



# Chapter 1

## Antiquity and the Middle Ages

### The Shield of Achilles

Ancient Greece and Rome produced a large and varied literature about the visual arts, but little is left of it, and the only theoretical text to survive in its entirety is the treatise *On Architecture* by Vitruvius. Writings of the kind we would classify as theoretical, critical, and even art-historical were in existence by the fifth century BCE – associated with the “high classical” phase of Greek art – and continued to be produced throughout antiquity, but what we know of them comes to us in the fragmentary form of citations in texts of other kinds: any effort to discuss *systematic* thought about art in the ancient world has to be built around the ideas of philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, and of rhetorical theorists such as Cicero and Quintilian, authors whose interest in visual art was fairly tangential to their work as a whole. Before attempting to do this, however, it is useful to consider the evidence of what might be called *unsystematic* thought: ancient literature also records ideas about art that reflect broadly based, “popular” attitudes, and these can be seen as the ground from which more sophisticated thought grew. Some of these ideas continued to be of concern down to the modern period, so that they were assumed to constitute the perennial or universal sources of art’s interest.

The importance of the visual arts in the ancient world, their nearness to life as lived and imagined, is suggested even in myth. Creation myths often represent God as a kind of craftsman: the God of the Old Testament “lays the foundations of the earth” like an architect and fashions man “from the dust of the earth” like a potter or sculptor. In Greek myth, Prometheus forms the first man and woman from clay. Such stories reflect a regard for the skills necessary to make things, to manipulate materials, and to control natural forces. A similar regard is reflected in



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the magical properties often attributed to the products of craft: Hades possesses a helmet that can make the wearer invisible; Aphrodite's girdle causes anyone who looks at her to fall in love with her. Perhaps the most haunting of all stories associated with visual art is that of the sculptor Pygmalion, who carves the image of an ideally beautiful woman, falls in love with it, then, by praying to Aphrodite, obtains his wish of having it come to life. The tale reflects the capacity of images to suggest living presence, but also to inspire fantasy and to embody ideals – to supply what is lacking in life and thus to awaken desire. It reveals a very clear awareness that images can mobilize our deepest psychological resources.

Such myths suggest that art was understood and valued as a form of power over nature, a power that, even if limited, might sometimes seem to tread upon the prerogatives of the gods, and thus involve tragic consequences. Prometheus pays dearly for giving his creation the one gift, fire, that he believes will offer it some protection in a hostile world. The craftsman Daedalus is not only a master of materials but has a stratagem for almost any situation: he builds a labyrinth, devises wings with which to fly, and creates statues that move, that come as near to being alive as human power alone can make them – but he must watch his son Icarus perish with the very wings he has made for him. Orpheus, the musician, charms animals and even stones with his song; in what is surely the most haunting story about the power of music, he almost succeeds in bringing his lover Eurydice back from the land of the dead. In such tales, the artist figures as a kind of hero, struggling against the ultimately limiting conditions of human existence.

Ancient literature also testifies to the kind of day-to-day experience of art that seems more familiar to us. Homer's references to crafted objects indicate the significance, prestige, and fascination that painstakingly and finely made things held. His description of a simple brooch given as a present by Penelope to Odysseus may be compared with an example of the kind of goldsmith's work he might have known (figure 1.1):

It was fashioned of gold with double clasps, and on the front it was curiously wrought: a hound held in his forepaws a dappled fawn and pinned it in his jaws as it writhed. And at this all men marvelled how, though they were of gold, the hound was pinning the fawn and strangling it, and the fawn was writhing with its feet and striving to flee.

These few words capture the elemental fascination of all illusionism, of the way in which an inanimate material can be made to seem alive, of the way in which the power of artifice momentarily replaces one reality with another. A more facetious example of the same idea is an epigram





**Figure 1.1** Box with embossed gold panels, Mycenaean, c.1500 BCE, National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

associated with the mosaic image of a laughing satyr recorded in a late-antique collection known as *The Greek Anthology*: “Why do you laugh?” the viewer asks. The image answers, “I laugh because I marvel at how, being put together out of all kinds of stones, I suddenly become a satyr.”

Beyond the mere manipulation of materials, then, illusion is another source of fascination. *The Greek Anthology* preserves numerous epigrams about a famously naturalistic bronze statue of a cow by the sculptor Myron: “I am Myron’s little heifer, set up on a base. Goad me, herdsman, and drive me off to the herd.” As in the epigram about the mosaic satyr, the image itself speaks, a device that is used to suggest – and succeeds remarkably well in capturing – the startling effect of being fooled. A more philosophical viewer might observe that this effect undermines the distinction between the categories “nature” and “art”: “Looking at this heifer of Myron’s you are like to cry out: ‘either Nature is lifeless, or Art is alive.’” To say that an image is alive, that it is made of flesh, that it seems to move or to be about to move, that it breathes, or that it lacks only the breath, that it speaks, or that it lacks only the capacity for speech, are all stock phrases; they testify both to the artist’s skill and to the viewer’s psychological engagement. Though we quickly tire of their





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formulaic quality, we must recognize that they say as much about the experience of art as most people needed to say.

One of the most striking examples of the value set on illusionistic deception is found in Pliny the Elder, a Roman encyclopedist of the first century CE, who provides a brief history of painting and sculpture in the context of his discussion of various minerals and how they are used by human beings for different purposes. Pliny's information is taken mostly from older secondary sources and is not very carefully integrated; much of what he says is untrustworthy in terms of factual accuracy, but it is important both for what it reveals about attitudes toward art in the ancient world and because it exerted such an influence on the imagination of later centuries. Pliny tells the story of a competition between two Greek painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasios: Zeuxis produced a picture of a cluster of grapes so true to life that when it was unveiled, birds flew down as if preparing to peck at it. He was confident of victory, but when he asked to have Parrhasios' picture unveiled, and found that what he had thought was the veil was in fact the painting, he had to admit defeat, for where he had deceived birds, Parrhasios had fooled an expert.

In addition to the power of images to persuade the viewer of physical presence and of life, there was also an intense interest in their ability to go a step further and tell stories. Homer describes at length a great golden shield, forged and embossed by Hephaestus, the god of fire himself, for the hero Achilles. Though the object is fictitious, and is certainly intended to surpass in its magnificence the work of all human goldsmiths, its description documents a profound responsiveness to the power of art, particularly to its narrative capabilities. Among the things represented on the shield are two entire cities:

In the one there were marriages and feastings, and by the light of blazing torches they were leading the brides from their bowers through the city, and loud rose the bridal song. And young men were whirling in the dance, and in their midst flutes and lyres sounded continually; and there the women stood each before her door and marvelled.

Nearby a trial is taking place, with one man arguing his case and the other disagreeing, while a group of judges listen and onlookers show their support for one side or the other. Around the second city a battle is being fought, with the kinds of incidents one would expect to see as part of such an event. Between and around the cities are landscapes, in which figures are shown engaged in characteristic activities: plowing, grain and grape harvesting, cattle and sheep herding, and dancing. In each case, the ability of the images to tell stories depends upon their





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capacity to suggest, not only physical forms, but movement, and not just visible things, but music and speech. These descriptions testify to a kind of projective engagement with the object that goes beyond the visual to involve all the resources of the imagination.

The description of works of art became a highly developed literary exercise, and the results are often as formulaic as the epigrams about Myron's cow. Those that give the best idea of the way in which, in the real world, cultivated people looked at works of art is the collection known simply as *Pictures* by the orator Philostratus. These little essays purport to record extemporaneous speeches made by the author in front of the paintings in his patron's collection for the edification of the patron's ten-year-old son. One of the most extensive and remarkable concerns a picture of a boar hunt. In addition to the descriptive naturalism, Philostratus admires the arrangement of episodes: the skill with which the story is told. He is especially responsive to the characterization of the hunters: "one shows in his face a touch of the palaestra, another shows grace, another urbanity, and the fourth, you will say, has just raised his head from a book." He also notes the conceptual complexity of the picture: the four hunters are led by a fifth, a boy of great beauty, with whom they are obviously all in love, so that the pursuit of the boar is paralleled by their pursuit of him. Surprised by the intensity of his absorption, Philostratus exclaims:

How I have been deceived! I was deluded by the painting into thinking that the figures were not painted but were real beings, moving and loving – at any rate I shout at them as if they could hear and I imagine that I hear some response – and you did not utter a single word to me to turn me back from my mistake, being as much overcome as I was . . .

For all its self-consciousness, his experience is not unlike that implied in Homer's descriptions of the brooch or the shield of Achilles.

The representation of the emotions and inward qualities of human figures can greatly intensify the effect of presence. The sculptors Phidias and Praxiteles were credited with having "instilled the very passions of the soul into works of stone." *The Greek Anthology* includes several epigrams about a painting of Medea murdering her children, in which the representation of intense and complex feelings was especially admired:

When the hand of Timomachus painted baleful Medea, pulled in different directions by jealousy and the love of her children, he undertook vast labour in trying to draw her two characters, the one inclined to wrath, the other to pity. But he showed both to the full; look at the picture: in her threat dwell tears and wrath dwells in her pity.





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Perhaps the most famous representation of emotion in ancient art was the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* by Timanthes. The painting illustrated the episode from the story of the Trojan War in which the Greek leader, Agamemnon, must sacrifice his daughter in order to propitiate the gods. The other leaders of the Greek host were each shown expressing a different kind of horror and sorrow at the event, but the emotional climax was the figure of Agamemnon himself, whose face was covered by a veil as he performed the sacrifice: as his emotions were not explicitly revealed, the viewer was left to imagine them in all their unbearable intensity. The picture thus succeeded in representing what it did not represent; in acknowledging the limits of art, it transcended them.

Related to the depiction of emotional states is the ability to suggest the deeper, more permanent aspects of the personality: “character” or “soul.” Apelles the painter and Lysippos the sculptor were famous for being able to capture not only the physical appearance of Alexander the Great, but also his heroic character or spirit (*ethos*). Yet not everyone seems to have believed that images could really reveal the soul, and the claim was often explained by saying that the artist represents it by depicting its visible manifestations. The form of the body and face, onto which the character of the soul was believed to be imprinted, along with the representation of emotions, might thus serve the higher purpose of revealing something beyond either physical form or transient states.

If a high value was placed on the depiction of emotions, the powerful emotional responses elicited from *viewers* were also a source of wonder. Apelles so effectively captured Alexander’s stormy temperament in one portrait that, when the emperor’s generals saw it, they trembled as if they were in his presence. The Roman emperor Tiberius developed such a passion for the statue of a young athlete that he had it removed from a public place to his bedroom; popular outcry forced him to put it back, even though, as Pliny says, “he had completely fallen in love with it.” The ability of works of art to arouse uncontrollable sexual urges is also reflected in the stories of adolescent boys attacking the famously beautiful *Aphrodite* of Praxiteles on the island of Knidos.

Closely related to the representation of emotional states and character, yet also distinct, is the capacity of images to suggest abstract ideas. Zeuxis painted a picture of Penelope, wife of Odysseus, “in which one saw morality itself.” Parrhasios did a picture of two children in which one saw “the simplicity and contentment of that age”; his image of the people of Athens, which may have been, or included, a personification, a single figure representing the idea of the Athenian people, showed them to be “fickle, choleric, unjust and variable, but also placable, merciful and





**Figure 1.2** Botticelli, *Calumny of Apelles*, c.1494–5, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

compassionate, boastful, proud and humble, fierce and timid – in short, everything at once.”

The most famous demonstration of the power of personification was the picture of *Calumny* by Apelles. The painter had been falsely accused of a crime and exonerated, but chose to memorialize his experience by painting a picture in which he sought to express the nature of calumny – what we would call vicious gossip. The picture is lost, but a description by the essayist Lucian survived to tantalize later generations (figure 1.2). A judge with the ears of an ass sat enthroned, and to either side stood female figures, representing Ignorance and Suspicion, to show that the judge was about to act under the influence of those qualities. Before him, Calumny, a lovely young woman but with a wicked expression on her face, dragged a young man, Innocence, by the hair. She was preceded by a haggard male figure symbolizing Envy, and was attended by two female figures, representing Artifice and Deceit. Behind them, ignored by all, was a female figure representing Truth. By combining personification with narrative, such a picture demonstrates the capacity of painting to make complex philosophical statements.

The ancients were clearly intrigued by other aspects of art than those dependent on the experience of particular objects: they included the high





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prices commanded by certain works and the social prestige enjoyed by some artists. Pliny never fails to mention when a picture or statue has been bought for an extraordinary sum, or, as sometimes happens, cannot be bought at all: the people of Knidos would not part with their beloved *Aphrodite*, even when a foreign king who coveted it offered to pay off their considerable public debt in return. Another king is said to have discontinued his siege of the city of Rhodes for fear of damaging a famous picture by Protogenes in the area of the city where he had to press his attack. The financial and social success enjoyed by famous artists is also an object of interest: Zeuxis could afford to have his name sewed in gold thread into his garments, and he began to give away his pictures, saying that they could not be bought for any price.

The most famous success story is that of Apelles. Alexander the Great was so fond of him that he forbade anyone else but Apelles to paint his portrait (only Lysippos was allowed to sculpt it), and he let Apelles treat him with an unusual degree of familiarity. One story tells how the emperor came to visit the painter in his studio and began to talk at great length about painting, though he knew nothing about it: Apelles advised him to change the subject, since even the studio assistants had begun to snicker behind his back. The most remarkable indication of Alexander's regard is indicated by the story of how, when he ordered Apelles to make a portrait of his favorite mistress, Campaspe, and realized that in the process of painting her Apelles had fallen in love with her himself, he gave her to him as a gift.

The truthfulness of such stories cannot be confirmed: they are not entirely implausible, yet they smack of legend. Spectacular success of the kind attributed to Apelles was surely exceptional: in general, painters and sculptors were considered manual craftsmen and did not enjoy either great wealth or social prestige. Pliny emphasizes the respect with which the arts were regarded in Greece: he says that in some places there were laws forbidding their practice to slaves, and that not only free men but aristocrats practiced them – and there is some independent evidence to support these claims. But he also betrays what would have been the more commonplace, dismissive attitude when he says that in the case of Campaspe, Alexander acted “without regard for the feelings of his mistress,” who went from being “the property of a great king” to “the property of a painter.” Unique as he was, Apelles became the enduring symbol and standard of artistic success: many a later painter would be praised as “a new Apelles.”

The personalities of artists were another source of fascination. The trait most often associated with them was not eccentricity, but competitiveness:







it is a theme that figures even in myth. The satyr Marsyas considered himself so good at playing the pipes that he challenged Apollo, the god of music, to a contest; Marsyas lost and for his insolence was flayed alive. Arachne, skilled in weaving, challenged Pallas to a similar contest; her reward was to be changed into a spider. Among historical artists, we have already encountered the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasios. A courteous competitiveness is illustrated by the story of a visit Apelles made to his colleague, Protogenes: finding him away from home, he drew a single, exquisitely thin line on an unused panel in the studio. Protogenes, arriving home, knew exactly who his caller had been, since only the famous Apelles could possess such skill. Protogenes nevertheless drew an even finer line, and told his housekeeper to show it to Apelles if he should call again. When Apelles returned, and managed to paint a third line, finer still, Protogenes conceded defeat. The two artists agreed that the panel should be preserved as a demonstration of skill, and it became a famous picture, winding up in the collection of the Caesars in Rome before being destroyed in a fire.

Arrogance and obsessiveness were also thought to be common in artists. Parrhasios called himself “prince of painters,” and went around claiming that he had brought painting to perfection. Apollodorus, known as “the madman,” was so critical of his own work that he destroyed much of it, “his intense passion for his art making him unable to be satisfied.” Apelles, who was gracious toward rivals, made a point of working every day in order to keep up his skill. He challenged himself “to paint what could not be painted” – things like thunderstorms – and did not think it importunate to make portraits of people as they died.

Ancient anecdotes also testify to the fascination of the creative process. Though artistic practice was mostly laborious and formulaic, there was an awareness that following the rules does not always yield the desired result. Protogenes was once trying unsuccessfully to render the appearance of foam around a dog’s mouth; exasperated, he finally threw his sponge at the panel, which hit it in such a way as to get just the effect he wanted. One of the most famous stories concerns the ever-flamboyant Zeuxis: asked to produce a picture of Helen of Troy (or Aphrodite) for the people of Croton, he demanded first that he be allowed to see the five most beautiful girls in the town naked, so that he might choose the best parts of each to form an ideally beautiful figure. Though this story also savors of the legendary, like those of Pygmalion and of Apelles and Campaspe, it makes the more serious art-theoretical point that the artist does not simply copy what he sees but combines and distills his experiences in order to arrive at some kind of ideal conception.





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Discussions of what we would call inspiration are rare in connection with the visual arts: the most striking are all associated with the figure of Zeus, now lost, made by Phidias for the temple at Olympia. An epigram in *The Greek Anthology* says that “either God came from heaven to Earth to show thee his image, Phidias, or thou didst go to see God.” Some sources say that Phidias had refused to use a model, claiming that his conception of Zeus was inspired by a reading of Homer. Cicero says that Phidias “did not look at any person as a model, but there dwelt in his mind an idea of extraordinary beauty, and at this he fixed his attention constantly, guiding his art and hand to produce its likeness.” The ability to imagine the ideal, to produce an image that does not so much resemble nature as surpass it – erotically motivated in the story of Pygmalion – here reveals its moral dimension, its claim upon the most exalted values. So impressive was the Olympian *Zeus* that it was often credited with having revitalized religious devotion.

Yet another feature of the attitude toward art reflected in ancient literature is an awareness of its historical development, usually expressed in terms of “progress” and “decline.” Pliny’s account of the arts is presented as a history, with individual artists making contributions to the improvement of technique in a way that we associate more readily with science or technology than art. The understanding of art as something that develops over time seems to have been widespread: Cicero and Quintilian, writing about the development of rhetoric, compare it to the development of painting in ways that suggest that the history of art was familiar to their readers – the kind of thing any educated person would know.

Pliny also presents a tantalizing record of what may have been the beginning of art theory. The sculptor Polykleitos, active around the middle of the fifth century BCE, “made what artists call a ‘canon’ or model statue, because they draw their outlines from it as from a sort of standard; and he alone of mankind is deemed by means of one work of art to have created the art itself.” This notice does not give us many details, but the *Canon* was famous in antiquity: though the original bronze was lost, numerous marble copies survive (figure 1.3). Other sources tell us that Polykleitos also wrote an essay explaining the principles upon which the sculpture had been based, and this essay, like the statue, came to be known as the *Canon*. This text was also lost, but it too seems to have been well known, and there are several significant indications of its content scattered through other ancient writings.

The *Canon* will be discussed in more detail in the third section of this chapter; for now, it is enough to attend to Pliny’s remark that Polykleitos





was believed to have “created the art itself” in a single work. This does not mean simply that the statue was so innovative that it set a new standard; it means that Polykleitos had produced a work in which the whole art of sculpture seemed to be contained – in the same way that Homer’s shield of Achilles contains the entire art of goldsmithy. The shield is a microcosm, a world in itself; for, in addition to the cities and the landscapes with all their inhabitants, it represents the order of the cosmos: “therein he wrought the earth, therein the heavens, therein the sea, and the unwearied sun and the moon at the full, and therein all the constellations wherewith heaven is crowned.” The *Canon* is simply a microcosm of a different kind.

When a picture succeeds in creating an illusion, it can be said to point beyond itself. It points in this way when it suggests physical presence; it points further when it represents a story or an emotional state or a type of character; further still when it gives form to ideals of physical beauty or moral perfection, or attempts to express complex philosophical truths. Where might such pointing end? Perhaps where the individual work of art points to art itself. Texts like Homer’s and Pliny’s suggest that this idea is not at all new, but was present in remote antiquity and was fundamental to ancient notions of what art is. They suggest that the desire to define art in general could contribute to the production of particular works, that those works were held to be greatest in which that aim was realized, and that art was thus recognized as in some essential way a self-reflexive – we might say theoretical – activity.



**Figure 1.3** Polykleitos, *Doryphoros* (Roman marble copy after 5th-century BCE Greek bronze original), National Museum, Naples.





## Imitation and Knowledge

The myths, anecdotes, descriptions, and epigrams presented in the previous section all agree in the fundamental assumption that works of art are objects made by hand, distinct as a category from objects that come into being as a result of “natural” processes, even though people sometimes wondered whether birds’ nests or beehives were not a kind of art. “Art” (*techné*) is a category thus defined by its opposition to “nature,” yet – as the same sources clearly indicate – the relation between art and nature is not *simply* one of opposition. The idea that art *imitates* nature was a commonplace in antiquity, and its philosophical elaboration at the hands of Plato (c.428–c.348 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE), especially of the relation it implies between art and knowledge, becomes decisive for all subsequent thought about what art is.

Plato’s attitude toward art is famously problematical. His most notorious and extensive treatment of it occurs in his most ambitious work, the dialogue known as *The Republic*, an attempt to describe the sociopolitical order of the ideal city-state. Early on, Plato has his spokesman, Socrates, declare that the arts of poetry and music, while beneficial in many ways, can also exert a harmful influence on society, especially on the young, and must be strictly controlled by those in authority. Poets like Homer tell stories that would lead one to believe that the gods are wicked and deceitful, for instance; such tales undermine religion and society’s entire system of values: in the ideal city-state, only stories in which the gods are represented as good, heroes are always heroic, and evildoers are always punished, are to be allowed. Similarly, only those forms of music that encourage virtues useful to the citizen or soldier will be permitted. Socrates admits that the visual arts can also have a positive influence, encouraging the recognition and appreciation of qualities like harmony and grace – “there is certainly much of these qualities in painting and in all similar craftsmanship: weaving is full of them and embroidery and architecture and likewise the manufacture of household furnishings” – but the visual arts too must be controlled: artists must be forbidden to represent “the evil disposition, the licentious, the illiberal, the graceless, either in the likeness of living creatures or in buildings or in any other product of their art.”

We find this advocacy of censorship reprehensible, and the ruthless elitism on which the whole system depends certainly does not make it any more appealing, but there is a forward-looking – indeed, revolutionary – aspect to Plato’s extremism. Poetry and music had played an important role in Greek education since earliest times: in attacking them, his aim is





to make the case that philosophy, not poetry, should occupy the central place in the education of the ruling class. Only philosophy can provide the mental training comprehensive yet rigorous enough to prepare future leaders with the ability to discern truth and to establish and maintain a just society. As we shall see, Plato developed his position in order to meet not only the ancient challenge of poetry, but also the newer one of rhetoric.

After having outlined his utopia in more detail – as well as his case for philosophy as the best, indeed the only true, mode of knowing – Plato returns to his offensive against poetry, music, and the visual arts, and gives it both a more aggressive edge and a more explicit philosophical grounding. What is fundamentally objectionable about these arts is that they are all based on imitation (*mimesis*): they provide us with reproductions of something, yet always fail to reproduce its real essence or value. A painting, for instance, reproduces only “appearances” (*phantasma*). Poetry has the same problem: Homer represents only the “appearance” of virtue as manifest in, say, Achilles, not virtue itself. It has been suggested that Plato’s disdain for *mimesis* also has to do with its importance in traditional culture, with its origins in ritual and magic, and that, even as practiced in the more evolved forms of dance, drama, and poetic recitation in Plato’s day, still reminded him of the primitive, superstitious system of values he wanted to supplant.

Plato does not deny the fascination or amusement value of imitation; what he questions is its capacity to serve the pursuit of truth. At best, mimetic images distract us from what is essential by emphasizing appearances; at worst, they lead the mind in precisely the wrong direction, filling it with lies. He insists that a beautiful design based on geometric principles, no matter how pleasant to look at, is still less useful to the mind than the contemplation of the principles themselves. In another place, he makes a distinction between sculptors who copy the proper proportions of the figure they imitate, and those who then deliberately distort the proportions in order to make the statue seem more graceful from a certain angle: the visual arts are given to such cheap trickery; they customarily make concessions to the limitations of our senses, rather than appealing to our powers of rational understanding. Imitation is a realm of “play,” with no potential for serious content, and, in a memorable phrase, paintings are called “dreams for those who are awake.”

Plato’s extremism must be seen as a product of his concern to establish once and for all the true basis of knowledge. At one point he uses the example of a horse’s harness. Who really “knows” the harness? Is it the craftsman who knows how to make it, or the painter who knows how to



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represent it? Clearly, the craftsman's knowledge is superior: he must have some understanding of the function it serves, of its parts and materials, and how they are to be combined; a painter need only know how the finished product looks. But superior even to the craftsman's understanding is that of the expert rider, who knows how to use the harness properly to control his horse. His understanding of the harness assumes its place within a more comprehensive kind of knowledge. Plato thus creates a hierarchical relationship between three modes of knowing, three kinds of art: that of the rider, that of the craftsman, and – at the bottom of the heap – that of the painter.

It is worth noting Plato's insistence that the craftsman – the harness-maker or potter or weaver – occupies a higher place in the hierarchy of knowledge than the painter. The object that the craftsman produces has a functional value; his expertise is specific and he makes no claim to universal knowledge. The knowledge of the imitative artist – whether he be a poet, musician, actor, painter or sculptor – is essentially false, no deeper or more comprehensive, Plato says, than that of a man who holds a mirror up to the world and turns around and around in one place, casting back reflections of everything around him.

In the satirical little dialogue *Ion*, Plato insists upon an even more emphatic separation of art from knowledge. He demonstrates that imitative artists – the example is a rhapsode, a performer of musical verse – do not really understand why they do what they do. They may be “inspired,” but then it is “a god or a muse” who “speaks” through them, in which case they do not proceed by “art” in the commonly accepted sense. It is significant that Plato's discussion of inspiration refers to poetry and not the visual arts: there is no suggestion that the painter or sculptor can be inspired. Despite his contempt for poets and his high regard for useful craftsmen, Plato thus reproduces the commonplace assumption that arts involving reading and writing are of a higher kind than those that depend on manual labor.

Plato's disdain for the kind of knowledge imitative art requires must be understood in relation to his radical and profoundly influential conception of what knowledge is. For him, the true knowledge of anything is a knowledge of its ideal form (*idea*). Beds differ, but we readily recognize all as beds, and this is enough to indicate that there is some single idea or form of bed in which all physical beds somehow participate. It is this idea of the bed that, in Plato – as in all idealistic philosophy – is the *real* bed. What we would call real beds – the ones we sleep on – are all only partial and imperfect reproductions of the ideal. It is important to note that, by “idea,” Plato does not mean what we generally use





the word to mean: the representation of something in the mind of a particular individual. For him, real ideas have an objective existence: they dwell in a realm apart, a realm that he describes in other of his writings in terms suggestive of later Christian conceptions of heaven. Our mental representations *may* bear some resemblance to these ideas, but not necessarily, and any resemblance they do have may stand in no closer relation to the ideas themselves than appearance does to essence.

Radical idealism of this kind seems a little silly when applied to beds, but consider the examples of “justice,” or “goodness,” or “beauty”: such things are never wholly present in the world of our day-to-day experience, yet the fact that we find such concepts meaningful at all is profoundly significant; it seems to testify to their reality. When we are able to say about an action that we witness, for instance, that it is just or good, we testify to the fact that we have come into contact with a higher, invisible reality, that we have seen through the limited world of sense experience to something purer and more perfect. Elsewhere in his writings, Plato develops the notion that our ability to recognize abstract qualities in particular cases comes from our existence before birth, when our immortal souls lived in the heavenly realm of ideas and knew them directly, in their pure form. When we, in our earthly life, recognize justice in some particular instance of just behavior, it is our memory that has been jogged: we remember – or, to translate Plato’s own term more exactly, we “unforget” – our previous, more perfect life.

Though attached to a metaphysics that most of us would not accept, there is something intuitively compelling and intensely beautiful about this account of experience. At the deepest level, perhaps, Plato’s insistence on an ideal order above or behind the world accessible to sense is a way of explaining the feeling that we, as moral agents, make a crucial contribution to reality; that reality in some way depends upon our witnessing and our active intervention. One does not have to be an idealist to sense that seeing the truth of things necessarily involves seeing “through” them in some way. Plato believed that real insight of this kind is available only to philosophers, but most of us would respond by saying that artists can achieve it too, and that great art does exactly what he says only philosophy can do.

In fact, there are plenty of indications in Plato’s work of a more generous attitude toward art. We have already noted his idea that well-made objects bring us into contact with harmony and grace. In some places he goes much further. At two points in *The Republic*, for instance, he likens his own philosophical method to that of an artist: in trying to define the ideal state, he says that he is like the painter who tries to





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depict, not any particular living person, but the most beautiful and perfect person imaginable. He thus seems to acknowledge the possibility of a kind of painting that does not imitate mere appearances, but essences – and, what is more, that philosophy itself is a kind of painting. Elsewhere, at several points in his writings, philosophy is likened to music, and in one place, the dialogue *Phaedo*, it is described as “the best kind of music.”

Perhaps Plato’s condemnation of art should be understood as a challenge, a call for a higher, truly philosophical art: it certainly has functioned that way, both in antiquity and in later periods. His idealism provided a set of tools with which to describe what the most serious and exalted art might do; the importance he assigned to beauty, discussed in the next section of this chapter, also offered an enduring positive stimulus. Many ancient writers influenced by Plato did not feel the need to follow him in his assault on art – we will consider the example of Plotinus in the next section – and one source even says that Plato was trained as a sculptor: though implausible, the very existence of such a story indicates a widespread belief that Plato’s attitude toward art was not as rigid as he sometimes makes it seem.

There is some evidence scattered through Plato’s writings of his attitudes toward the art of his own time. His reference to optical adjustments in sculpture, also to illusionistic stage painting, indicate that he was aware of outstanding developments: these references usually occur in a strongly negative context, but they also reveal a genuine appreciation of the technical achievements involved, and it is very likely that he enjoyed art – as he enjoyed poetry – despite his philosophical misgivings. In one passage he says that he prefers old Egyptian statues to the work of his fellow Greeks because they follow a single, unchanging pattern: this remark suggests a real antipathy to contemporary trends, and perhaps even a pointed response to his older contemporary, the sculptor Lysippos, who claimed to be less concerned with the way human figures actually are than the way they appear.

Aristotle, who was Plato’s student, also understood art as involving the imitation of nature, but he had an altogether more positive view of imitation, as well as a more positive view of nature – that imperfect realm of ceaseless change and deceptive appearance that Plato so mistrusted. For Aristotle, imitation is a natural instinct and a mode of knowing: it is by imitating adults that children learn. As adults, we delight in imitation for its own sake – as is proven by the fact that we enjoy pictures of things that, in themselves, we would find disgusting – but our pleasure also depends on the fact that we associate imitation with learning, and learning is always pleasant.







Aristotle's theory of knowledge is unlike Plato's. Where Plato stresses the sharp division between appearance and essence, Aristotle describes a step-by-step process that leads from our experience of the one to our understanding of the other. In the opening pages of his *Metaphysics*, he describes how the artist, like everyone else, learns from experience: his memories of particular instances help him arrive at an understanding of causal principles. The example Aristotle uses is the "art" of medicine: anyone with some experience of life may know that, in a particular case, a particular symptom calls for a particular treatment; only the true doctor, the "man of art," understands the symptom as the manifestation of a condition – the product of a certain cause – and how, in any case, that condition should be treated. Art is a *systematic* understanding of cause and effect; it is essentially a mode of rational thought.

Elsewhere in his writings, especially in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle establishes a hierarchical relationship among the modes of knowing and clearly defines the place of art. He identifies three modes: the theoretical or speculative (what we would call abstract thought), the practical (which has to do with action), and the productive or factive (which has to do with making something). Philosophy, properly speaking, belongs to the first, which is the highest kind; art to the last and lowest. In another place he divides the "rational soul" into two parts, the speculative or contemplative (which addresses those things that are eternal and unchanging, the objects of philosophy) and the deliberative (which addresses those things that vary, that can be other than they are or not at all). The higher, contemplative part is composed of three "faculties": science, intuition, and wisdom (which is the highest, most perfect mode of knowing); the deliberative part consists of two: prudence (which covers all forms of conduct), and art (which, again, has to do with making). Art is defined as "a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning." Though Aristotle places art in the lowest position, he firmly identifies it as a mode of knowing: where Plato had been concerned to sever art from knowledge, Aristotle insists upon connecting them.

Plato seems to have thought of imitation largely in terms of a resemblance between the finished product and an object in nature. Perhaps because Aristotle understands art primarily as a process of making, he sees imitation rather as a resemblance between two kinds of becoming. Like nature, art causes things to come into being, but where nature is a principle of coming-to-be, or movement, in the thing itself (the seed will naturally become a tree), art is a principle of movement in something other than the thing moved (a stone must be acted upon by a sculptor to become a statue). Nature and art run parallel to each other, so to speak;





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the artist does not so much seek to imitate the way nature *looks* – though he may do that as well – as the way it *works* in causing things to come into being. Aristotle clarifies this point in another place, his treatise *On the Parts of Animals*: “Art is an order of the work” – that is, the working process – “independent of the material.”

Aristotle’s most influential ideas about art are found in the *Poetics*, a brief treatise which comes down to us in incomplete form. Its subject is poetry, which is provisionally defined as the “imitation of life,” by which Aristotle seems to mean primarily the imitation of living persons, of human action. The different forms of poetry have evolved out of our natural delight in imitation. In a manner characteristic of his systematic method, Aristotle classifies them according to the means, the objects, and modes of imitation. Of principal interest to him are the two “best” forms: tragedy and epic. These are better primarily because they represent better sorts of men – heroes.

Of the two, Aristotle clearly prefers tragedy, and much of the surviving text is directed toward demonstrating its superiority. Tragedy had evolved from ritual forms and was still highly ritualized in his time; in offering his famous definition of it, he accommodates tradition while attempting to discover some normative principle:

Tragedy, then, is the representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude, by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions.

The idea of “relief” (*catharsis*) has proved to be the point of greatest psychological interest to modern readers; elsewhere Aristotle speaks of the pleasure we take in feeling such emotions when we know that we are not personally involved in the events represented on stage.

Proceeding with his rational redefinition of the form, Aristotle distills tragedy into six ingredients: plot, character depiction, thought (the expression of internal states through words and actions), diction (speech), and “song and spectacle.” By far the most important is the plot: it is both the most essential and the hardest to get right. He calls it “the soul of tragedy” and likens it to the role of drawing in painting: “if a man smeared a panel with the loveliest colors at random, it would not give as much pleasure as a simple outline in black and white.” Many playwrights do not recognize that a tragedy is primarily a representation of action, and only secondarily of the persons performing the action, so that they





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tend to put too much emphasis on character depiction; in so doing, they confuse the aims of tragedy with those of the epic poem. A tragic plot must be selective and tightly structured: like a living body, it must have a beginning, middle, and end; it must confine itself to a single sequence of events, with the episodes arranged in such a way that, if any one were changed or taken away, the effect of the whole would be seriously damaged. Aristotle's attentiveness to the effect of a well-structured plot is revealed in his remark that we are most moved when "incidents are unexpected, yet one is a consequence of another."

All the elements of tragedy must be made to serve the plot. The characters should be as noble as possible, but it is more important that they behave in a manner appropriate to their function in the story. Character is revealed by thought, and thought in turn by speech, so that these third and fourth parts of tragedy are also determined by the demands of the whole. The legibility of this overarching structure, the effect of necessity, of inevitability, in the arrangement of every detail, is essential to the particular kind of pleasure or satisfaction that a tragedy gives us.

Because the subject matter of poetry is human action, the poet must possess a knowledge of human nature. For Aristotle, this implies not just a vivid imaginative grasp of particular character types, but an understanding of the general principles that shape and govern them; it is *systematic* in the same way as the doctor's or philosopher's. In his manipulation of well-known stories, the tragic poet in particular has the opportunity to display this kind of understanding:

A poet's object is not to tell what actually happened, but what could or would happen either probably or inevitably . . . The difference between the historian and the poet is that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason, poetry is a more serious and more philosophical thing than history, because poetry tends to give us general truths while history gives us particular facts.

The poet is free to depart from historical truth in order to reveal a higher truth, to demonstrate the enduring principles of human conduct. These principles are the real subject matter of both art and philosophy, and there is no reason why a great tragic poet may not be considered a philosopher.

Where Plato had so stubbornly insisted on the separation between imitative art and true knowledge, Aristotle discovers the ground of their similarity. Again, it should be pointed out that Aristotle argues his case in





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connection with poetry, not the visual arts: while he makes numerous comparisons between poetry and painting, which later theorists of art eagerly cited as evidence of a kinship between the two, he did not pursue the analogy very far.

### **Beauty**

Like the idea that art imitates nature, the idea that beauty is somehow fundamental to art – that beautiful natural forms, for instance, should be the privileged objects of imitation – was highly developed in ancient times. Yet at certain points the pursuit of beauty may seem to lead away from the imitation of nature. The resolution of this potential tension, the justification for the pursuit of beauty in art, again depended on the theory of knowledge, on establishing the status of the beautiful as an object of knowledge.

Beauty played a fundamental role in Plato's philosophy. For him, the ideal form of something is also its most beautiful: the idea of the bed is the most beautiful of beds. Of course, such beauty is not to be confused with what is most pleasing to our senses: the beds that look most beautiful may correspond less to the idea than ones which, by comparison, at first seem unappealing. Yet beauty is an essential attribute of any ideal form: it is not a mere appearance or a lesser substitute for some higher integrity; it is essential to what things are when they are most real. Though in at least one place in his writings, the dialogue known as *Hippias Major*, Plato takes care to distinguish between the beautiful and the good, in others he links them and insists upon the existence of an absolute beauty, which stands with the absolutely true and the absolutely good as a supreme value, and which partakes of their nature. Our encounters with beauty consequently have an important role to play in our growth as individuals and in the search for truth, however much we must be on our guard against the distraction of mere appearances.

The way in which our experiences of the beautiful help us to achieve higher understanding is described most clearly and compellingly in the *Symposium*, perhaps the most beautiful of Plato's dialogues, a series of speeches in praise of love made at a banquet, in which each speaker tries to outdo the one before, until Socrates delivers the most extraordinary of all. Beauty is understood as that which inspires love: love is defined at one point as the desire to possess the beautiful, though the beautiful is then identified with the good. While desire is a longing for what we do not have, it is also an expression of that which is self-sufficient and



eternal – as well as beautiful – in ourselves: at the lowest level, it is the desire to procreate, to reproduce oneself, thus to give oneself a kind of eternal life. Making babies is as close as animals and simple people come to realizing the eternal in themselves, but, for the finer spirit, the kindling of love is the first step in a long spiritual journey, a journey which, if properly pursued, leads toward the understanding of absolute beauty, goodness, and truth. Love, the desire for the beautiful, is thus the sustaining and guiding impulse of philosophy.

The process begins when the lover starts to see the beauty of his beloved in everything around him. He recognizes from this experience that “the beauty of one form is akin to the beauty of another” and will realize that “the beauty in every form is one and the same.” As a result, his desire for any particular instance, or individual, is tempered. Next, he will come to appreciate how the beauty of the mind is more beautiful than that of the body. This recognition leads, in turn, to an understanding of the beauty of moral principles and laws, and, beyond these, of the beauty of abstract thought, especially philosophy. The appreciation of these exalted things results in a further independence from the need for lower ones. For those who persevere in this journey, the true philosophers, the final step is the revelation of absolute beauty:

This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in this relation and ugly in that, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as varying according to its beholders; nor again will this beauty appear to him like the beauty of a face or hands or anything corporeal, or like the beauty of a thought or a science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatever; he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and all other beautiful things as partaking of it, yet in such a manner that, while they come into being and pass away, it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change.

This idea of an ascent, prompted by love, from the particular to the universal, from the many to the one, from the contingent to the absolute, is perhaps Plato’s most profoundly influential contribution; we will see it reappear in various forms in later thought. Again, one need not accept it as stated to find it intuitively compelling: a modern reader inclined to see it as a calculating displacement of erotic energy onto increasingly abstract objects might yet be moved by the way in which it testifies to the reality and intensity of our inner life, to the *dynamic*





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quality of being, and to the fundamental instability or incompleteness of individual identity. Its description of the progress from the sense experience of particulars to the understanding of the absolute is less rigid than the abrupt distinction between appearance and reality expressed elsewhere in Plato's writings, and more nearly anticipates Aristotle's account of how we come to know things.

Plato does not mention the visual arts in this connection. His principal concern is with the relation of beauty to truth, and he is not interested in exploring in detail the nature of physical beauty in any way that would, say, help an artist create a beautiful picture or statue. Yet elsewhere in his work he hints at how one might begin to move in that direction. Our ability to see the resemblances between forms, to see order in the world, depends on our ability to find similarities between objects that do not at first seem similar. To do so implies abstracting, if only unconsciously, a third term, a mean or unit by which both might be measured. Measure involves number, and numbers are, in fact, the most common and paradigmatic kind of idea. Plato mentions that all the arts and forms of higher understanding depend upon a "science of measure"; all involve recognizing and avoiding the extremes of too much and too little, and arriving at some mean. An "art of measurement" thus underlies all the arts, including the "art" of personal conduct: "measure and proportion are everywhere identified with beauty and virtue." Plato's word for proportion is *symmetria*, which does not mean symmetry as we now use the term, but is best translated as "commensurability," the susceptibility of unlike parts to measure by a single unit, a third term.

The belief that numbers constitute the ultimate reality was already well developed by Plato's time: it is traditionally attributed to Pythagoras, a philosopher who lived about a century earlier. Pythagoras claimed to have discovered that the numerical relations governing musical harmony also governed the motion of the stars, and from this he inferred that such relations were the structural principle of the universe. Some of Plato's writings show the influence of Pythagorean doctrine; one way in which it affects his conception of the experience of the beautiful is seen in a passage in which he advises the seeker after truth, in considering the night sky, not to be distracted by the splendor of the spectacle – which is likened to a painting – from the numerical intervals that structure it. In listening to music, by the same token, one ought not to attend to the sensuous delight of the sounds so much as contemplate the numerical relations present in the harmony.

The idea that proper understanding involves determining extremes and avoiding them by choosing a middle path, the mean, was a commonplace





in antiquity: Aristotle made it a systematic practice in defining happiness in his *Ethics*. The notion of measure and of a mean between extremes was also invoked in the *Poetics*, when he says that the ideal plot must form a whole – it must have a beginning, a middle, and an end – and that the whole must not be either too large or too small. He even likens this plot to a living creature, “which, to be beautiful, must be a whole made up of parts presented in a certain order and of a certain magnitude.” His most comprehensive definition of beauty, however, occurs in the *Metaphysics*. Taking issue with those who argue that mathematics can teach us nothing about the good or the beautiful, he says: “The chief forms of beauty are order, symmetry and distinctness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree.”

The idea that a work of art will be more beautiful if it is made according to numerical relationships had been demonstrated at least as early as the mid-fifth century BCE, when the sculptor Polykleitos made the famous figure that came to be known as the *Canon*. One of the most important bits of evidence about this figure is a passage in the medical treatises of Galen. The author is commenting on the opinion of another philosopher that health in the body is the result of a harmony among all its constituent elements:

And beauty, he feels, resides not in the harmony of the elements but in the commensurability [*symmetria*] of the parts, such as the finger to the finger, and of all the fingers to the metacarpus and the wrist, and of these to the forearm, and of the forearm to the arm, and in fact of everything to everything else, as it is written in the *Canon* of Polykleitos. For having taught us in that treatise all the commensurabilities of the body, Polykleitos supported his ideas with a demonstration, a statue of a man made in accordance to his principles, and called the statue itself, like the treatise, the *Canon*.

More testimony about the *Canon* is found in the treatise *On Architecture* by Vitruvius. The third book, on the design of temples, begins with a discussion of the importance of symmetry, which is said in turn to depend upon proportion. Symmetry must be present if the temple is to have the beauty of a well-shaped human body:

For nature composed the human body in such a way that the face, from the chin to the top of the forehead and the lowermost roots of the hairline should be one-tenth [of the total height of the body]; the palm of the hand from the wrist to the tip of the middle finger should measure likewise; the head from the chin to the crown, one-eighth; from the top of the





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chest to hairline including the base of the neck, one-sixth; from the center of the chest to the crown of the head, one-fourth. Of the height of the face itself, one-third goes from the base of the chin to the lowermost part of the nostrils, another third from the base of the nostrils to a point between the eyebrows, and from that point to the hairline, the forehead also measures one-third. The [length of the] foot should be one-sixth the height, the forearm and hand, one fourth, the chest also one-fourth. The other limbs, as well, have their own commensurate proportions, which the famous ancient painters and sculptors employed to attain great and unending praise.

The “famous ancient painters and sculptors” must include Polykleitos. Vitruvius goes on to suggest another system, this one geometric, also derived from the body:

So, too, for example, the center and midpoint of the human body is, naturally, the navel. For if a person is imagined lying back with outstretched arms and feet within a circle whose center is the navel, the fingers and toes will trace the circumference of this circle as they move about. But to whatever extent a circular scheme may be present in the body, a square design may also be discerned there. For if we measure from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head, and this measurement is compared with that of the outstretched hands, one discovers that this breadth equals the height, just as in areas which have been squared off by use of the set square.

It is this second alternative that was illustrated, fifteen centuries after Vitruvius, in a famous drawing by Leonardo da Vinci (figure 1.4); whether this system also derives from Polykleitos, or comes from another source, is uncertain. Vitruvius proceeds to present conflicting ideas as to whether six or ten is the more perfect number, and therefore the more appropriate basis for a proportional system, and then to suggest yet another system of subdivisions based on Greek and Roman money. All this serves to introduce his discussion of the architectural styles, later called “orders” – Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian – each of which involved its own proportional system (figure 1.5). Clearly, there were a variety of canons available in antiquity, for the human body as well as for buildings.

An important contribution to the Platonic tradition of speculation about the nature of beauty and its relation to art was made by the philosopher Plotinus, who lived in the third century CE – seven centuries after Plato – and was the leader of a school of thought that came to be known as Neoplatonism. His writings were collected and edited after his death by one of his followers, Porphyry; the result is a single large treatise, the *Enneads*. Plotinus liked to say that all he wanted to do was clarify and





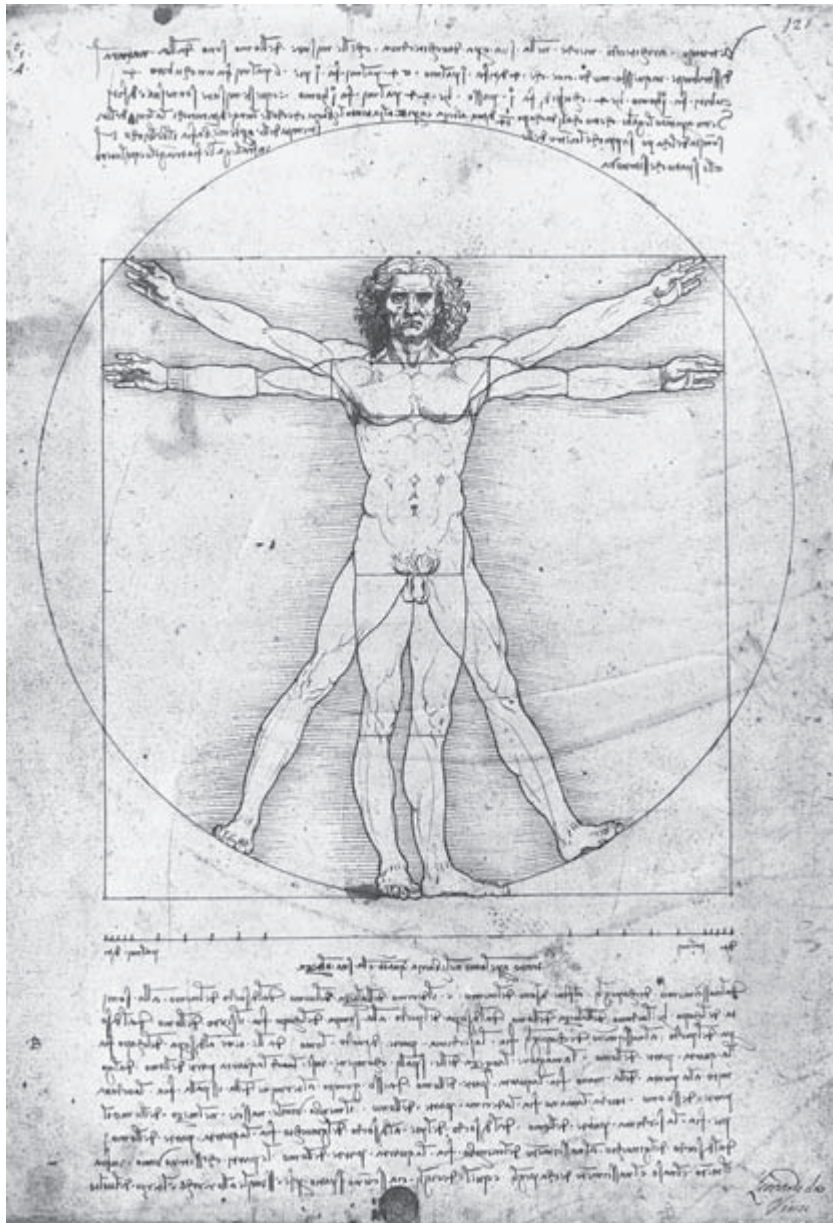


Figure 1.4 Leonardo da Vinci, "Vitruvian Man," c.1487, Accademia Gallery, Venice.





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**Figure 1.5** Comparative diagram of classical architectural orders, from Claude Perrault, *Ordonnance des cinq espèces de colonnes . . .* (Paris, 1683).





systematize Plato, but in fact he and his editor created something new, and some of their most striking innovations concern beauty and art.

Plotinus departs from Plato on two major points: the first, that art is imitation; the second, that beauty can be reduced to a harmonious disposition of parts – proportion or symmetry. “Since one face, constant in symmetry, is sometimes fair and sometimes not, can we doubt that beauty is something more than symmetry, that symmetry itself owes its beauty to some remoter principle?” Any definition of beauty as symmetry is simply inadequate, both because things not divisible into parts, like light, or color, or the dawn, or the night sky, are undeniably beautiful, and because things divisible into parts between which some proportional relationship exists can yet be ugly.

In constructing a cosmic system out of Plato’s writings, Plotinus relies heavily on the notion of love described in the *Symposium*. We recognize beauty chiefly in the emotion it calls up in us, which Plotinus describes as a profound perturbation – in the words of one translator, a “delicious trouble.” That “remoter principle” which bestows beauty on material things is “something perceived at first glance, something the soul names as if from an ancient knowledge and, recognizing, welcomes it, and enters into union with it.” Plato’s concept of spiritual ascent and purification becomes the basis of an entire metaphysical system.

From an understanding of the diversity of human character, the lover comes to achieve a perception of the unity of human nature: Plotinus calls this unity the “world-soul.” The sure grasp of this unity, in turn, leads to the awareness of the power of higher intuition which Plotinus calls “mind.” Practice in intuition then leads to the recognition of mind as a single principle, “world-mind”: this is the highest point that human thought can reach, but it is still one step beneath the ultimate reality, which Plotinus calls the One.

As our thoughts ascend, they retrace the path of our own origin. The One is the source of all being; it is not static but superabundant: its nature is to spill over, to emanate. From its own perfect unity it spills over into diversity, into a less perfect form of existence in which knowing is distinct from being, knower from thing known: this is the realm of mind. From mind, being spills over into soul, a still less perfect realm, in which diversity is governed, that is, structured, by the principles of time and space. At the bottom of this hierarchical scheme is matter. In its pure state, matter is a kind of non-being, a mode of existence untouched by emanations, uninformed by any unifying principle or form. In several places Plotinus uses the metaphors of light and darkness to illustrate the relation of the One to matter.





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The individual human being is composed of matter and soul. The soul, having descended from the One, feels itself to be in exile. In experiencing beauty, it recognizes another part of that unity from which it came and is stimulated by a desire to return to it again – at first through union with the beautiful particular; finally, by virtue of proper intellectual training, in the single principle of mind. The ultimate step, direct union with the One, is beyond the power of the mind to achieve, for mind still requires a distinction between knower and known. In the final leap, so to speak, this distinction would have to dissolve: it can occur only in ecstasy, an inspired, super-rational state, by a direct emanation from above, when absolute being accepts us – if only for a moment – into itself.

What emerges from the *Enneads* is a picture of the universe as a single, vast organism, through which being literally circulates, like blood through the body, downward from the One, then back again. Beauty has an important role to play in this system. For Plotinus, any beauty, even the most physical, is an emanation of the One, and has an absolute value by virtue of its place in the cosmic hierarchy. A degree of unity on one level always serves to lead us upward toward the higher more perfect unity from which it derives. Preoccupied as he is with what lies beyond the world of everyday experience, Plotinus actually helps to redeem mere physical beauty from the suspicion with which Plato had treated it. His sensitivity to physical beauty is revealed many times in the examples he discusses – taken from the natural world as well as from music, dance, and the visual arts.

In such a system, what is of value in art cannot be described in terms of imitation, at least in the usual sense. Artistic creation is rather a re-enactment – and the result, the work of art, a symbol – of natural or divine creation. Just as individual natural objects, in the degree of unity they exhibit, reveal the higher principle of being acting through them, so the artist's products are beautiful by virtue of the intention they reflect – the idea in the artist's mind. A stone that has been fashioned into a figure is more beautiful than an unworked stone because in a statue matter has been patterned, given a degree of unity which moves it toward the unity of the One. The artist imposing his idea on resistant matter is like the One spilling over into less perfect modes of being.

In one way, this conception of the creative act brings Plotinus close to Aristotle – for whom the artist works in a manner parallel to nature, emulating its processes. The difference is that, for Aristotle, the validity of the result is still to be measured in terms of its relation to some external standard. For Plotinus, all that matters is the relation of the





finished product to the idea in the artist's mind; in fact, the finished product is always much less important than the idea. The result will never perfectly reflect his intentions, just as no emanation of the One is as perfect as the One itself.

The work of art is a reflection of the artist's idea, but how is one to understand and assess the value of that idea? Does it have the objective truth of a Platonic idea, or only a relative value as the product of an individual, idiosyncratic imagination? The answer, for Plotinus, is clearly the former – at least in the cases that matter. The sculptor Phidias, he says, did not create the great statue of Zeus at Olympia by copying any model in nature, but by conceiving its form in his mind. Nevertheless, this shape is the one that Zeus himself would *necessarily* have taken had he chosen to become visible. The artist attained through contemplation a point at which a direct emanation from above was granted: the statue represents the real essence of divinity making itself perceptible to human sense.

In this way, art can rival the very highest achievements of philosophy and theology. Another passage offers a revealing perspective on how the process works:

Those ancient sages who sought to secure the presence of divine beings by the building of shrines and statues showed insight into the nature of the One; they perceived that though the soul is everywhere traceable, its presence will be secured all the more readily when an appropriate receptacle is elaborated, a place specially capable of receiving some portion or aspect of it, something reproducing or representing it, serving like a mirror to catch an image of it.

Here the image functions as a kind of talisman, an instrument for drawing down and storing divine power. Though Plotinus implies that such idols are only ever partial and imperfect expressions of the One – and thereby moves in the direction of a rational monotheism – he plainly understands the power of art in terms of primitive magic. One cannot imagine Plato approving of the way in which his disciple thus surrenders the rigorous distinction between truth and superstition.

## Rhetoric

The art of public speaking – rhetoric or oratory – played an extremely important role in the ancient world: it was an essential skill for lawyers,





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politicians, and diplomats; military commanders too were expected to be able to rouse their troops before a battle with a stirring speech. Rhetoric was even something of a public entertainment. The leading orators developed great reputations; one imagines that the crowds that gathered to hear two well-known speakers debate a case were as intrigued by the professional rivalry as by the issues at stake. Some orators specialized in virtuoso displays of rhetorical skill, arguing one side of a question until the audience was persuaded, then arguing the other side with equal conviction.

It is not surprising, therefore, that rhetoric developed a vast theoretical and critical literature of its own: to judge from what remains, much more than concerned the visual arts, poetry, and music combined. Because the rules of rhetoric were felt to be applicable to writing – and to poetry as well as to prose – rhetorical principles governed the discussion of literature in general. It is in rhetorical theory, for instance, that one finds the most sophisticated analysis of literary devices and effects, but it is an indication of what rhetoric meant to the ancient world that one also finds much more. Cicero, the greatest of the Roman orators and an important theorist, believed that “eloquence” was a civilizing force, the fountain from which flow all the institutions and benefits of civilized life, the arts and the sciences. Quintilian, a follower of Cicero, showed how a training in rhetoric might form the basis of an ideal education. Rhetoric embraced philosophical concerns as well as poetic ones: it might be useful to think of it as a middle realm between poetry and philosophy.

Another point of importance is the immense influence of this literature in later phases of European civilization. The classics of rhetorical theory were well known during the Middle Ages; during the Renaissance they became the basis of what used to be called liberal education. Cicero, in particular, became a supreme cultural hero. He had suggested that the ideal man, if he ever were to exist, would have to be an orator; and because he himself had written philosophical essays, on the one hand, and led an active and heroic political life, on the other, he was regarded as very nearly the perfect man, and thus the proof of his own claim. All educated Europeans, from the Renaissance down to the time of World War I, knew their Cicero: an indication of how much things have changed is that only students of Latin and cultural historians read him now.

Rhetorical theory deserves attention here because of this influence. The entire vocabulary of literary stylistics, which was soon adapted to the visual arts, derives from it. In addition, rhetorical theory preserved and elaborated in a more accessible form many philosophical ideas bearing upon literature and art: Cicero’s adaptation of Plato’s theory of ideas to his own definition of ideal eloquence probably introduced more readers





to Plato's thought than the philosopher's own writings. On a deeper level, however, because rhetoric was an art that mediated so directly between intellectual and practical – especially political – life, it offered to later periods an appealing model of what art might do; it brought with it a particular notion of ideal personhood, one that can be said to ground identity itself in a kind of artistic performance.

Rhetorical theory was already well developed by the late fifth century BCE. A number of treatises were in circulation; none survives in anything but small fragments and excerpts in the writings of later authors, and these suggest that the approach was practical and technical. Several of the authors were Sophists, however, and we know enough about this school of thought to supplement the fragments in an illuminating way. Though their opinions varied, most Sophists believed that the kind of truth pursued by philosophy is either inaccessible to the human mind, or irrelevant, and that in its absence there is only belief: the power to persuade, to manipulate belief through the use of language, is the highest intellectual skill; the pursuit of power through eloquence replaces the pursuit of wisdom. They insisted that rhetoric should be the basis of education – that it should assume the position traditionally occupied by poetry and that Plato would try to claim for philosophy – and they were energetic campaigners for their cause. Plato seems to have been attracted to them early in his career, but soon rejected them, and many of his writings are direct attacks upon them. The formation of his own ideas seems to have owed a good deal to the negative stimulus provided by the Sophists.

The first complete surviving treatise on rhetoric was written by Aristotle. As one would expect, it is characterized by a breadth of intellectual perspective, a speculative, rather than practical or technical approach. He defines rhetoric in general as “the faculty of discerning the means of persuasion in any case,” and he clearly divides it into different categories. His first concern, however, is with the relation of rhetoric to truth. The art of speaking can be easily misused, he admits, but most good things can; it can also be a useful means of defending the truth against those who lie. He goes on to define the nature of rhetorical reasoning in relation to logic, saying that where logic makes use of the syllogism – a series of propositions which lead to an inevitable conclusion – rhetoric employs the enthymeme, a syllogism in which one of the propositions is left unstated, or in which the propositions are probable rather than demonstrably true. In marking the difference between rhetoric and philosophy so carefully, he seems to be responding both to the challenge of the Sophists, with their radical relativism, and to Plato's sweeping repudiation of them in the interests of an equally radical idealism.





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Like the tragic poet, Aristotle's orator must possess a practical knowledge of human nature, which will enable him to represent the actions of men he attacks or defends, as well as fashion arguments that will appeal to the various "classes and conditions" of men. Aristotle provides an inventory of social groups – rich, poor, middle class, educated and uneducated, noblemen, professionals, artisans, and slaves – as well as drawing attention to the differences between the young, the middle aged, and the elderly. These groups tend to have certain traits that the orator must know. When he wishes to describe the actions of a young man, for instance, he should make them seem rash and impulsive (if he wishes to blame them) or bold and idealistic (if he wishes to praise them). Similarly, if he wishes to appeal to a group of young men, he should speak boldly, with energy, and suggest a tendency to get carried away by feeling; if his auditors are old men, he must come across as a person of judgment, thoughtful, and inclined to caution.

Aristotle is well aware that the successful speech is not always the most truthful speech; rhetoric, especially the narration of events in a lawsuit, is governed by the same principles of probability and necessity that he describes in the *Poetics*. It is much more important that a story seem plausible than that it actually be true: an audience or jury will be more readily persuaded by a lie which conforms to their expectations than a truth which defies them. In narrating or explaining the actions of his client or his adversary, the orator must take account of this fact, select details with care and present them in such a way that the actions conform to general preconceptions about human nature.

If the list of the "classes and conditions" of men presents a survey of human nature in breadth, so to speak, Aristotle also provides a catalogue of emotional states which surveys it in depth. He describes a range of emotions, their causes and consequences, and the ways in which people experiencing them tend to behave: the orator must have a sure grasp of these as well if his representations of human conduct are to persuade, but each class, condition, and emotional state also demands a slightly different strategy on the part of the orator, each must be described, or addressed, in a different way. Aristotle comes close to seeming like a Sophist when he says that "every condition of life and moral habit has a language appropriate to it." Yet what is most remarkable about these catalogues is not the veracity of each individual characterization so much as the impression they give of constituting a kind of system, of providing a map, so to speak, of the human condition as a whole. This orderliness, this systematic approach, which makes this part of the *Rhetoric* into a handbook of practical psychology and sociology, works to ground the







potentially infinite diversity of human nature in a comprehensive unity; it represents rhetoric reclaimed, as it were, brought under the synoptic vision of philosophy.

Perhaps the single most important principle of rhetorical theory is that of propriety or *decorum*. In the most general terms, it is the principle that governs the relation between form, content, and audience. What one has to say determines how one says it, but the circumstances in which it is said – which include one’s own position, the position and attitude of those one is addressing, as well as the purpose one wishes to achieve by speaking – will also determine how one says it. All three factors need not be equally important in all cases, of course. A writer may take his audience for granted and devote himself entirely to working out a satisfactory relationship between content and form. An orator may let his choice of both content and form be shaped by his audience. If he is a diplomat, the content of whose statement is not his to change and whose audience may not want to hear it, he will probably devote his attention to clothing it in the least offensive form possible. Adherence to decorum requires a comprehensive understanding of expressive possibilities combined with an acute sensitivity to social circumstances and the intellectual flexibility – the sheer ability to think on one’s feet – to be continually adjusting the one to the other.

Though decorum may thus seem to demand a rather servile willingness to accommodate oneself to external conditions, rhetorical theorists almost always treat it as a *positive* principle: they emphasize the way in which it enables them to negotiate circumstances and to generate an entire speech – to deduce every detail of its structure and style, down to the choice of individual words – from general considerations of form, content, and audience. Decorum guarantees both the internal consistency – the stylistic unity – of the speech and its appropriateness to its context; it adjusts the order of the work of art to the order of the world beyond it.

Aristotle himself has relatively little to say about style in the *Rhetoric*. He discusses a few verbal ornaments of the kind that would later be called “tropes” (*tropoi*) or “figures” (*figurae*), such as metaphor. He discusses word choice in some detail: the words of an oration must not mimic too closely the patterns of everyday speech; they must be artful enough to set themselves apart, but they must not be so artful as to seem contrived, affected, or pompous. In general, he advocates his usual policy of the middle path between extremes. He refers readers to the *Poetics*, where some aspects of rhythm and word choice are discussed at greater length: again, if rhetoric touches on philosophy at one end, it touches on poetry at the other.



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Later theorists went much further, dividing speeches into different parts, classifying the various types of argument, often providing lengthy inventories of ornaments illustrated with numerous examples from the works of famous writers, and offering detailed instruction in metrics and word choice. Quintilian, for example, distinguishes between tropes and figures: he classes metaphor among the former, first identifying three types, then suggesting another, four-part division susceptible of further subdivision. Other theorists advanced different systems, and even within each system there was a great deal of overlap: the same passage from a speech or poem might be described by different theorists as making use of different ornaments, and an individual writer might have a hard time distinguishing the effects of several superimposed ornaments in a single passage. Combinations of ornaments were sometimes identified as independent classes.

Despite this tendency to over-complication, rhetorical theory is an effective tool for the analysis of artful language, and some of the ancient terminology is still in use. Metaphor, for instance, which Quintilian calls *translatio* (a literal equivalent of the Greek, meaning to “carry over”), and identifies as “the most common and by far the most beautiful” of tropes, refers to the substitution of one thing for another in order to suggest a similarity between them. When we describe a man as “a fountain of ideas,” or as “the shepherd of his people,” we suggest a similarity that vividly inflects our representation of him. Another common figure is metonymy, which involves replacing the name of a thing with a word denoting something related to it in some way: the expression “Ceres spoiled,” for instance, intensifies the image of a ruined harvest by suggesting that the goddess of the harvest herself has been violated. Yet another term is synecdoche, the substitution of a part for the whole – as in the expression “all hands on deck” – or the whole for a part; it also applies to the substitution of a more specific term for a general one, as when we say “cut-throat” for “murderer,” or the more general for the specific, as when we say “creature” for “man.”

Such “figurative” language – departures from ordinary or expected usage – engages our imaginations and intensifies our response to what is said. On a deeper level, however, orators seemed to have understood that the distinction between the literal and the figurative is far from fixed – that the imagination is always at work in our response to language and in the way we make sense of things generally. Quintilian points out how even peasants use metaphors when they call a bud a “gem,” or when they say that soil is “thirsty.” The *visual* nature of the imagination in particular is an extremely powerful force: Quintilian says that metaphor “is





designed to move the feelings, to give special distinction to things and place them vividly before the eyes.” He also describes a device called *enargeia* (which he translates as “vivid representation”), by which a speaker may embellish an account with details that force the hearer to reckon with it in visual terms: “For oratory fails of its full effect, and does not assert itself as it should, if its appeal is merely to the hearing, and if the judge feels that the facts on which he has to give his decision are merely being narrated to him, and not displayed before the eyes of the mind.”

Other similarities between verbal and visual artifice were observed: just as Aristotle had compared poetry and painting at several points in the *Poetics*, rhetorical theorists made use of analogies with painting in order to clarify their discussion of various techniques. Quintilian likens *sententia* – aphorisms or pithy remarks – to the highlights painters employ to enhance the three-dimensionality of their pictures: brilliantly effective when used sparingly, they can quickly become tiresome, just as too many highlights can confuse and undermine the illusion of forms in space. Rhetorical theorists also commonly referred to their various devices as “colors” – a metaphor that could suggest either decorative or deceptive qualities.

An important feature of ancient rhetorical theory – an extension, essentially, of the principle of decorum – is the idea that the various styles available to speakers fall into categories which can be arranged hierarchically. The simplest and most commonplace scheme was the distinction between “low,” “middle,” and “high” styles: modes of speaking appropriate to trivial, middling, and exalted subject matter, respectively. This tripartite division was too simple for some theorists. Demetrius of Phalerum described four styles – the “plain,” the “elegant,” the “elevated,” and the “forceful” – and listed the themes, arrangements, figures, and metric rhythms appropriate to each.

The forceful style – the word Demetrius uses, *deimos*, is usually translated as “terrible,” meaning “awe-inspiring” or “overwhelming” – deserves special attention because it is characterized by a deliberate bluntness or clumsiness of expression that seems to ignore all the rules of good speech. An orator may use it when he wishes to give the impression that he is in the grip of a powerful emotion or a profound idea and cannot be bothered with the usual stylistic refinements. In other words, it is an artful artlessness, a kind of speech that turns the limits of speech to advantage. In the hands of a master, even silence can be made eloquent, as when Demosthenes, attacking an opponent, said: “I could on my part . . . but I do not desire to say anything offensive.” Nothing Demosthenes could have said, Demetrius observes, would have been as effective as that ellipsis.





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The principle is similar to the one employed by the painter Timanthes when he veiled the face of Agamemnon in his *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*.

Another theorist, Hermogenes, believed that the different styles were ideas in the Platonic sense, essences that the orator should strive to embody as fully as he can, but which can never be perfectly realized in any single oration. He identified seven such “ideas of style,” which he subdivided into others. For the seventh, he used the same word, *deinos*, that Demetrius had used for his “forceful” style, but he defined it differently – as a mastery of the other six styles and an ability to deploy them at will: it represents an ideal or absolute eloquence, the power of which is “terrible.”

In addition to comprehensive treatises, there were entire works devoted to a single style. The most famous and influential of these, traditionally attributed to a writer named Longinus, is a study of the “elevated” or “sublime” (*hypsos*) in literature. As with the “forceful” style of Demetrius, the sublime can involve a certain disregard for refinement that suggests a mind preoccupied with more important things. Examples are taken from all over ancient literature and even include the opening words of *Genesis* – grand and powerful despite their simplicity. This sensitivity to the way in which departures from the rules can sometimes be effective, this consciousness of the fact that systems of rules, however elaborate, must always be flexible enough to allow for such departures, is a good indication of the real acuity and intellectual vitality of ancient rhetorical theory. The awareness that art depends upon rules in some essential way, and yet that any system of rules must remain open-ended, is a recurrent theme in later art theory.

An example of the influence of rhetorical principles on the discussion of poetry is the verse letter known as *The Art of Poetry* by the Roman lyricist Horace. Succinct, commonsensical, and witty, it is unlike a formal treatise: its purpose is to offer a few useful guidelines to aspiring poets – and to exemplify its own precepts. Most of the advice depends upon the principle of decorum. The poet should take particular care to make his characters behave in a natural and consistent fashion: old men should be described as behaving like old men, young men like young men; the style of their speech should also reflect their ages, fortunes, and emotional states. The poet is entitled to certain departures from nature, a freedom shared also with painters: “as is painting, so is poetry” (*ut pictura poesis*), Horace says; “painters and poets have always enjoyed the same prerogative to dare whatever they would,” but one should never stray so far from nature that one’s inventions seem improbable or impossible. An effect of naturalness – of artlessness – is the highest achievement of art.





Perhaps the most remarkable passage in the poem is one in which literary skill is shown to depend upon wisdom and character:

Of good writing the source and fount is wisdom. Your matter the Socratic pages can set forth, and when matter is in hand words will not be loath to follow. He who has learned what he owes his country and his friends, what love is due a parent, a brother, and a guest, what is imposed on senator and judge, what is the function of a general sent to war, he surely knows how to give each character his fitting part.

Beyond the comprehensive understanding of human nature advocated by Aristotle, Horace suggests that poetry demands a kind of moral knowledge acquired in the active living of a virtuous life.

Partly because its author was a famous poet, partly because of its entertaining form, and partly because the advice it offers tallied with the best of ancient rhetorical and poetic theory, this little poem became an important influence on literary theory in the Middle Ages and early modern period. And because it draws so much from rhetoric, on the one hand, and suggests a close kinship between poetry and painting, on the other, it became the most important channel through which ancient rhetorical theory exerted its influence on later theories of the visual arts.

## Word and World

Medieval thought about art takes up and creatively elaborates several of the themes introduced in ancient times. The relation of art to knowledge and its place in the hierarchy of human activities continues to be a concern for formal philosophy and theology: as in antiquity, the “mechanical,” craft-based arts, such as painting and sculpture, generally occupy a lowly position in relation to the “liberal” arts; though their practical usefulness for human life is recognized, claims for their relevance to the higher reaches of speculative thought meets with resistance. Because the leading thinkers of the period were members of the Church, there is a pervasive interest in defining the value of art in religious terms. Magnificent buildings and ornaments are sometimes regarded as appropriate instruments of devotion; just as often they are seen as irrelevant and a waste of money – or worse, as sinister distractions, idols, and incitements to vice. Much medieval discussion of art revolves around the tension between the obvious usefulness of images – as a means of teaching the illiterate, or of stimulating spiritual life through an appeal to the emotions – and the equally obvious danger of their being misunderstood and misused.





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Some medieval thinkers did recognize the value of images, however, even at the highest levels of thought, and they were perhaps no more uncommon in their time than the ancient philosophers willing to admit the same thing. Some recognized that the inability to think in anything *but* images is one of the fundamental limitations of the human mind; others seem to have assumed that images may occasionally exceed the capacity of rational thought to express the loftiest and most precious truths, those insights available only to intuition touched by divine grace. One example is the Italian mystic Joachim of Flora, active toward the end of the twelfth century, who made use of “figures” (*figurae*) – diagrams – to express his complex ideas about the presence of God in history (figure 1.6). These diagrams were not simply illustrations but essential to the form of Joachim’s revelations. They can be said to document the importance of figurative thought in the medieval period, even of the way in which thinking itself was believed to involve a kind of art. At the same time, their abstractness and complexity indicate why such thinking remained detached, in all but a few isolated circumstances, from the practice of the visual arts as we usually understand them.

Debate over the nature and function of images could become violent. During the eighth and ninth centuries, the Greek Church twice came under the control of iconoclasts (literally, “breakers of images”) who vehemently renounced the use of images for religious purposes: the making of religious pictures was outlawed and many existing ones were destroyed. For a time it seemed that the Western Church might follow suit. The appeal of such pictures proved to be too profound, however, and their value for the faith was eventually upheld, though not before the kind of veneration owed to them was precisely defined in order to distance it from any suspicion of idolatry.

If the appeal of images is profound, however, so is mistrust of them, and iconoclastic sentiment resurfaced repeatedly, even in the West: it was usually associated with religious reform movements, though its motives are often impossible to disentangle from a general resentment of ecclesiastical wealth and power. Even Renaissance Florentines were susceptible to iconoclasm: when, for a time at the end of the fifteenth century, the city came under the influence of Girolamo Savonarola, a spellbinding preacher – an orator, thus himself a kind of artist – paintings, along with other luxury items such as expensive clothes, were destroyed as “vanities” in public bonfires. The Protestant Reformers of the next century were concerned to circumscribe the use of religious images, and in some places in Northern Europe extremists vandalized churches. At the final session of the Council of Trent in 1563, the Roman Catholic Church



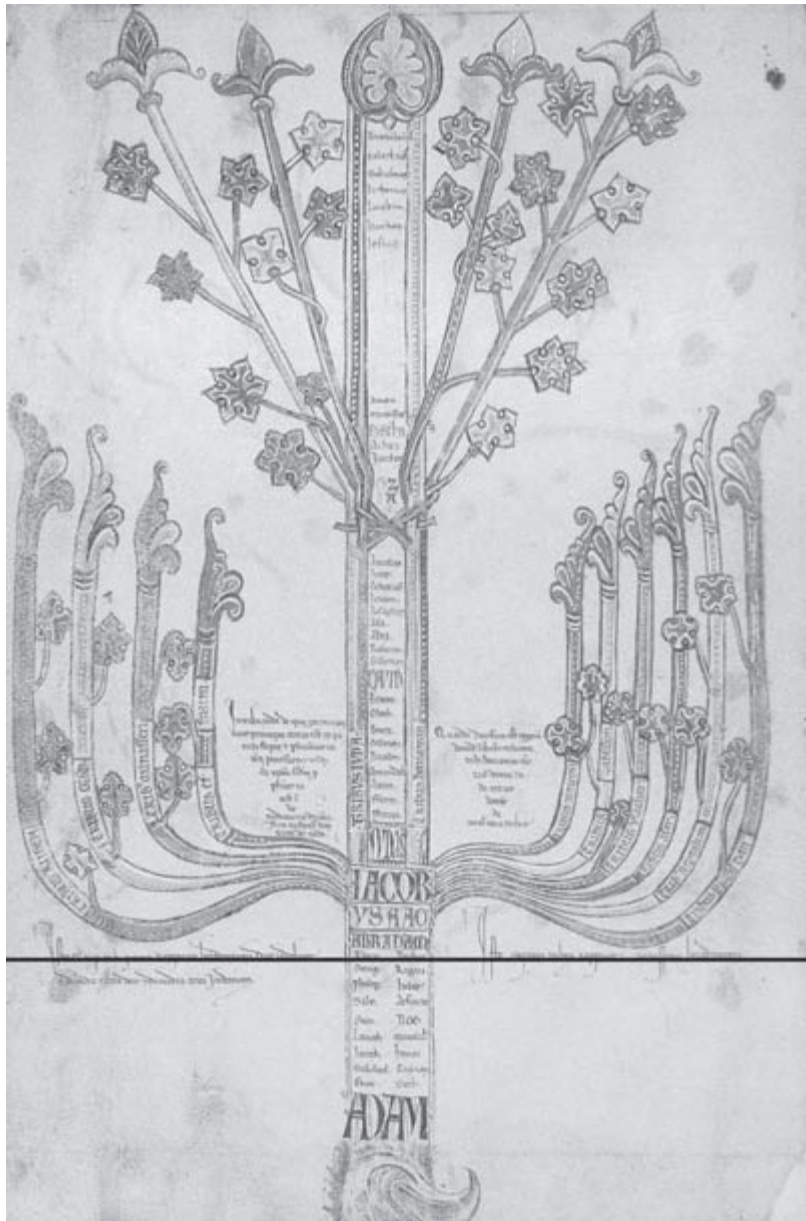


Figure 1.6 “Tree-Eagle” figure, from the *Liber Figurarum*, a manuscript of works of Joachim of Flora, c.1200, Bodleian Library, Collection of Corpus Christi College (MS 255A), Oxford University.





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reaffirmed the value of images in devotional life – and also set guidelines to distinguish proper from improper ones. All this anxiety testifies to an awareness of the power of art, an awareness that only deepens as the Middle Ages give way to the early modern period.

The sensitivity of medieval thinkers to the psychological function of images is part of a preoccupation with signs and symbols generally – with the experience of meaning in the most comprehensive sense. Their involvement with this issue, and its urgency for them, is an outgrowth of biblical exegesis, of the need to explain the single, divinely planned order – the Word – in the many words of sacred Scripture, as well as show how that order governs the world at large. The systematic methods of interpretation that they evolved, which continued to influence ideas of how meaning is produced well after they were transferred from Scripture to secular texts, and from texts to images, can perhaps be called the most original contribution of the Middle Ages to the theory of art – but only if we remember that their inventors would never have thought of them in such terms.

The best place to begin a survey of this development is with St Augustine (354–430 CE), who was both a great theologian and a famous teacher. In the broadest historical perspective, Augustine’s achievement may be described as the appropriation for Christianity of the rich intellectual tradition of classical antiquity. Trained as an orator, he rose to prominence in Rome; after his conversion, he came to use his skills to defend and promote Christianity. In response to more extreme Christians, who distrusted all “pagan” learning, he urged the study of ancient philosophy and rhetoric: “we must not fear what those philosophers say, but appropriate the truths they contain from those who are, in a sense, their illegal possessors.” Also, “every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he discovers truth, it is the Lord’s.” Such arguments were revived during the later Middle Ages and early modern period to justify the preservation and study of ancient texts: without Augustine’s authority and influence, it is likely that many more would have been lost.

Augustine’s *On Christian Learning* is a treatise about how one should study Scripture, or, rather, how an education might be based upon or built around the study of Scripture. He begins by distinguishing between signs and things. Signs are things, but ones that signify or symbolize other things. He says he will use the term “thing” primarily for what we would call “referents,” those things to which signs refer. Of course, some things can also function as signs. A stone, for example, may be regarded as a thing, but the stone upon which the patriarch Jacob rested his head is a sign. On the other hand, some signs are such that their whole value consists in signifying: the principal example of this type is words.







Some things are to be enjoyed, he continues, some used; some are to be both enjoyed and used. Those that we enjoy make us happy, while those that we use help us to obtain the things that make us happy. Since, in the end, God is the only source of complete enjoyment, all other things – everything in the world – exists to be used. The world is a means to God: “through what is corporeal and temporal we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual.” Even man, who, because he contains an eternal part, the soul, might be the one thing in the world that we might enjoy in itself, is ultimately to be valued as an image of God.

“A sign,” Augustine says, “is a thing which, apart from the impression that it presents to the senses, causes of itself some other thing to enter our thoughts.” Following Plato, he distinguishes between “natural” and “conventional” signs: natural signs are those which lead us to the thought of something else by their very nature. Smoke is a natural sign of fire. Conventional signs, “those which living creatures give to one another,” depend for their understanding upon associations that are learned. The most important of these is words, which depend upon a knowledge of language, but other signs of this kind are visual symbols such as flags, or aural symbols such as a trumpet call signaling attack.

Augustine’s real concern is the problem posed by “ambiguous” signs, those the meaning of which is unclear, either because the recipient – the reader, say – has no idea what is meant, or because he finds it possible to infer more than one meaning. Sacred Scripture is full of such ambiguities, and since it is impossible that God should be incoherent, or ambiguous for no reason, Augustine concludes that God planted these difficulties in the text in order to humble those who are used to understanding things easily, and, by forcing us to work hard in order to understand, to impress upon us the value of the truths contained in the text. The apparent incoherence of such passages – and of the world at large, of course – is itself part of the divine plan.

The understanding of difficult signs can thus be a source of both pleasure and deeper insight. “Everything is learned more willingly through the use of figures, and we discover things with much more delight when we have had trouble searching for them.” He suggests that there is a way of finally solving all the riddles because “practically nothing is dug out from those unintelligible texts which is not discovered to be said very plainly in another place.”

Much of *On Christian Learning* is devoted to analyzing Scripture in terms of classical rhetorical classifications; Augustine also suggests that some of the devices of rhetoric – various tropes and figures, but also the low, middle, and high styles – should be used by Christian teachers. He





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also discusses symbolism, including number symbolism, at some length: for instance, the forty days that Moses and Christ both fasted is broken down into four times ten, ten into seven and three, seven into three and four – each of which numbers has specific symbolic associations that enhance the significance of the passage. Though we tend to think of this technique as a strange and distinctly medieval habit of thought, it was widely practiced in antiquity.

Augustine distinguishes between “literal” and “figurative” meaning. “It is necessary,” he says, “to understand as figurative anything in Scripture which cannot in a literal sense be attributed to an upright character or a pure faith.” It is ridiculous to suppose that Mary Magdalene anointed Christ’s feet with fragrant oils “for the same reason that was customary among sensuous and dissolute men, whose banquets were such that we loathe them.” In this case, rather, the oil is “the good reputation which each one will possess who follows in the footsteps of Christ.” Augustine sometimes refers to the literal as the “historical” meaning because it simply describes an event in real time. There are also at least two distinct types of “figural” meaning. On the one hand, a passage may suggest a principle of good conduct; it may express a moral principle applicable to our own lives. On the other, it may refer to the *ideal* state of things – showing how they are in heaven, or will be at Christ’s second coming – for heaven, or the end of time, is by definition a condition when the corporeal and temporal fall away to reveal only the spiritual and eternal, the true nature of things.

Later theologians elaborated upon the distinctions between the levels of meaning suggested by Augustine. The fifth-century mystic who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite wrote a treatise about heaven, *The Celestial Hierarchy*. He begins by explaining how he gathered his evidence – drawn from Scripture primarily, of course, but also other sources – and he says that he has read them all figuratively, as referring to the state of things in heaven, a mode of reading he calls “anagogical.”

Dionysius has some fascinating things to say about figures and metaphors. For example, because the ultimate truth is so exalted, so far beyond the capacity of our minds to grasp, it was *necessary* for God to express himself through symbols. His glory is like a blinding light, which he has taken care to cover with “many veils.” Elsewhere, obviously influenced by Platonism, Dionysius says that these symbols are such that they do not allow the mind to rest content and thus do not lull it into a false sense of understanding, but urge it on toward the higher truths of which they are merely images. In one place, he even advises the Christian, in contemplating God, or in trying to explain the nature of





God to an unbeliever or neophyte, to use deliberately inappropriate metaphors, so that the listener is not tempted to take the image for the reality, and so that the mind, which cannot approach God directly, may move toward him step by step by coming to understand what he is not. If one says that Christ is like a worm, for instance, one makes a point about his humility without allowing the hearer to suppose that he or she really understands it. “Similitudes drawn from things farthest away from God form within us a truer estimate that God is above whatever we may say or think of Him.” This idea radically inverts the classical rhetorical notion of decorum.

St Thomas Aquinas, active around the middle of the thirteenth century, relied on both Augustine and Dionysius in his discussion of figural language in the Scriptures. He distinguishes four levels of meaning: the literal or historical and not two, but three, figurative senses – the “moral” (sometimes called “tropological”), the anagogical, and the “allegorical.” The moral sense is essentially the same as for Augustine, the anagogical essentially the same as for Dionysius. The term “allegorical” had been used in ancient rhetorical theory to refer to an extended use of metaphor or a discussion of some topic disguised as the discussion of something else. For Aquinas, it has a more specific meaning, reserved for events in the Old Testament or features of the “old” law of Judaism that anticipate events in the New Testament or aspects of the new, Christian dispensation. Aquinas agrees with Augustine that any passage of Scripture may have more than one level of meaning; indeed, any passage may have all four levels of meaning.

All this may seem to lead only into the obscure entanglements of biblical exegesis, but different levels of meaning were also felt to exist in the world at large: indeed, medieval thinkers commonly thought of the world as God’s other “book,” and assumed that it had been planned as carefully as the Scriptures. A thirteenth-century troubadour, Ramon Llull, developed a system for reading the world in this way – he called it his “art” – in which the attributes of God, identified by abstract nouns such as “goodness,” “power,” “truth,” and so on, are recognized in a series of ascending levels in the hierarchy of creation, from the traditional four elements through plants, animals, and man, until they are apprehended in their pure form in God himself (figure 1.7). These words thus provide tools with which to understand how the perfection of God is manifest in the world. Apart from its general dependence on common medieval habits of thought, Llull’s art drew upon techniques for the training of memory developed in ancient rhetorical theory as well as the Jewish mystical lore known as cabbala.



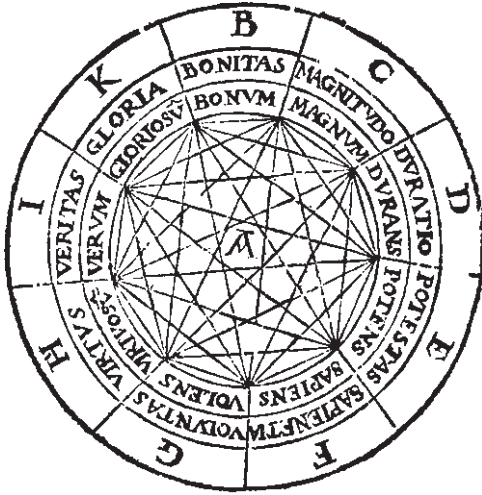


Figure 1.7 Diagram of divine attributes, from Ramon Llull, *Opera* (Strasburg, 1617).

Another remarkable example of the application of figurative thinking, and one with the advantage of bringing us immediately to the issue of its relevance for the visual arts, are the writings of Abbot Suger of St Denis, who lived in the mid-twelfth century. Suger's church was the ancient burial place of the kings of France; during his lifetime – and thanks in great part to his energy and influence – it was enlarged and redecored: the choir (figure 1.8) is one of the first examples of Gothic style in architecture, and older histories attributed its invention to Suger himself. In any event, he left a description of the church, along with an account of its rebuilding and an inventory of the precious objects in its treasury.

Suger demonstrates profound responsiveness to the sensuous beauty of objects, especially of precious materials like gold and jewels, but he takes pains to insist upon the superior value of workmanship. The verses which he composed for the doors of the main portal direct the viewer's attention beyond the materials to the craftsmanship, and beyond craftsmanship to their symbolic significance:

Whoever thou art, if thou seekest to extol the glory of these doors,  
Marvel not at the gold and the expense but at the craftsmanship  
of the work.  
Bright is the noble work, but, being nobly bright, the work  
should brighten the minds, so that they may travel,  
Through the true lights to the True Light where Christ is the  
True Door.

The idea of an ascent from the physical to the spiritual, from a lower to a higher beauty, reaches back to Plato and Plotinus; the idea that the literal door is to be experienced by the viewer figuratively, as a symbol of Christ, derives from Augustine and Dionysius. The light imagery, also a feature of these other writers, is especially conspicuous in Suger's discussion of the stained-glass windows.



**Figure 1.8** St Denis, Paris, choir, 1140–4.





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In fact, the St Denis to whom the church is dedicated was believed to be none other than Dionysius the Areopagite. Suger had read *The Celestial Hierarchy*, and there can be no doubt that he intended the church and its riches to be seen and understood in terms of the principles explained there:

Thus when, out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God, the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect – transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial – on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an analogical manner.

This passage has tended to strike modern readers as exceedingly disingenuous. Did Suger really experience religious ecstasy as he gazed at his extraordinary horde of gold and jewels? Or is his mysticism a cover – conscious or unconscious – for simple greed? He was not an otherworldly personality, but one of the shrewdest, most powerful men in France, and it has been suggested that his mystical posturing had a political purpose: that it was intended as a response to reformers who questioned whether the Church should accumulate and display wealth. Suger may have been trying to show that material richness is transfigured when dedicated to God, and its contemplation can have a spiritually uplifting effect.

If Suger's writings present us with the example of a sophisticated and highly placed churchman able to experience works of art analogically, we may still want to ask whether artists themselves understood their work in such terms. It would be surprising if the complex conception of what meaning is, and of what artifice, in its highest form, can be, had no effect – did not stimulate the ambition of writers and craftsmen, or prompt them to approach their task with a new exaltation of purpose. At the same time, it would be surprising if more than a very few possessed the intellectual resources to explore its implications fully. One who did was the Florentine poet, Dante Alighieri, whose *Divine Comedy*, composed in the early years of the fourteenth century, describes a journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven. An allegory of the soul's ascent from sin to salvation, it is also an inventory of spiritual states, from abject damnation through various complex processes of purification to exquisitely nuanced degrees of blessedness. It is a microcosm as ambitious as a medieval mind was capable of conceiving: a survey of the human condition in its breadth and depth, a map of the universe that seeks to reveal its divinely ordained structure. Later commentators made the same claim for Dante's poem





that ancient commentators had made about the works of Homer and Virgil: that it is a summation of all learning, a distillation of all wisdom, a synopsis of all modes of being in their ideal interrelation.

Dante intended to write his own commentary on the *Divine Comedy*, and he claimed, in a letter to one of his patrons, that he would explain how the entire poem could be read on any one of the four levels of meaning described by Aquinas – the literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical. In other words, he would show how his work possessed the same complexity and depth as sacred Scripture – as creation itself. Though he never got around to the commentary, his boast is significant: he could have made no more emphatic assertion of the poet's creative prerogatives.

Again, significantly, it is a poet who scales the highest intellectual summit, but we do not need to look far from Dante in order to discover visual artists determined to invest their work with unprecedented significative richness. The sculptor Nicola Pisano and his son, Giovanni, were Dante's exact contemporaries, and active in the same part of Italy. They are best known for a series of pulpits which combine extraordinarily complex, dramatically charged narrative reliefs with allegorical figures that beautifully express abstract ideas, as well as compelling characterizations of prophets and saints. Anticipating the orientation we associate with the Renaissance, their work makes continual reference to the art of classical antiquity, as if inviting comparison and attempting to demonstrate an equal or superior degree of skill.

Toward the end of his career, Giovanni made a pulpit for the Cathedral of Pisa which he probably envisioned as his crowning masterpiece (figure 1.9). Most modern viewers do not find it as successful, on the whole, as his earlier work, or that of his father, but the inscription – which, following ancient custom, is presented as if being spoken by the sculpture itself – is memorable for its overweening pride:

I praise the true God, the creator of all excellent things, who has permitted a man to form figures of such purity. In the year of Our Lord, thirteen hundred and eleven, the hands of Giovanni, son of the late Nicola, by their art alone, carved this work . . . [he] is endowed above all others with the command of the pure art of sculpture, shaping splendid things in stone, wood, and gold. He would not know how to make ugly or base things even if he wished to do so. There are many sculptors, but to Giovanni alone remain the honors of praise.

Another part of the inscription directs the viewer's attention specifically to the comprehensive artistic ambition reflected in the work: "Giovanni has encircled all the rivers and parts of the world endeavoring to learn much and preparing everything with heavy labor . . ." Whether we





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**Figure 1.9** Giovanni Pisano, pulpit, Pisa Cathedral, 1302–10.

understand the “rivers and parts of the world” as something Giovanni has sought to represent on the pulpit itself, or as alluding to his travels and studies, and thus to his comprehensive understanding of things, this inscription testifies to his desire that the work be seen as a microcosm, as an exemplification of art itself – like the shield of Achilles.

