

BOOK REVIEW

The Art of the Body: Antiquity and its Legacy. By Michael SQUIRE. Ancients and Moderns Series. London: I. B. Tauris / New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xv + 240. Paperback, £12.99/\$24.95. ISBN 978-1-845-11931-7 / 978-0-19-538081-1.

According to series editor Phiroze Vasunia, the Ancients and Moderns series aims to showcase the best work currently being done in reception studies and to demonstrate the continued relevance of classical antiquity to contemporary debates about culture, politics and society, approaching the categories of “reception” and “tradition” critically and interrogating the very notion of unmediated access to the classical past, thus seeking “to stir up debates about and within reception studies and to complicate some of the standard narratives about the ‘legacy’ of Greece and Rome” (ix). Other volumes in the series consider such topics as race, sex, gender, slavery and war, among others. One broad claim of the series is that classical scholarship “is inextricably connected to what many generations have thought, said, and done about the ancient world” (x).

In the current volume, Michael Squire explores Greco-Roman visual representations of the body, considering the post-classical reception of these representations in the West, and relating this reception history to broader issues regarding the relationship between antiquity and modernity. His three basic premises, set out in the Preface, are: (1) that classical antiquity provided the model for all subsequent attempts to understand the human figure; (2) that the post-classical reception of ancient images of the body tend to complicate contemporary understandings of what these images meant in their original context; and (3) that ancient and modern body imagery have a reciprocal relationship, with each affecting how we understand the other. This last claim is perhaps the most striking, suggesting that modern representations of the body actually change the way we see and understand ancient representations; in a sense, the present influences the past no less than the past is generally thought to influence the present. If Squire has a polemical point, it is that contemporary departments of art history on the one hand, and classical archaeology on the other, must break down the institutional and disciplinary barriers that separate them, because “the material creations of the past are always experienced through the lens of the present” (xiv) and vice versa.

The first chapter, “Embodying the Classical,” serves as a kind of introduction, setting forth basic principles as well as sketching out the argument of subsequent chapters. Squire traces the western conception of the body back to the traditional Greek association between beauty (*kalos*) and goodness (*agathos*). He discusses the fifth-century *Canon* of Polyclitus as well as its subsequent refinement by sculptors including Praxiteles, Scopas and Lysippos. This system of mathematical ratios (*symmetria*) was believed not only to guide the mimetic representation of the human form, but also to correspond to its ideal reality. This ideal achieved renewed influence in the Italian Renaissance, driven by both the scholarly recovery of Vasari and the practical achievements of artists including Botticelli and Michelangelo. Botticelli’s 1486 *The Birth of Venus* derives from ancient descriptions of Apelles’ lost *Aphrodite Anadyomene*, as well as ancient adaptations of Praxiteles’ Knidian Aphrodite. Ideas about the body had influenced the architectural concepts of Vitruvius, which in turn influenced Leonardo da Vinci’s thinking about the body. Squire then traces this Renaissance embrace of classical idealism through later centuries of the modern period, including eighteenth-century aestheticism and nineteenth-century Romanticism. In a section charmingly entitled “Body Fascism,” Squire connects the nineteenth-century physical culture movement with the rise of German Nazism and Italian Fascism. Finally, Squire traces the twentieth-century turn away from the classical ideal, beginning with the Futurism of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909 and continuing through successive art movements including Surrealism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Dadaism, and Cubism. After World War II, the perceived connection of Nazism and Fascism with classical idealism accelerated this turn away from antiquity in the visual arts. As Squire writes, “the past had become *passé*” (24). And yet, Squire argues, the past hardly lost its potency. For one thing, rejection of Polyclitus’ *Canon* or Da Vinci’s “Vitruvian man” was accompanied by an embrace of early exemplars including Greek Cycladic figurines of the third-millennium BCE. Postmodernism, moreover, returned to classical imagery, if only as part of an ironic critique.

Chapter 2, “Figuring What Comes Naturally? Writing the ‘Art History’ of the Body,” considers the impact of ancient Greek naturalism on conventional modern narratives of artistic development. That is to say, Squire’s concern here is “historiographical rather than simply historical” (32); he is less concerned with the emergence of Greek naturalism than he is with its historical and scholarly reception. Beginning with Winckelmann, art historians have tended to treat naturalism as something inevitable, the discovery of which by the classical Greeks

may be seen as a token of their civilization and as a watershed in an ongoing story of human progress towards complete knowledge of the world and its truth. Squire chooses to focus on Ernst Gombrich's *Story of Art*, first published in 1950, as an emblematic case study of this aspect of classical reception. Along the way, the reader gets a satisfying introduction to Greek monumental sculpture and the development of the *kouros* from its Egyptian origins through its Orientalizing Archaic phase to the "Revolution" or "Greek Miracle" represented by the development of *contrapposto* stance and other features of classical Greek naturalism.

In Chapter 3, "The Ancient 'Female Nude' (And Other Modern Fictions)," Squire argues that the western conception of the ideal female body derives from ancient artistic conventions, particularly Praxiteles' fourth-century Knidian Aphrodite, highly influential through numerous ancient copies and descriptions. This modern ideal, however, is a product of classical reception, filtered first through a Christian ideology that viewed Mary as the ideal woman (by turns Christianizing the classical ideal and classicizing the Christian), and later through an evolving series of secular assumptions about sexuality and gender.¹ This entire history of the female body, Squire argues, emerges under the penetrating glare of the male gaze. The very conception of art in the West, Squire claims, assumes an active male subjectivity and a passive female objectivity. Into this sweeping historical context, Squire places the feminist resistance to male objectification, from Mary Richardson's 1914 mutilation of Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* in London's National Gallery, to John Berger's politically inflected distinction between "nakedness" and "nudity" in his 1972 monograph *Ways of Seeing*, to the Guerrilla Girls' 1989 political poster that asked, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met[ropolitan] Museum?" Squire explores both continuities and discontinuities between ancient and modern ways of seeing. The male gaze may be a legacy of classical antiquity, but issues of religious scruple lent the contemplation of ancient female nudes, often images of goddesses, an aesthetic and moral complexity not readily apparent in the story of the modern female nude.

Chapter 4, "Stripping Down and Undressing Up," considers similarities and differences between Greek and Roman culture in relation to political portrai-

¹ For a useful discussion of how the idealized Mother with Child derives from the pagan Roman tradition of portraiture, see Kathrin Schade's essay, "The Female Body in Late Antiquity: Between Virtue, Taboo and Eroticism," in Thorsten Fögen and Mireille M. Lee (eds.), *Bodies and Boundaries in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*. (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter 2009).

ture. Squire compares Roman appropriations of the Greek body with those of modern political leaders (e.g., Canova's 1802–6 *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker*, Greenough's 1841 statue of George Washington, and Gori's representation of Mussolini in his 1937 *Genius of Fascism*) to explore the complexities of the classical legacy. By way of this analysis, Squire pinpoints what is specific to Roman figurations of the body, and distinguishes these from earlier Greek and later modern forms of bodily imagination. The Roman art of the body, Squire argues, oscillated uneasily "between figurative and non-figurative modes" (153). The Roman portrait did not simply mirror reality, but worked rather through a complex vocabulary of social, cultural, and historical symbolism, "as a series of amalgamated parts that together added up to more than the whole" (152).

The final chapter, "On Gods Made Men Made Images," explores images of the divine by way of the Christian reception of the pagan past. Squire argues that the idealized and idolized body of the Greco-Roman god was alternately paradigmatic and problematic for Judeo-Christian theology. Like the Greco-Roman gods, the Christian god took human form; and like images of the Greco-Roman gods, images of the Christian god were modeled on the human body. In both the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian contexts, however, the ideas of divine anthropomorphism and mimetic representation of the divine were controversial. Moreover, the ongoing effort to reconcile Christian iconography with classical may be seen as a driving force throughout the entire history of western art right up to our own day, regardless of one's theological convictions or conscious engagement with the classical tradition. Squire takes pains to counter the common conception that Byzantine and Medieval art are disconnected from Greco-Roman antecedents, and that classical antiquity only becomes relevant during the Renaissance. Nevertheless, the Renaissance embrace of classical models did occasion important changes in theological imagery. In the fifteenth century, Squire argues, "God became increasingly embodied and present, and decreasingly spiritual and removed" (192). The Reformation to a great extent banished mimetic representations of God from the Church, thus paving the way for the secular conception of "art" with which we are most familiar today. The legacy of antiquity, however, remains relevant: "Modern secular notions of the image descend from the theological upheavals of the Reformation, which themselves descend from the ancient legacy of embodying and figuring the divine" (195). Squire concludes by acknowledging his argument's debt to Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, first delivered in the 1820s. Hegel, Squire writes, "understood that everything we see and think about 'art' derives from the delicate negotiation of each

successive present from each successive past: only by thinking about the modern alongside the ancient can we conceptualize either—or indeed both” (201).

This book, in keeping with the Ancients and Moderns series, is a popularizing project. In place of the footnotes and bibliography that would accompany a more academic monograph, a Further Reading section provides bibliographical suggestions corresponding to each chapter, focusing on references that are (1) recent and (2) in English. Sixteen pages of beautiful color plates add to the pleasure of the text. On the whole, Squire has written an engaging book that informs the reader about the art of the body in antiquity and its modern legacy in an appealingly original and idiosyncratic manner.

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