from the straight line. Since they are comparatively

slight, they were not noticed until as late as 1837 by Pennethorne and presented in detail by Penrose in 1851. Measurements revealed them in the best works of architecture, in which they occur in almost every line. It has been said with little exaggeration that there is not a single straight line in the Parthenon. These irregularities are to be found in vertical and horizontal lines alike; both the columns and the architraves are slightly out of "true."

What is the explanation? One suggestion is that these irregularities were an adjustment of the eye's tendency to bend a straight line; the architect had to bend it in the opposite direction to make it appear straight. This is the most probable answer. But it is likely that there was yet another consideration: the avoidance of a stiffness and monotony that is tiring to the eye. In that case these adjustments would have been used in architecture for the same reason that the painter does not use line and compasses to compose his picture.

In this way the classical art of the Greeks

mirrored *two theories* of beauty and art which were the outgrowth of two philosophies: the cosmocentric doctrine of the Pythagoreans and the anthropocentric doctrine of the Sophists. These two philosophies were not only different but also virtually contradictory. Nevertheless they left their mark on the same art. The artistic good taste of the Greeks was plastic enough to accommodate them both. Their artists could reconcile truth and illusion, "canons" and *temperaturae*. The Greek canons having their origin in the aesthetic of the Pythagoreans were of a *universal* nature, mandatory for all artists and all works of art. But they left some latitude for *temperaturae*, adjustments, exceptions, modifications suggested by the aesthetic of Gorgias and the Sophists. They, on the contrary, encouraged the *individual* spark in art. This gave the art of Greeks the virtues which seem mutually exclusive but which it was a measure of their genius to blend: obedience to general *rules* and individual *freedom*.