

# The Classical Concept of Mimesis

Göran Sörbom

Fine art is not eternal and constant but culturally dependent. As such it has been produced, described and explained in different ways. Antiquity did not have the concept of Fine Art. Not until the eighteenth century was there such a concept to distinguish Fine Art from other human activities, such as craft or science, and their products. Before that, there were no artistic concepts and no language to describe, explain and interpret the production and uses of works of art in a modern sense. But, of course, people have always made paintings and sculptures, played music and danced, told stories and dramatized them in various ways. But these modes of activity have served in vastly different kinds of situations and have been characterized and understood in many ways, not only as works of art.

When the Greeks of the classical period wanted to characterize the basic nature of painting and sculpture, poetry and music, dance and theatre, i.e. things we today call works of art, most of them agreed that such things were *mimemata* (in singular form *mimema*), the result of an activity they named *mimesis*. Now, what is a *mimema* and what kinds of activity were connoted by *mimesis* according to the ancient outlook?

Traditionally the English word 'imitation' is used, although inadequately, to translate the Greek word *mimesis* and the philosophical discussion of the behaviour denoted by *mimesis* is commonly called 'the theory of imitation'. The theory of *mimesis* was not, however, a well-articulated theory but was rather a fundamental outlook shared by most authors, philosophers and educated audiences in the classical period, in antiquity as a whole, and even later. Neither was there a clear-cut terminological usage. Several words were used more or less synonymously as, for instance, *mimema* (imitation), *eikon* (image), *homoion* (likeness). But behind this terminological cluster there was, I think, a basic conceptual consensus which will be sketched in this chapter.

The theory of *mimesis* is now generally regarded as the oldest theory of art. But the theory of *mimesis* as we find it in ancient texts is not a theory of art in a modern sense; it is rather a theory of pictorial apprehension and representation.

The basic distinction for the ancient theory of *mimesis* was that between *mimemata* and real things. For example, a house is a real thing whereas a painting or a sculpture representing a house is a *mimema*, a thing which looks like a house but is not a house. And a piece of music which sounds like sorrow is not a real or genuine (expression of) sorrow but just gives the impression of sorrow. The *mimema* as a thing is a sort of vehicle for ‘man-made dreams produced for those who are awake’, as Plato suggestively formulates it (*Sophist* 266C). Neither the dream nor the *mimema* is a real thing.

### Forms of Mental Image (Aisthesis)

This basic distinction between *minemata* and real things was commonly accepted far into the eighteenth century when the rise of the modern concept of Fine Art and the establishment of aesthetics as the philosophical clarification of beauty in nature and in the Fine Arts rejected the theory of imitation as inadequate and superficial. When Alexander Baumgarten, as one of the pioneers of this hunt for the real nature of the Fine Arts, suggested the establishment of aesthetics as an intellectual and academic pursuit (*Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (1735), §116), he started from the basic distinction, originally made by the Greek philosophers and the Church fathers, between *aistheta* and *noeta*, i.e. between what we receive from our senses and what the intellect provides us with. Aesthetics should be concerned with sensuous knowledge as logic is concerned with intellectual knowledge. And the Fine Arts were regarded as man’s most subtle explorations of the capacities of our higher senses, sight and hearing. The innovation of the eighteenth century was to regard these explorations as goals in themselves (autotely) and to give them an institutional place of their own in western society and culture (autonomy; the ‘art world’ to use Arthur Danto’s modern term).

In the classical period and commonly in the ancient tradition *aisthesis* was described as the processes in which mental images of contingent qualities and shapes of individual things are presented to the mind. When a person sees a house, for instance, there is a mental image of the house in the mind of the perceiver, an image of its colours and shapes. The basic metaphor used to characterize this process was that of pressure. An individual thing presses its contingent qualities and shapes upon the senses like a signet ring which, when stamped into wax, delivers its form but not its matter to the wax. However, when we think ‘house’ the mind entertains the essence, real nature or the ‘houseness of houses’ which is something general and not accessible to the senses (*aisthesis*) but only to thought (*noesis*) since thoughts do not have individual and contingent properties.

Mental images could be of different kinds, it was maintained, and were distinguished from each other with regard to vividness, consistency and relation to

the outside world. Perceptions, illusions and hallucinations were counted as different forms of mental image passively received by the perceptual apparatus which in an active state could produce memories, dreams and imaginations as other forms of mental image consisting of contingent properties of individual things.

### The Apprehension of *Mimemata* as a Form of *Aisthesis*

When Plato calls pictures ‘man-made dreams produced for those who are awake’, (*Sophist* 266C) he singles out the apprehension of pictures and *mimemata* as yet another distinct kind of mental image. Looking at or listening to *mimemata* resembles in some respects dreaming. In both cases the perceptual apparatus produces or delivers mental images without there being such things as apprehended by the dreamer and spectator. There is no house pressing its shapes and qualities upon the dreamer’s mind nor is there a real house causing the mental image when looking at a picture of a house. But, alternatively, the spectator of the picture is awake, which seems to imply that the viewer or listener is aware that it is a *mimema* and not a real thing that he or she is apprehending. If a person looks at a painting representing a house and believes he or she is looking at a real house, they make a perceptual mistake; they have an illusion and do not look at the picture or *mimema* in a proper way. The apprehension of *mimemata* is also dreamlike in character in the sense that the mental image produced by the *mimema* can be a free combination having no reference to real existing things. In making pictures and *mimemata* the makers are as free as dreamers or persons imagining things to combine elements from the contingent world into objects that do not necessarily have reference to the existing outside world, the centaur being the standard example of this. Imagination (*phantasia*) is the free play of the senses (*aisthesis*).

A difference between dreams and mental images called forth by *mimemata* concerns how they are brought about. Dreams are generated spontaneously in the mind of the dreamer and partly by will when imagining things. But the apprehension of *mimemata* is triggered by external man-made objects and thus intentionally produced. The fact that pictures and *mimemata* are man-made also distinguishes them from ‘natural’ images such as reflections and shadows, which are made by God or nature (Plato’s *Sophist* 265B–266D). Both man-made *mimemata* and natural images require an ability to be apprehended. Philostratus (*The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* II.22) claims that when we see images in the stars, in shadows, and in reflections, the mimetic faculty is activated. Also, looking at paintings and sculptures is dependent on the mimetic faculty: ‘[T]hose who look at works of painting and drawing require a mimetic faculty; for no one could appreciate or admire a picture of a horse or a bull, unless he had formed an idea of the creature represented.’

## Some Basic Properties of *Mimemata* and Pictures According to Ancient Thought

When Plato (*Sophist* 240A–B) tries to define picture (*eidolon*), he maintains that a picture is similar to things of the kind it represents, that it is similar in only some respects, and that it is no more than similar to the things in question. Similarity is, in ancient thought, understood as having properties in common and the idea that individual things and mental images can have properties in common is founded in the belief that perception basically is a kind of impression, a process in which individual objects deliver their individual shapes and qualities, but not their matter, to the mind. Thus, the mental image as a kind of individual impression is similar to the external individual object it represents by having properties in common with it within the range of the relevant sense organ. But a picture, sculpture or *mimema* cannot share all of the properties with the thing represented. If it did, it would not be a representation or *mimema* of that thing but a second example of it (Plato's *Cratylus* 432A–B). Finally, the only function of pictures and *mimemata* is to be similar to a certain extent to the things represented (Plato's *Sophist* 240B). Pictures and *mimemata* are made in order to be seen or heard and thereby produce mental images of individual things they themselves are not. Thus, pictures and *mimemata* are man-made things intended to raise mental images of individual things with their contingent shapes and qualities in the minds of their listeners and spectators. This is their essence or true nature.

### Kinds of *Mimemata*

Pictures and likenesses function through their contingent similarities with the kinds of things they represent. The external object *mimema*, however, does not necessarily physically resemble the things it represents. Rather the correct apprehension of it results in a mental image representing something particular and contingent which it in itself is not. The recited words of Homer's *Iliad*, for instance, do not resemble the wrath of Achilles (except when the rhapsode acts direct speech) but, according to ancient thought, call forth mental images of that story in the minds of the listeners, who are aware of the fact that they are listening to a recital and not looking at Achilles himself. Generally, all pictures and likenesses are *mimemata* but not all *mimemata* are pictures or likenesses. Aristotle (*Poetics* chapter 1) distinguishes between kinds of *mimemata* with reference to the medium used, such as words, gestures and movements, shapes and colours, rhythms and sounds, etc. The picture of a landscape functions through its similarities to landscapes we are familiar with, and a poem describing a landscape arouses in the mind of the reader or listener a mental image of a landscape by means of words. As Joseph Addison expresses it (*Spectator*, no. 416, 1712), showing his great indebtedness to ancient thought:

Words, when well chosen, have so great Force in them, that a Description often gives us more lively Ideas than the Sight of Things themselves. The Reader finds a Scene drawn in Stronger colours, and painted more to the Life in his Imagination, by the help of Words, than by an actual Survey of the Scene which they describe. In this case the Poet seems to get the better of Nature; he takes, indeed, the Landskip after her, but gives it more vigorous Touches, heightens its Beauty, and so enlivens the whole Piece, that the Images which flow from the Objects themselves appear weak and faint, in comparison of those that come from the Expressions.

Both Plato and Aristotle maintain that music is mimetic in character. For example, Aristotle states (*Politics* 1340a17–21) that ‘musical times and tunes provide us with images [*homoiomata*, likenesses] of states of character’. When we say ‘the piece of music is sad’, this means in terms of the theory of *mimesis* that the piece of music generates a mental image of sadness in the listener’s mind in a similar way as a painting can represent, i.e. generate a mental image of, a house without being a house.

Knowing that it is not a real expression of sadness makes us react differently when listening to the piece of music than to real expressions of sadness. The same is true about looking at pictures. Knowing that the thing represented in a painting is just a representation and not a real thing makes us react differently. Aristotle writes (in *De anima* 427b23–5) that ‘when we form an opinion that something is threatening or frightening, we are immediately affected by it, and the same is true of our opinion that inspires courage; but in imagination we are like spectators looking at something dreadful or encouraging in a picture’. And in the *Poetics* (1448b10–12) he notes that ‘[o]bjects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and dead bodies’.

### Models of *Mimemata*

It is often maintained that the theory of *mimesis* is concerned with the relation between the thing *mimema* and the outside world, i.e. between the *mimema* and individual model or models in the outside world. But what is the model of a *mimema* or, which is the same thing, what is represented in the *mimema* according to the theory of *mimesis*? It can be an individual thing or person. Xenophon relates (*Memorabilia* III.11) how painters used beautiful women as models. But it can also be a memory image. Xenophon tells in another anecdote (*Symposium* IV.21) about a person who was teased because he never had anything else in mind but his beloved. He replied: ‘Do you not know that I have so clear an image [*eidolon*] of him in my heart that had I the ability as a sculptor or a painter I could produce a likeness of him from this image that would be quite as close as if he were sitting for me in person.’ And Porphyry (*On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books*, 1) describes how a portrait was made in secret of the philosopher Plotinus by a painter who went several times to Plotinus’s lectures and used

the composite memory image he thereby created as the model for the painting. Seneca comments on the process of making a sculpture (*Epistulae morales* 65): '[I]t doesn't matter whether he had his model without, to fix his eyes on, or within, a notion conceived and built up in his own brain.'

It is not only individual things and memory images, however, that can serve as models for pictures and *mimemata*. Imagination (*phantasia*) can also produce mental images as models for pictures and *mimemata*. Philostratus maintains (*The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* II.22) that *mimemata* are due to a mimetic faculty which is twofold, namely, the ability to form mental images and the technical skill to convey these mental images into matter. 'Man owes his mimetic faculty to nature, but his power of painting to art [*technē*; skill].' The word *technē* (traditionally translated 'art') signifies the craft involved in the production of *mimemata* and pictures, not the modern Fine Arts as we know them. In general, any human activity founded on practice and experience and put into rules and habits was called *technē* (art), something that could be taught and learnt. Thus, crucial to the production of paintings and sculptures are the mental images which have been produced in the mind of the painter or sculptor: imagination creates mental images of particular things with their sensuous qualities, colours and shapes. In perception the object presses its form without its matter upon the mind of the perceiver and creates thereby a mental image in his or her mind. In a way, the production of pictures and *mimemata* is the reverse order of perception: the skilled hands of the painter or sculptor model the matter to coincide with the mental image. Every craftsman, Alcinous writes (*Isagoga* IX), 'carries the model in himself and conveys its form into matter', and Philo fills in (*De opificio mundi* 4) 'keeping his eyes upon the pattern and making the visible and tangible objects correspond in each case to the incorporeal ideas'.

Finally, authors such as Cicero (*Orator* II.8–10) and Seneca (*Epistulae morales* 65) have claimed that Platonic ideas may serve as models for pictures and *mimemata*. Plato himself denies this vehemently in the *Republic* (598A) with a reference to a clear-cut dualism; things seen cannot be thought and ideas cannot be seen or otherwise apprehended by the senses (*Republic* 507B–C). Although most authors agree that Platonic ideas cannot be grasped by the senses, the conviction that pictures can represent or refer to Platonic ideas has appeared now and then in the history of the theory of *mimesis*, enhancing the value of pictures. The reason for this higher valuation is the fact that the abstract intellectual world was regarded as much more valuable than the fleeting and ever-changing world of the senses, which is the domain of *mimemata*.

### The Production of *Mimemata*

Thus, according to ancient thought *mimesis* was, in a passive sense, the reception of mental images, and in an active sense it was seen as the production (*poiesis*) of objects intended to create mental images in the minds of the perceivers. This

production has two stages: the creation of a mental image (often called *inventio* in the Latin tradition) and the skill to realize the mental image in material form as a painting, or sculpture etc. In the imaginative work, which is the nobler part of the twofold mimetic activity and which is innate, the mind is free to compose units different from things existing in reality. Xenophon stresses (*Memorabilia* III.10) the possibility of choosing elements and putting them together in such a way that the final result will exceed what we normally find in this world. Pliny the Elder relates (*Natural History* XXXV.64) how the painter Zeuxis who, when commissioned to make a painting of a goddess, ‘made an inspection of the virgins of the city, who were nude, and selected five in order that he might represent in the picture that which was the most laudable feature of each’. Cicero comments (*De inventione* II.1.1–3) that Zeuxis used this technique ‘[f]or he did not believe that it was possible to find in one body all the things he looked for in beauty, since nature has not refined to perfection any single object in all its parts’. Horace adds that the combination must also show *decorum*, i.e. follow what is proper (*Ars poetica* 1–37). Painters, sculptors and poets should join in their representations things that fit together. A lion, for instance, is not timid in its behaviour and a king is generous and magnanimous in his appearance. Thus it would be ridiculous to represent a timid lion and a mean king. The typical or ideal of the sort of thing represented in the painting, sculpture or poem should be the goal.

When Maximus of Tyre writes (*Oration* XVII.3) ‘Painters gather beauty from every detail of every human body, they collect them artistically (*kata ten technen*) from different bodies into one representation and in this manner they create one beauty which is healthy, fitting and internally harmonised. In reality you would never find a body precisely like a statue, since the arts [*technai*] aim at the greatest beauty’, he rules out the use of an individual external object as a model. Thus the *mimema* and picture is not a slavish copy of an external object, something the theory of *mimesis* is often said to imply. The goal of Greek painting and sculpture is, most often, not the realistic representation of actual individuals, rather it is the representation of the idealized human body and soul. Maximus also mentions (*Oration* II.3) the foremost criteria used in judging sculpture: ‘The Greeks have recognised that the gods ought to be praised with whatever is most beautiful on earth: pure material, human shape and perfect art [*technē*].’ Let us follow the trend of many ancient writers and take Pheidias’s Zeus in Olympia as the best example of Greek sculpture: the sculpture was made of gold and ivory, it had the most dignified human form ever made, and Pheidias was in command of the most perfect craftsmanship.

### Beauty

Beauty in painting and sculpture was often understood as a commensurability among the parts of the representation as beauty in music was seen as the harmonious relations of intervals and rhythms. In the Pythagorean tradition these

relations could be expressed numerically. Beauty was seldom, however, regarded as the final goal of painting and sculpture, as was claimed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when being beautiful became the basic category in the aesthetic understanding of the world. The most common characterization and evaluation of paintings and sculptures in antiquity was their life-likeness (to *zōtikon*) or vitality. In descriptions of paintings and sculptures they are praised because they show persons represented true to life; only voice or breath is missing, it is said in many literary descriptions. This has been understood as a strong realistic or naturalistic tendency in the Greek audience far from the obvious idealism which we can see in classical Greek sculpture. But the ancient will to life-likeness was not realism or naturalism in a modern sense. It expressed the most fundamental trait of what is called the Greek art revolution, which happened most dramatically around the turn of the century 500 BC. The Greek revolutionary invention at this moment was the technique and skill to represent life and particularly human life in its most obvious potentiality. Life was defined as the interplay between body and soul. The soul was commonly regarded as without contingent properties which made it non-perceptible. Nevertheless it can be represented in paintings and sculptures because the 'works of the soul' can be seen in the living body: a happy person looks different from a sad person and such signs of the presence of soul are capable of representation, Xenophon remarks (*Memorabilia* III.10). So, the claim for lifelikeness was far from a wish for a realistic 'copying of individual things' but a wish to represent man's most valuable property, namely that of being a living body-soul unit. Plotinus writes (VI.7.22): '[Are] not the more lifelike statues the more beautiful ones, even if the others are better proportioned? [. . .] Yes, because the living is more desirable; and this is because it has soul.' The ability to represent the body-soul unit is the remarkable innovation of the classical period which changed the whole history of picture-making and picture-understanding.

### Summary

The ancient heritage with regard to the aesthetic field is first of all dependent on the basic distinction between what we know by means of the intellect and by means of the senses. The senses 'inform' us about the individual and contingent qualities of particular things whereas the intellect considers the abstracted and common properties of things: we see and hear the colours, sounds and shapes of things but we understand their common natures by the intellect.

Further, within the field of the senses people have has a mimetic faculty which was understood as the ability to see and hear individual things where no such things are at hand; for instance, you see a house in a painting where there is, in fact, a flat surface painted in different colours. In order to see or hear such things the percipient must be aware of and know that the house seen is a picture and *mimema* of a house and not a real house. If they do not see this they either see a



flat surface with colours or they have an illusion of seeing a house where there is none. In order to see and hear *mimemata* the percipient must be acquainted with things of the kind represented. In order to see that the painting represents a house you must know what kind of things houses are. The mimetic faculty is twofold in nature: every human being has the ability to see or hear *mimemata*, for instance in shadows and reflections in water, but only some persons have learnt the skill and practice (the *technē*) of producing *mimemata*, i.e. ‘man-made dreams for those who are awake’ in Plato’s formulation.

Finally, these man-made dreams can be used in many different ways, for many different purposes and under vastly different circumstances. They appear in religious contexts, they can be used in political propaganda, they serve as entertainment, as educational tools and as pornography. To use them as works of art is a cultural tradition and behaviour with its roots in antiquity and in the theory of mimesis but not developed as a social institution of its own until the eighteenth century.

## References

### *Primary sources*

Texts quoted in English translation

- Alcinous (1970) *Isagoga* trans. by Władysław Tatarkiewicz, in *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Ancient Aesthetics*, Mouton, p. 298
- Aristotle (1964) *De anima (On the Soul)* 427b23–25. trans. by W. S. Hett, Loeb Classical Library, p. 157
- Aristotle (1951) *The Poetics* 1447a8–1447b29, 1448b10–12. trans. by S. H. Butcher in *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, Dover, pp. 7–11, 15
- Aristotle (1962) *The Politics* 1340a17–19, trans. by Ernest Baker, Oxford University Press 1962, p. 343
- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb (1954) *Reflections on Poetry (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus)*, trans. and with an introduction and notes by Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther, University of California Press
- Cicero (1960) *De inventione* II.1.1–3, trans. by H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library, pp. 167–9
- Cicero (1962) *Orator* II.8–10, trans. by G. L. Hendrickson and H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library, p. 311
- Horace (1966) *Ars poetica* 1–37, trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library, pp. 450–3
- Maximus of Tyre (1970) *17th Oration* XVII.3 and XXV.7, trans. by Władysław Tatarkiewicz, in *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Ancient Aesthetics*, Mouton, pp. 302, 305
- Philo of Alexandria (1970) *De opificio mundi* 4, trans. by Władysław Tatarkiewicz, in *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Ancient Aesthetics*, Mouton, p. 297
- Philostratus (1960) *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* II.22, trans. by F. C. Conybeare, Loeb Classical Library, pp. 173–9
- Plato (1956) *The Republic* 507B–C, 595B, 598A, trans. by Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library, pp. 96, 418, 430

- Plato (1968) *The Sophist* 240A–B, 265B–266D, 268B–C, trans. by Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library, pp. 349, 447–53, 457–9
- Pliny (1968) *Natural History* XXXV.61, trans. by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 9, p. 309
- Plotinus (1988) *Plotinus with an English translation* VI.7.22, vol. 7, trans. by A. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, p. 159
- Porphyrus (1989) *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books 1*, trans. by A. H. Armstrong in *Plotinus with an English Translation*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library, p. 3
- Seneca (1967) *Epistulae morales* 65, trans. by R. M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library, p. 449
- Xenophon (1938) *Memorabilia* III.10.1–8, III.11.1–2, trans. by E. C. Marchant, Loeb Classical Library, pp. 231–7, 239–41
- Xenophon (1961) *Symposium* III.10–11, trans. by O. J. Todd, Loeb Classical Library, p. 421
- Xenophon (1961) *Symposium* IV.2, trans. by O. J. Todd, Loeb Classical Library, p. 421

*Further reading*

- Else, Gerald F. (1957) *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, Harvard
- Else, Gerald F. (1958) ‘“Imitation” in the fifth century’ *Classical Philology* 53 pp. 73–90
- Halliwell, Stephen (1986) *Aristotle's Poetics*, Duckworth
- Kristeller, Paul Oscar (1965) ‘The modern system of the arts’, in *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts*, Harper Torchbooks, pp. 163–227
- Pollitt, J. J. (1974) *The Ancient View of Greek Art: Criticism, History, and Terminology*, Yale University Press
- Schweitzer, B. (1934) ‘Mimesis und Phantasia. Zur antiken Kunsttheorie’ *Philologus* 89, 286–300
- Sörbom, Göran (1966) *Mimesis and Art. Studies in the Origin and Early Development of an Aesthetic Vocabulary*, Scandinavian University Books
- Sörbom, Göran (1992) ‘The theory of imitation is not a theory of art. Some stages in a conceptual tradition’, in Jeanette Emt and Goran Hermeren, (eds), *Understanding the Arts. Contemporary Scandinavian Aesthetics*, Lund University Press, pp. 217–35
- Sörbom, Göran (1994) ‘Aristotle on Music as Representation’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 1, 37–46
- Tatarkiewicz, Wladyslaw (1970) *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Ancient Aesthetics*, Mouton