

CHAPTER ONE



Imaginary Museum

Pursue the road,
And beat the track the glorious ancients trod;
To those eternal monuments repair,
There read, and meditate forever there.

—Marco Girolamo Vida, *The Art of Poetry*

AN AGE OF MUSEUMS

André Malraux remarked that museums change the very nature of the items they house. They “estrangle the works they bring together from their original functions and . . . transform even portraits into ‘pictures’” (9).¹ When we recognize a portrait figure, painted or sculpted, less by its subject than by its maker—Reynolds, Lawrence, Flaxman, Chantrey—we can’t help thinking of it as an art “work,” as appropriate to a museum as to a dining hall or stairway wall of a home. Many such pieces in fact reside in art museums, while others, like the Nelson monument and the memorial tombs of Chaucer and Tennyson, have been given homes in buildings like Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s Cathedral, places looked upon by visitors and guidebooks more as museums than as burial sites. The museum space rescues artifacts not only from vulnerable objecthood² but from dead iconism, a semiotic bondage to the past. The visitor’s concern is with their present effect, enhanced as much as possible by the way they are displayed. At sites where monuments have a significant referential setting—the

Roman Forum, or a necropolis—figures invite retrospective meditation. In the museum of art, itself a monument, they are viewed as forms, therefore as speaking of themselves, not of something that is gone.

“Every work of art is characterized by a deep structural identity,” Ernst Cassirer observed, “an identity of form, not of matter.”³ Thinking of any work in terms of form always emphasizes certain things: 1) the mental or spiritual as against the merely physical or material; 2) the human and living as against the nonhuman and dead; 3) present effect as against past reference (forms are experienced, not merely understood); 4) ultimately, incorporating all of the above, the aesthetic as against the merely artifactual. During what has been called the Museum Age⁴—the latter half of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth—the concern with aesthetic forms in art and literature coincided with the spread of art museums, and especially of sculpture galleries, for as Hegel declared, the concern of the sculptor is “*Form and nothing more.*”⁵ The monumental figure came to embody form itself and all its possibilities. In the world of sculpture and painting, “form” meant outline or shape, especially the human shape treated artistically, and viewed as distinct from color, texture, and expression. Art museums were home to the arts of form; they housed human figures carved, molded, painted, drawn, or engraved.

Therefore, when the most celebrated displaced monumental figures in history were moved from the outside of a partially ruined temple—the Parthenon—to the inside of a new temple—the British Museum (by way of Burlington House)—they became reinterpreted as “the paragons of sculpture and the mould of form” (Hazlitt).⁶ Transplanting such pieces—rescuing them, it was thought—from abandoned or neglected sites around the world replaced their meaning as relics or ruins with a new aesthetic significance that suggested man’s transcendent spiritual life. Their new homes needed to reflect this. In 1816, as the British Museum prepared to house the Marbles, much interest was shown in just how they should be displayed. Complaining that the major continental museums were “wretchedly lit,” and that by contrast the Townley Marbles in London were more effectively positioned below a twelve-foot-high skylight, a writer in Hunt’s *Examiner* demanded that “England first shew, with her usual understanding, that she considers the beauty of the production as the first requisite, and that she will sacrifice all splendour and magnificence and height of apartment for the attainment of an object of infinitely more importance, viz. the exhibition of this beauty to the greatest effect.”⁷ The museum’s project was to realize spatially the mental character of individual artists and their culture, and thus to express human purpose as visible form, the element of clarity and definition, as Benjamin Haydon said, in all the visual arts.⁸ By emphasizing one kind of original intention, formal identity, over another, indication or reference,

the museum gave the monumental artifact a living humanity.

In thus being linked to the truly monumental—human greatness expressing itself intelligibly over the ages—rather than the merely memorial or historical, “form” came to symbolize man’s conquest of time itself. A person may be beautiful “only for a moment,” Goethe observed in his appreciation of Winckelmann, but the figural work of art, standing “before the world in its ideal reality . . . produces an enduring effect . . . and by breathing life into the human figure, it raises man above himself, completes the cycle of his life and actions, and deifies him for the present moment, in which the past and future are also contained.”⁹ To Goethe the classical mythic sculpture was the epitome of the pure figural, and therefore of pure form. It “divests man of all inessential elements,” thus attaining “perfection,” so that the viewer can attend only to the work. “A subject at rest presents solely itself, and therefore is complete by and in itself.” That is, it need only present itself, not represent anything. Figures like the regally reposing Juno or the contemplative Minerva “have no contact with the outside world but are completely self-contained.” They “reign in splendid isolation.”¹⁰ Such figures contain “the motion together with its cause.” Even figures in groups are wholly involved in one another and wholly explainable by reference to one another. Goethe was really defining the aesthetic in terms of the image and designating the image as non- or anti-historical: ideal in origin and thus, like a figure in an art museum, creative of its own essential dramatic space. The figure in an art museum or museum-like space is *essentially* a “breathing” presence, not a representation.

Nonetheless, some early nineteenth-century critics, most notably those of Lord Elgin, held that dissociating works from what Malraux calls “their original functions” was murder or at least captivity. In a work published in England in 1821, the archeologist Quatremère de Quincy, who had himself visited Paestum in the 1770s, argued against the transporting and enclosing of such works, whose real influence derives “less from their beauty and perfection than from their antiquity, their authenticity, and their publicity.” It was a “death” to this direct knowledge of the past to “withdraw its elements from the public, to decompose its parts, as has been done without intermission during the last twenty-five years, and to collect the wreck in dépôts called *Conservatories*.”¹¹ (He was referring especially to the Musée de Monuments Français.) The emotions attached to these artifacts in their native settings give that historical instruction a special potency when all is seen as a whole. Therefore, “To displace all these monuments, collect the scattered fragments, class methodically the remains, and compose from such an assemblage a practical course of modern chronology” is to deprive them of their sustenance (56).

Especially interested in what happens to the original meaning of monumental figures, Quincy conveyed the new monumental meaning with his own, distinctive figure:

Who can now make us sensible of the meaning of figures whose expressions are only grimaces, whose accompaniments are enigmas? What emotion do we in reality feel from the contemplation of that disenchanted figure of a woman pretending to weep over an empty urn? What mean these images which retain nothing but their substance? What signify these mausoleums without graves, these cenotaphs doubly empty, these tombs which death animates no longer? (56)

The monuments' loss of their own historical context means the death of their "images," leaving only their "substance," their material identity. Without what "explained" them we are left to contemplate them as enigmatic objects. Quincy's model for the artifactual corpse is an emblematic tomb figure, lifeless as the body it is supposed to honor, an allegory arousing no "emotion" for the viewer. The viewer now is in the position of an allegorical figure of Grief, and the work itself is an "empty urn" not studied and understood archeologically, but mourned over.

Though Quincy laments the historian's effort to reimagine figures according to a modern scheme, the historical reading of figures, even the contextual kind he favors, is always a departure from the maker's intention. The original aim of the monument as a religious icon, an insigne of grief, or a bearer of personal fame (of the subject, the maker, or both) is always incompatible with its subsequent use as an indicator of historical situations. Monuments are usually made for the first, but ultimately read for the second. Quincy lamented the loss to monuments of a "publicity," which depended on their "antiquity" and "authenticity"—their true historicity—rather than on their "perfection and beauty." What a museum does, whether it is an institution of art or of archeology, is provide a new visible context, one imaging a modern or a transhistorical perspective. The assumption behind the museum of art, which underlay much literary and art history of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was that a work's grander historical significance was not to be found by learning its original social or even intellectual context, but by grasping its Gestalt, the impression it makes. In this Gestalt or experienced form may be grasped the work's true historical meaning: the character of the age in which it emerged. More than anyone, it was Winckelmann who has inspired museum curators to look for perfection and beauty, and thus to Greek art, as the standards for their collections. And it was from him that art historians and later literary historians inherited what I shall call a museum sensibility or consciousness.

IMAGINARY MUSEUMS: WINCKELMANN AND SCHLEGEL

Winckelmann, “the greatest antiquary of his time and the first modern art historian” (Bazin 164), supervised productive excavations in Rome as Clement XIII’s Prefect of Antiquities and directed the building of Rome’s Villa Albani, as well as the assembling and arranging within the Villa of a major collection of antiquities. Thus his relation to classical forms was personal and immediate, as his writings reflect. He developed a method of reading art objects that made cultural history possible, one based on drawing historical generalizations from the present character and effect of the individual work or art object.

The premise of his *History of Ancient Art* is that art began with the drawing of human figures and has always been centered on them. From his first chapter, “The Shapes with Which Art Commenced,” he writes the story of the represented human form evolving toward its greatest perfection with the Greeks.¹² Here and in other writings he circumscribes and isolates the sculpted artifact, in many cases also providing an engraved version of it. He then muses upon it, emphasizing its aesthetic (often its erotic) expressiveness, which he then uses to interpret its period or phase of history. As Goethe’s appreciative essay on him phrased it, he taught that great works of art exist “through their continuing reality as ineffable creations,” and that we should “contemplate” each work “as an individual whole” (“Winckelmann” 236).

Starting from this close reading of individual forms and their separate parts, Winckelmann was the first to lay out an historical scheme of ancient art, based on the evolution of style or treatment. It has been argued that his work had a major influence on nineteenth-century European museums and indeed on all thinking about represented human forms as artifacts: “After the appearance of Winckelmann’s *History* it became possible . . . for more and more people to arrange sculpture [chronologically] in their minds and eventually in certain publications.”¹³ The conceptual influence of Winckelmann can be seen in the imagery of many of the German writers who followed, particularly Schiller, Herder, Goethe, and Hegel. Schiller, like Winckelmann, saw civilization as the evolution of defined, forever expressive, forms from indefinite, by now inexpressive, ones. “The monstrous divinity of the Oriental, which rules the world with the blind strength of a beast of prey, shrinks in the imagination of the Greeks into the friendly contours of a human being. The empire of the Titans falls, and infinite force is tamed by infinite form.”¹⁴ Herder’s *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* described the Near East as a mysterious ruin—“fables of fables, fragments of history, a dream of the ancient World.” The Greeks, however, left “noble monuments, monuments that speak to us with a

philosophic spirit.”¹⁵ Their *monumental* articulateness is empowered by the “philosophic spirit” of the age, which penetrates both “letters” and “the arts.” As the spirit of the artist then was in perfect harmony with that of the age, the same quality could be found in all remaining monuments of the time.

Nearly everyone credited Winckelmann’s *History of Ancient Art* (1764) with effecting a true revolution in the reading of what he called “splendid forms,” and by means of those, in the reading of literary works.¹⁶ Winckelmann’s contributions were, first, a definition and examples of pure beauty and, second, a truly historical approach to aesthetics: a history of art constructed of individual works alone, not biographies of artists—monuments, not lives.¹⁷ And in his *History*’s gallery of Greek marbles he provided both a starting place for understanding our past and a standard by which to measure all post-classical achievements. Before passing to “the masterpieces of painting,” Mme. de Staël’s heroine Corinne (1808) commences her art tour of Italy with the Vatican Museum, “that palace of statues where you see the human countenance made divine by paganism, just as Christianity makes the soul’s emotions divine.”¹⁸ It is in these halls that she embarks on reflections about the history of the human spirit, a history embodied not only in art forms representing the human body, but in the social forms discernible through these figures. “In our modern day, society is so cold and oppressive that suffering is man’s noblest aspect, and any man who has not suffered has neither felt nor thought. But in earlier times, there was something nobler than pain; it was heroic equanimity, the sense of strength that could develop among unequivocally free institutions” (142). The whole climate of the age can be read, as Winckelmann and Corinne do read it, in the faces and postures of these antique forms.

Like the author of *Corinne*, Winckelmann was less interested in what the sculpture was once meant to depict than in the cultural character it embodies symbolically and forever. For example, the “character of wisdom” found in the father’s face in the Laocoon group, its “noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur,” he attributed to the characteristically “great and dignified” Greek soul.¹⁹ This habit of “Physiognomic Perception,” which the historian uses to “wake the dead” and to “unriddle the mute language of the monuments,”²⁰ underpins art and cultural history from Winckelmann on. It is a practice resisted in our own time by Foucault, who, unlike the humanist, insists that statements of the past be treated as “an incomplete, fragmented figure.” He describes the aim of creating a total history as one of seeking to “reconstitute the overall form of a civilization . . . what is called metaphorically the ‘face’ of a period.”²¹ Foucault himself here disfigures history *with a figure*, thus rejecting the accepted practice of monumentalizing the past by humanizing it.

Foucault of course is arguing against such modern humanist philosophers as Ernst Cassirer, who insisted that the concepts of form were basic to the existence of the humanities.²² While Foucault emphasizes the status of the monument as “relic,” Cassirer sees it as a living symbolic idiom. The “true historian” must regard his material not as “petrified fact” but as “living form.” “History is the attempt to fuse together all these *disjecta membra*, the scattered limbs of the past, and to synthesize them and mold them into new shape” (*Essay* 225). Perceiving an artifact as a “work” helps rescue it from the necessary oblivion of all material creations. Monuments and documents have an *objective* past that is “gone forever.” They cannot be wakened “to a new life in a mere physical, objective sense.” Humanist history, though, can give them an “ideal existence” (*Essay* 221) by interpreting them “not only as dead remnants of the past but as living messages from it, messages addressing us in a language of their own.” Therefore, no matter what its nominal subject, the humanist reads every work of art as a monument to man generally, not to a particular person. “Beneath the temporal flux and behind the polymorphism of human life [historians] have hoped to discover the constant features of human nature” (*Essay* 208, 218–19).

The act of *converting* monuments from “dead and scattered” historical facts into living “forms” was central to Romantic cultural theory and art history, a tradition to which Cassirer belongs. It is a kind of archeology, the archeology of revivification. The mental reproduction of the monument to create the sense of a new, living form is what Cassirer and earlier historians referred to as an historical “palingenesis.” Goethe praised Herder’s historical descriptions as providing no simple “husk and shell of human beings” but as “regenerating the rubbish . . . to a living plant” (quoted by Cassirer, *Essay* 225).

Such regeneration, according to Cassirer, has been central to humanist thought for centuries and indeed underlay the humanist idea of the “Reformation.”

According to Ficino, the whole point of religious and philosophical *knowledge* is nothing other than the eradication from the world of everything that is deformed; and the recognition that even things that seem formless participate in form. . . . If redemption is conceived of as a renovation of the *form* of man and of the world, i.e., as a true *reformatio*, then the focal point of intellectual life must lie in the place where the ‘idea’ is embodied, i.e., where the non-sensible form present in the mind of the artist breaks forth into the world of the visible and becomes realized in it.²³

Thus the basic act of reforming the “deformed” has focused on reimposing form on monumental works disfigured by time, especially those of the human figure: a “renovation of the form of man.” Form, by

which the work expresses its character, is something concealed, to be unfolded or disclosed by viewer, reader, or, in the case of the ekphrastic poem, the poet. It is “a significant exterior,” A. W. Schlegel observed, “the speaking physiognomy of each thing, which, as long as it is not disfigured by any destructive accident, gives a true evidence of its hidden essence” (*Lectures* 340). To the eye of the connoisseur, even disfigured works were integral in their form if not in their shape. When Shelley’s friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg visited Florence, he was drawn like everybody then to the Medici Venus. He discovered that it had once been broken to pieces, then badly repaired: the head and hands he thought perhaps modern. The head was “insipid.” Nothing about its expression could he admire, “but the form I praise.”²⁴ Clearly the whole was greater than any of its parts when expression was subordinated to form. The Belvedere Apollo had also been mutilated and restored, but its state of repair mattered little to Byron, who declared that in its “delicate form . . . are exprest/ All that ideal Beauty ever bless’d/ The mind with in its most unearthly mood . . .” (*Childe Harold IV*, St. 162).

Rudolf Arnheim has more recently framed the matter in terms of Gestalt aesthetics. Although an artwork has a weak Gestalt as an object, it has a strong one as an experience. It is physically “an object of low organisation. It makes little difference to the marble of the Laocoon group that an arm is broken off, nor does the paint of a landscape revolt when a busy restorer adds a glaring blue to its faded sky.” But “the *work of art defined as an experience* turns out to be a Gestalt of the highest degree” (emphasis added).²⁵ Form is the *visualized* whole of any “work,” as shape is the visible whole. Thus form brings together the two aspects of monumentality: durability of the work as record and durability of the work as effect. In fact, it gives a work like the Belvedere Torso a monumental Gestalt and thus protects it from disfigurement. Long regarded as proof of the indestructibility of aesthetic identity, the Torso received its most celebrated reformation by Winckelmann. If Renaissance humanists sought the “renovation of the *form* of man,” in Winckelmann’s reading²⁶ we see a later example of such reformation. The process is one of reconstructing and reproducing the Torso form by imagining it: presenting it to his “inner eye.” The passage, written in 1759, was later incorporated into his *History*.

If it seems inconceivable that the power of reflection be shown elsewhere than in the [missing] head, you can learn here how a master’s creative hand is able to endow matter with mind. The back, which appears as if flexed in noble thought, gives me the mental picture of a head filled with the joyful remembrance of his astonishing deeds, and, as his head full of wisdom and majesty arises before my inner eye, the other missing limbs also begin to take shape in my imagination. . . .

The manner in which our thoughts are directed from Hercules' feats of strength to the perfection of his soul constitutes one of the mysteries of art; and the perfection of that soul is recorded in the torso as in a monument that could not have been equaled by a poet who limited himself to celebrating the strength of the hero's arms. . . . The world of art weeps with me in seeing this work . . . half destroyed and cruelly maltreated. Who does not lament, on this occasion, the loss of hundreds of other masterpieces? Yet art, in wishing to instruct us further, recalls us from these sad thoughts by showing us how much might still be learned from this fragment, and how an artist should look at it.

Reading the torso (which he identifies as that of Hercules) as a record of its own composition, Winckelmann first invites us to imagine the "master's creative hand" in order to "learn" how to see a "work," matter endowed with mind. Supplied by the writer, the "hand" and arm so obviously missing in the thing become the power of the artist's expression and craftsmanship. The "head full of wisdom and majesty" rising before Winckelmann's inner eye is equally that of Hercules and of the creative "master." As it emerges, so then does the idea of the work itself, its form, taking "shape in [his] imagination" as the "missing limbs" do.

Figural works, especially those like sculptures or oil portraits, which are nothing but figure, have a presence, phenomenality, depending little on their being intact. As Arnheim says, the mutilated Laocoon may give the experience of wholeness more than an overpainted landscape. Perhaps mutilation itself, as has been surmised, "requires us to imagine that the work in question is sustained by an underlying, albeit sometimes invisible, ideal order."²⁷ Through its form the partial figure with a strong Gestalt is a language for the ideal order which generated it and which it embodies. That order as imagined is form, but imagining it is undoubtedly easier if the original shape of the object is a familiar one, a centered recognizable figure.

Partly owing to Winckelmann, the Belvedere Torso came to exemplify the monumental power of the "work of art"; it can be mutilated but never deformed: its formal presence belongs to the idea, its essence, rather than to the object, its material existence. "When a Work has Unity it is as much in a Part as in the Whole," Blake declared. "The Torso is as much a Unity as the Laocoon" ("On Homer's Poetry"). In its original state the Torso expressed the strength of the human body. Maimed, it imaged the comprehensive unity of the Greek mind. For Blake's friend and patron William Hayley, that unity, discernible to the tactile imagination, was the secret of classical sculpture's ability to reproduce itself in figures designed by later artists like Michelangelo: "The veteran, while his hand, with science fraught,/ Roved o'er the stone so exquisitely wrought,/ His fancy giving the maim'd trunk a soul,/ Saw,

in his touch, the grandeur of the whole.”²⁸ Thus the monumental form’s ultimate expressive power is that of keeping alive the idea of itself, not as historical object or artifact but art work (as “an artist should look at it,” rather than as a mere antiquarian would). That was the essence of Samuel Rogers’s sonnet “To the Fragment of a Statue of Hercules, Commonly Called the Torso”:

And dost thou still, thou mass of breathing stone,
(Thy giant limbs to night in chaos hurl’d),
Still sit as on the fragment of a world;
Surviving all, majestic and alone?
What though the Spirits of the North, that swept
Rome from the earth, when in her pomp she slept,
Smote thee with fury, and thy headless trunk
Deep in the dust ’mid tower and temple sunk:
Soon to subdue mankind ’twas thine to rise,
Still, still unquell’d thy glorious energies!
Aspiring minds, with thee conversing, caught
Bright revelations of the Good they sought;
By thee that long-lost spell in secret given,
To draw down Gods, and lift the soul to Heaven!

Though mutilated in the drive of events and forgotten (“long-lost”) by history, the Torso “remains,” like Keats’s unravished bride. “Still” intact as image, it sits on, yet apart from, “the fragment of the world,” fitting Stephen Dedalus’s description of the aesthetic image as “self-bounded and self-contained upon the immeasurable background of time and space which is not it”—a background, in Rogers, of night (or “night in chaos,” depending on how we read the line). The darkness of formless time and shape claims as much of “Hercules” as can be thought of as either human body or stone object. What survives is the Torso as work. By identifying the figure as Hercules (as Winckelmann had) Rogers’s title specifically supplants the idea of fragmented object with that of original integral meaning, one that can be reanimated to “breathing” life as a speaking image with which to “converse” and find “Bright revelations of the Good.” Though physically a “ruin” like fallen towers and temples, it maintains its power of articulate expression. Rogers’s rhetorical question “And dost thou still . . . ?” is mutely answered by the still, surviving work.

Of course the archeologist’s task has been to revive discovered objects with scholarship, placing them within an explanatory—that is to say historical—framework. They are reconnected to their origin and their original role. That was the method of Quatremère de Quincy dis-

cussed above. Rogers's poem and other monument-readings of the time served the common Romantic aim of providing comprehension not by explaining, but by repicturing. As I have said, sculpture galleries like the Vatican's Belvedere, where Rogers viewed the Torso, frame and isolate their figures, creating new images of solitary objects. Similarly literary ekphrasis, the verbal reproducing of a real or imagined form, lifts the work from the setting in which it was or might be found and formally isolates it, recontextualizing it as art. Indeed, James Heffernan argues that the ekphrastic tradition has created a "museum of words," an imaginary place that started to gain a particular referentiality during the Romantic period with the new public art museums.²⁹ The reconstruction of an image attests to the power of the historical imagination to penetrate present situations—heaps of intact or mutilated remains—and grasp origins. Further, it attests to the artwork's power of surviving its own time.

The survival of the fragment shows that the artwork is more than object, form is more than shape. "A fragmentary torso still lives as a work of art," Herbert Read declares, no doubt with the most famous example in mind. "A work of art . . . and particularly a piece of sculpture, is not destroyed so long as a recognizable fragment of it survives. The fragment bears the artist's signature, the impression of his sensibility, and that quality we must isolate if in the end we would stand in the presence of the work of art." Such a work survives not only the "physical dismemberment of the statue but even the spiritual destruction of the body image."³⁰ As a fragmentary relic, a piece like the Torso has changed not just its condition or situation but its very nature and meaning. It began not as a monument in any documentary sense but as "an ideal of humanity." Now no longer that but not simply an aesthetic object either, it stands, according to Read, for the Aesthetic. Rogers's poem completes the meaning by making it stand for the triumph of the aesthetic over the historical or political. Released from its *past* signification it now has a strong phenomenal existence, a "presence" involving us as spectators.

However, when Read says we "stand in the presence of the work of art" I take him to mean it figuratively, a point I want to emphasize here. We may physically stand in the presence of an art object (or any other object or any person), but the "presence" of a poem, say, or a piece of music, is more in its effect than its physical nearness to us. So also is a sculpture *as a work*. We feel the presence of the grand *idea* of the "work of art" when we set up a kind of conceptual rather than perceptual space including the piece as work and us as audience or reader, with the relationship defined, as I have said, by having the work in the mind's eye. Thus Goethe reflected on Winckelmann's natural ability to appreciate

the beauty of forms in Greek literature, then confront it “face to face” in classical sculpture.³¹ And as we have seen, Winckelmann then could reconstruct the work, as work, to his “mind’s eye.”



On returning from a survey of Paris museums, the *Champion’s* editor John Scott described their richness in “the imperishable parts that appertained to what has perished;—in the sole survivors of general wrecks and ruins.” “In their present situation, looking back to their past history,” the treasures of the Louvre were poignant monuments to the catastrophes of time.³² Though these “survivors” are reminders of Time itself as ruined, in their new setting they were used to restore it, to shape it into eras or periods experienced in the various rooms, salons, or halls of the museum, a milieu of walls, frames, pedestals, and cases. Theatrically enlivening discovered figures from the past illuminates the darkened past itself. So history as a whole was given what Henri Focillon has termed “a really monumental quality,” Time distributed among rooms and exhibition cases, “stable chronological environments.”³³

Concurrent with the recognition of “archeology” (in the early sense of a “systematic description or study of antiquities” [*OED*]) as a serious pursuit was a singular growth of museums and other public object-collections, such as literary anthologies. These developments testify, first, to an eagerness to explain the earliest role of works of art, and, second, to envisage them in a new way while recapturing something of their earliest force or effect. By isolating or grouping, museums tended to accentuate their dual nature—esthetic and historical. As individually displayed esthetic forms these artifacts were made literally to showcase the uniqueness of the monument of human genius. As grouped records they arranged history.

In short, the museum offered a vision of Time shaped by its most distinguished human works. When the English and Prussians captured Paris in July 1815 they found in the Louvre Palace, as tourists later would, an extraordinary collection of works, the Musée Napoléon. The vast Gallery, running the whole length of the palace and half the distance between the Pont Royal and Pont Neuf, contained nearly two thousand paintings; the various ground-floor Salons or Halls were home to statues and statuary remains “collected from every part of the world, being exhibited to the best advantage.”³⁴ “The gallery was a magnificent sight,” wrote the Irish poet and novelist the Reverend George Croly. “A vista of 1,300 feet, of pictures, pillars of precious marble, and massive gilding. The first sensation seemed to be the same to all spectators, a feeling of eager, uneasy wonder. It required days to be able to look upon this daz-

zling collection with the calmness necessary to enjoyment.”³⁵ Although James Forbes, visiting the place a decade earlier during the Peace of Amiens, voiced dismay over the thefts that made possible such a collection, he too had been impressed with the “taste and judgment” of the decor and arrangements, the way the rooms themselves “correspond with the inestimable objects with which they may be said to be peopled.”³⁶

The Museum had opened to the public in 1793 and received its first consignment of looted works the following year, among them, from the Antwerp Cathedral, the middle panel of Rubens’s *Descent from the Cross*. Then, from 1796 to 1799, one shipment after another from the cities of Italy arrived, including the Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoon, the Dying Gaul, the Belvedere Torso, and the Venus di Medici.³⁷

Aside from moral and political questions arising from the confiscation, this museum provoked Europe-wide controversy about the ideal arrangement of artistic monuments. The aesthetics of viewing, of “effect,” so vital an element of landscape or garden theory, was now applied to it and places like it. One tourist just after Waterloo was “struck with amazement” at the Gallery’s more than quarter-mile length, its gilded and ornamented ceiling, the “nine noble arches abutted on pillars of porphyry and marble,” its grand mirrors and vases.³⁸ Henry Milton by contrast thought the gallery with its semicircular ceiling resembled “a great interminable pipe.” He could not imagine what the aim was of offering the visitor a view of so many paintings at once. He would find much to praise, however, in the different sort of drama of the sculpture salons, lined with dark marble effectively setting off the white figures in them. These rooms were, he noted, well lit, and many had marble floors.³⁹ For John Bell in 1817 the meagerness of the Tribune in Florence evoked by contrast the Louvre, where one could contemplate items “with sensations of heightened pleasure, when viewed in rich and noble halls.”⁴⁰

Obviously the gallery of paintings was intended to supply a panorama of human achievement, overwhelming in its richness and plenitude. To Sir Thomas Raffles in the summer of 1817 that aim was achieved: “It is like some splendid effort of enchantment—the mind is overwhelmed and bewildered by such sublime combinations of art—and the eye is lost in the vast and interesting perspective—and it is long ere you can recover from the impression of so much grandeur, to fix your attention on any individual portion of the stupendous whole.”⁴¹

What the gallery did singly the ground-floor sculpture rooms did successively, showing “the noblest efforts of human genius,” as Raffles referred to them, “wrested from the oblivion of long-departed years.” And all of this in a visible historical scheme: “you pass from age to age as you move from room to room—and in the lounge of a morning, you seem to have communed with the greatest characters that have appeared

upon the busy theatre of the ancient world” (27). Even when the original collection was being assembled, the English engraver Valentine Green wrote to Joshua Reynolds that it would provide “at one view” all the “principles and systems” of the various eras of art in a “resurrection of their ancient spirit.”⁴² In the Great Hall the room itself dominated as an image of history, but of history rationally ordered, as opposed to the images of time disordered that Petra or the sands of Egypt provided. “The eye is tranced,” Croly wrote, “and from the portal-arch/ Looks down the unmeasured length in dim delight,/ Piercing the radiant lines, the mighty march/ Of armies of the mind.”

Whatever the opinions about the great picture gallery, there appeared a consensus that the Louvre sculpture salons achieved their intended purposes: to present single models for periods, and to define history in terms of individual expressions of mind. They encouraged focusing on one object or group, sometimes by creating visual contrasts to isolate it aesthetically as a presence. In the same way, the Townley collection of ancient marbles in London (soon to form a prominent part of the early British Museum holdings) positioned each object to stand alone and stand out: “The aim in the decoration of this room was principally to recal the eye in particular upon each of the marbles it contains,” so objects were placed between dark red columns “to prevent the sight from wandering upon too many objects at once,” and also to present a contrast to the lighter marble.⁴³ Travelling in Italy, James A. Galiffe expressed a preference for only one class of sculpture at a time in the visual field (for the “perfect enjoyment of works of art”). It is too jarring, he declared, after the contemplation of the ideal beauty of a Greek or Roman statue, to have the eye immediately fall on the narrative or “poetic” aspect of a bas relief.⁴⁴ And yet the strong formal presence of the great single work could overcome an unfortunate placement. Croly argued that although the Louvre’s Venus di Medici, less favorably situated than the Apollo Belvedere, on first glance “disappointed every one,” she “gained upon the eye, and admiration seemed to be at length won by her, not inferior to that which was given at once to the *dazzling* eloquence of the Apollo” (81).

In their larger schemes museums conveniently provided what visits to present sites of ancient cities did: visual equivalents of cultures or ages. Goethe said that Winckelmann in and about Rome “saw his ideas in corporeal form . . . as he wandered in amazement through the ruins of a gigantic age.”⁴⁵ What we see with our eyes, of course, are monumental relics; what we can imagine is a past culture, an historical idea, an ideal world shaped around real objects. The word “museum” comes from the Greek *mouseion*, meaning a *place* or home for the muses. Like a church, cathedral, or temple the museum gave a sense of place to an

otherwise remote past, a place to view, study, and honor human achievement. Perhaps it was natural that the museum was often called a temple of art: *Tempel der Kunst*.⁴⁶

In the early decades of the nineteenth century these attitudes were reflected by the exterior and interior architecture of new museums, especially those meant to frame and display antiquities. The buildings were temples, “meant to preserve the vestiges of human history” (Bazin 199). The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed the spread of these museums of antiquity designed, very graphically, to accommodate “secular relics.”⁴⁷ The British Museum, begun in 1823 and designed by its architect Sir Robert Smirke as “an Ionic temple with two wings” (Bazin 198), was in fact inspired by the Parthenon in Athens. In Munich Louis I of Bavaria commissioned the construction of the neo-Greek Glyptothek to keep and display his collection of antiquities, including the pediments from the Temple of Aphaia in Aegina.

The association of artifacts with art and then with these buildings of solemn importance—both the temples from which they might have come and those in which they were deposited—profoundly influenced the way art and cultural history were imagined. As we shall see, the temple played an important role for poets as well as historians in visualizing both the art work and art history in general. Winckelmann declared that during the fifty years following the Persian War “was laid a foundation for the greatness of Greece on which an enduring and splendid edifice could be erected. The philosophers and poets commenced the structure; the artists completed it; and history leads us to it through a magnificent portal.”⁴⁸ In an ardent commemorative essay written in 1781 Herder spoke of “the edifice of his historical doctrine,” describing it as a “simple Greek temple” with “supreme sanctuaries and vast perspectives” standing before us.⁴⁹ Schlegel praised Winckelmann as “the best guide to conduct us to this sanctuary of the beautiful, with deep and thoughtful contemplation” (48).

Those interested in relating periods or cultures to the forms they produced found a logical beginning in the sculpted forms from classical Greece as stationed in an ancient temple or a modern museum. Matthew Arnold, a later advocate for a monumentalist sense of the past, would quite naturally turn to Greek literature as a model for humanist formalism (“a model of immortal beauty”) and to Greek sculpture as a visual model for true literary form. His 1853 Preface declared that the unifying element of a Greek tragedy, its “mythic story,” was in the mind of the spectator as he entered the theater: “it stood in his memory, as a group of statuary, faintly seen, at the end of a dark vista.” The strength of this self-configuring central idea gave to the classical artist—sculptor or writer—the power of architectonics, “that power of execution which creates, forms, constitutes,” and which allows “the spirit of the whole” to be “seized.”

Partly through the influence of Winckelmann, the museum curator and his audience saw the housed artifacts as materials for a newly constructed, comprehensible version of human progress and the “Rise of the Arts.” Art history and art collecting grew up together and were part of the same phenomenon.⁵⁰ The novelist Lady Morgan wrote that the Gallery in Florence permitted the visitor “to read the history of man in the progress of his works,” from the time the “dark rude animal” first exercises his imagination by “scooping his hideous idol in the rock” to the time when, as Phidias or Michelangelo, he leaves in the marble the record of his own and his god’s divinity.⁵¹ Likewise, in the Louvre one could trace “the progress of the art from its first beginning to the period of its greatest perfection.”⁵² However, as I have said, these visitors found only the paintings there organized to this end. The sculptures were treated as self-existent forms. The Louvre sculpture salons showed only “captive gods and emperors . . . imprisoned heroes and sages,” the Reverend James Chetwoode Eustace complained, while the sparse windows allowed a few sunbeams to “just glare on the lifeless forms, as if to show the paleness of the marble.”⁵³ “Statues, like pictures . . . ought to be arranged so as to form the history of the art,” leading the spectator “from the first efforts of untutored nature, to the bold outlines of the Egyptians, to the full, the breathing perfection of the Greeks.”

Graphically Winckelmann and his followers gave each historical period the faces and figures of its characteristic forms. The descriptions and engraved plates in his *History of Ancient Art* provided models for visualizing particular ages, most memorably that of classical Greece. But it was left to A. W. Schlegel to demonstrate the cultural unity of historical periods by devising, in terms of such models, the kind of inter-art analogies that have always been essential to concepts of cultural periodization.⁵⁴ Schlegel made sculpture a figure (in two senses of that word) for Greek drama, and painting for Romantic (post-classical) drama. Each style of drama, merged with its appropriate iconic form, became a model for the spirit of its age, bringing “before our eyes an independent and definite whole.” Such a whole, perceived *as if visually*, is perceived as having monumental form. “The solidity and uniformity of the mass in which [the figures] are constructed” announces “a creation of no perishable existence, but endowed with a high power of endurance” (*Lectures* 76). Characteristic form, remaining a shape in history, analogically provides a shape to history, reconstituting it figurally.

Although the arts became the focus of Schlegel’s interest in the later years of his life, a time when he superintended Berlin’s Museum of Antiquities and delivered a notable series of lectures on the *Theory and History of the Fine Arts*, he is best remembered for his work on literature: his essays, his translations of Shakespeare, and above all a series of

historical lectures he gave in Vienna during the spring of 1808 on *Dramatic Art and Literature*. As we shall see, when published these were to have a major effect on the way English writers such as Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Shelley analyzed and, more importantly, imagined the history of poetic thought.⁵⁵

Although the whole series shows the stamp of Winckelmann's perceptions, it is in the third lecture that Schlegel pays the most direct homage to the *History of Ancient Art* and the methods of "our immortal Winckelmann" (48). He begins this part of that lecture, a section on the study of the antique, by noting that although Winckelmann's subject was the plastic arts, he left many "hints" for the study of other aspects of Greek civilization, especially of literature. These hints, expanded to cover subsequent periods of literature and culture, become the basis for Schlegel's own historical method.

Throughout all the lectures, but especially in the third, Schlegel displays and defines what I have called museum consciousness, a way of thinking about cultural history to a large extent influenced by assumptions behind the philosophy and practice of art museums of the time. In a chapter on "The Essentials of Art" Winckelmann had indulged in a reverie in which he was an athlete in the Olympic Stadium. All around him he saw "countless statues of young manly heroes, and two-horse and four-horse chariots of bronze, with the figures of the victors erect thereon, and other wonders of art" (1-2: 190). This was his version of what Malraux would call our "*musée imaginaire*" or "museum without walls": the personal or cultural mental storehouse of images of the noblest works of art (13-16). Winckelmann argues that the critic-historian must try to collect and unite in the mind all the statues mentioned by ancient authors and all those whose fragments might be viewed. "When the understanding and the eye assemble and set the whole together in one area, just as the choicest specimens of art stood ranged in numerous rows in the Stadium at Elis, then the spirit finds itself in the midst of them."

Briefly, the assumptions Winckelmann and Schlegel shared in these matters were: 1) The culture of a nation is best grasped and displayed by the display of its monumental forms, the noblest productions of national genius. "The history of the development of art and its various forms may be . . . exhibited in the characters of a number, by no means considerable, of elevated and creative minds" (Schlegel 29). 2) When arranged or ordered historically these forms show the historical shape of a national or international culture. 3) Therefore, to make the presentation of forms publicly accessible either tangibly or verbally is to teach cultural history to the public. To these assumptions Schlegel, again following Winckelmann's lead, added three others, and by example showed how they

might be applied. 4) In *all* the arts each age has left behind characteristic forms by which it might be understood. 5) These historically characteristic forms in one of the arts have analogues in the others. 6) Therefore a new literary history is possible based on an understanding of the history of all these characteristic forms.

Schlegel's subject is drama, which he sees as essentially theater or spectacle, "visible representation before spectators." It follows, then, that the historian should give dramatic literature a "sort of theatrical animation" by offering to the mental view images of Greek statuary as conceptual models. Because every great cultural period is an organic whole, certain forms can be made to stand for that whole and give it a concrete presence. Winckelmann's investigation into early figural art had taught cultural historians to interpret periods by means of typical styles of representing the body. By using the inter-art analogy, Schlegel gave his own cultural history a broader perspective than Winckelmann's did. "We are yet in want of a work in which the entire poetic, artistic, scientific, and social culture of the Greeks should be painted as one grand and harmonious whole . . . and traced through its connected development in the same spirit which Winkelmann [sic] has executed in the part he attempted" (48–9).

Delivered the year *Corinne* made its appearance, Schlegel's *Lectures* used human forms in painting and sculpture this way to embody different styles of representation and effect for different periods. As Winckelmann did in his *History*, Schlegel offered a monumentalist view of cultural history, comparing and judging the "original and masterly works of art . . . the existing productions of the human mind" (18). This is very close to what the *History* tried to do, to show "the origin, progress, change, and downfall of art, together with the different styles of nations, periods, and artists, and to prove the whole, as far as it is possible, from the ancient monuments now in existence" (1–2: 3). Winckelmann's monuments are sculptures *by the side of which* we see Greek drama and "the other branches," making up a composite, a panorama of Greek culture (1: 3). Schlegel's are the otherwise lost figures in ancient drama restored by calling up sculptural models. Ancient Greece, the "consummation of form" (Schelling 336), was a natural starting place.

What is the best means of becoming imbued with the spirit of the Greeks, without a knowledge of their language? I answer without hesitation,—the study of the antique; and if this is not always possible through the originals, yet, by means of casts, it is to a certain extent within the power of every man. These models of the human form require no interpretation; their elevated character is imperishable, and will always be recognized through all vicissitudes of time. . . . (47–8)

Although we have no other information about the artist's exact intention or even who the figures are supposed to be, the idiom of form is always comprehensible.

As a staged or presented aesthetic form, the monumental figure operates in Schlegel's lectures to provide insight into cultural periods, much as it was supposed to in a museum. As readers we can give a theatrical animation to the great tragedies by keeping the "forms of gods and heroes" such as the Laocoon or Niobe "ever present to our fancy" (48). This would be the basis of a grand historical vision not just of drama or sculpture but of cultures as a whole in a *musée imaginaire*. These are no doubt some of the "shapes of beauty" that Keats in *Endymion* says we must always have with us. Obviously if we do not, in Schlegel's terms, keep them present in our imaginations we lose much of our power to read other artifacts. If we do keep them present, we have a way of reading history by responding to the *aesthetic* power of individual works. This, as I shall presently show, is the technique proposed by Shelley's "Defence of Poetry."

Significant form is the principle in a work that makes us *visualize* a particular kind of unity and therefore feel a particular kind of effect. "It is only before the groupes of Niobe or Laocoon that we first enter into the spirit of the tragedies of Sophocles" (48). Of course Schlegel places us mentally, not physically, "before the groupes," positioning the figures in our minds as figures or emblems of thought. Using visual form, sculpture, rhetorically to convey the spirit of the nonvisual, drama, he advanced his most influential idea, that the "spirit of ancient art and poetry is plastic [*plastisch*], but that of the moderns picturesque [*pittoresk*]" (22). Thus the essence of the classical work of art, sculptural or poetic, is a highly unified beauty, characterized by the single figure or group, that of the moderns a more complex and heterogeneous unity, as among the figures in a painting. The human form becomes a figure first for the spirit of the work and then for the spirit of the age.

The impulse, I believe, in identifying these two types of historical form is the humanist one of giving faces to historical periods to underline the endurance throughout history of something identifiable as human intentionality embodied in form. In its essential configuration the body, unchanging through history, stands for humanity and universal ideas about man. Among natural forms, Schelling declared in 1807, art should "seize directly" on what is "highest and most evolved, the human figure" (336). "The forms of sculpture are as uniform and eternal as simple, pure, human nature," Herder wrote; "the shapes of painting, which are a tablet of time, change with history, races and times."⁵⁶ The forms of sculpture can stand for the "simple" and "pure" in humanity, but as Hazlitt pointed out in some remarks on the Schlegel formulation, classic

and romantic are equally “founded in essential and indestructible principles of human nature” (*Works* 6: 348). This is certainly a dominant view in Schlegel’s *Lectures* as a whole, which attempted to restore the balance that Winckelmann had tipped in favor of the classics.

What makes any “work” historically telling, Schlegel indicates, is that point of contact between style and idea that we refer to as form which can be interpreted by the metamorphosing trope that images the work’s effect. Through their signifying forms, therefore, preserved art objects provide a unified conception for each individual period. In addition, the fact that even across centuries they can inspire “astonishment and admiration” assures us of the universality of human response and thus offers a sense of the unity of human history, providing a sense of form for that as well. Such assumptions were basic to Friedrich Schlegel’s own lectures, which also made use of inter-art analogies to convey the essence of historically significant aesthetic forms. As a literary historian Friedrich too sought to renovate old poems and plays by reproducing them in analogous forms. Like old paintings they must undergo a “process of restoration,” so as to be rescued from the “dust of ages.” He believed that restoring works of post-classical periods would help restore those periods in the eyes of historians. His discussion of the “Gothic” works of Eschenbach and his contemporaries was meant to help make the excellence of the Middle Ages “patent to all eyes.” To do so he must display the period in terms of its characteristic forms, and like his brother he used one art form as a metaphor for another. Past periods cannot be comprehended by analysis alone; each must be known by its formal effect. Medieval German poetry in its conceptual simplicity and its decorative style bears “a striking resemblance to the monuments of Gothic art, which still impress the beholder with mixed feelings of astonishment and admiration.”⁵⁷ The act of reconstituting an age by graphically reproducing its most characteristic works became an essential mark of these early literary histories.

Cultural and art historians from Winckelmann on sought to show that recovered figures constitute a living language for the past—as Cassirer put it, “messages addressing us in a language of their own,” living rather than dead. Any language should serve to make clear its subject, but dead languages themselves need explaining or deciphering. Cassirer’s goal of discovering an “idiom”—a style of speaking that expresses a style of thinking—is based on the idea, one I have been tracing in this chapter, that types of figures—literary and plastic—are mutually referential, and that one can be used to restore the other. I will mention one case briefly before turning in the next chapter to a literary monumental history not usually remembered as such: Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry.”

In the winter of 1819 Hazlitt delivered a series on *The Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth*, the eighth and last of which, “On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature,” was based on Schlegel’s distinction between the sculpturesque and the painterly. In it he declared that Schlegel was right in having us contemplate the Greek dramatists while standing before the Niobe or Laocoon (*Works* 16: 349); to show the distinctive nature of modern literature (in this case Elizabethan) Hazlitt used an architectural model. His point was that classical art is that of immediate visual impact, romantic of imaginative association of images. “A Grecian temple, for instance, is a classical object: it is beautiful in itself, and excites immediate admiration. But the ruins of a Gothic castle have no beauty or symmetry to attract the eye; yet they excite a more powerful and romantic interest, from the ideas with which they are habitually associated” (348). The habit of using historical inter-art analogies became ingrained with Hazlitt after reading Schlegel and is a prevailing feature in *Lectures on the English Poets*. His introductory “General View of the Subject” in the Elizabethan lectures adopts and even elaborates on Schlegel’s counsel to imagine art objects when thinking of literary works: “What is, I think, as likely as any thing to cure us of this overweening admiration of the present, and unmingled contempt for past times, is the looking at the finest old pictures; at Raphael’s heads, at Titian’s faces, at Claude’s landscapes. . . . We begin to feel, that nature and the mind of man are not a thing of yesterday, as we had been led to suppose” (*Works* 16: 178). Hazlitt also observed that time has left only “the wrecks of taste and genius . . . from which we are only now recovering the scattered fragments and broken images to erect a temple to true Fame! How long before it will be completed?” Hazlitt’s lectures were intended as a kind of temple of the arts, to restore and house the fragments and images, to “rescue” his subjects from “hopeless obscurity” and “do them right” (*Works* 6: 176).



In the plastic arts “form” meant first of all significant shape or outline. In the museum age it came to signify or express both the work’s own aesthetic essence and the essence of that age or civilization that produced it. Thus the Grecian Urn’s “attic shape,” read as form, spoke not only of its own character, but of the character of ancient Greece. Time, however, obscures or mutilates its forms. Writers could rescue or even restore them by visualizing them as other shapes or as figures in other media. In doing so, as we shall see in the next few chapters, they called upon another, centuries-old, idea of form: the shaping or reshaping force rather than the shaped thing.