

On Archeology Discourse

One may ask: "What conditions and circumstances must transpire for an object to be the subject of discourse" Such a question appears to be relevant when an object, at some time, or indeed any time, when discrete historical conditions exist that allow people to recognize the significance of an object and give voice to their opinions. For it may be stated that discourse to occur there need not be universal agreement. Indeed, there need not be a significant number of people that even recognize the importance of an object in order for that object to have influence upon the present. By this one does not wish to reduce an object to the caprices of taste, nor simply state that an object of art is good or bad. Such terms are indicative of the time in which they are viewed. If an example may be offered, many works of religious art in previous centuries, not long past, but before the use of perspective and forced perspective, are now considered crude by some. Rather, in such discourse more complex matters must be taken up which are often felt but seldom addressed.

In my own opinion there is a natural conflict between the intellect and the emotions, as other more poetic gentlemen have stated Apollo and Dionysus are always in varying degrees of conflict. This point is often the origin of discourse regarding ancient objects. Not in their actual historic context, *id est.*, the possible pagan use of a statue or structure but rather the motivation of the artist in his construction of a piece. Therefore, when a thing, an object, begins by to inscribe itself upon the relationship with other objects it is eminently worthy of study and discussion. In this regard one may rightly state that an object from antiquity is in actuality reinscribing itself in current society because of its previous influence and importance in another society.

The objects of our ancestors; principally statuary and architecture, have more than mere influence upon the thinking, execution, and aesthetics of modern artists. Such a conclusion is extremely facile. Thus, the statement that the Art of the ancients is 'good' and merits imitation is insufficient, as is the statement that it is important and merits study. Terms such as; good, bad, important, and insignificant are subjective and bring little to the possible reasons we are affected by a given thing.

As statues have been unearthed, rediscovered, and seen once more became, continue to be conducive to our beginning to understand and appreciate that which had been done long before our presence. Such conditions are numerous, difficult, and only by the Grace of Our Lord have we found some measure of wisdom to allow us, presently to perceive the relevance of such works. One should examine an object, admire its proportions, and the skill of the execution but also contemplate its significance, and meditate upon why we are affected by the object. Then, possibly, we may be able to understand our relationship to an object, its relationship to us, and its relationship to other objects.

As one may imagine it is difficult to state something new or make pronouncements upon various pieces and structures without appearing pretentious or vain. Yet, it is not enough to open one's eyes and seeing in a new manner, nor being attentive to the geometry of a work, for proportions alone does not make a work moving. It is most important to be aware and attentive to the reasons that an old object may appear new and brilliant, but even then that is only a beginning. Whether there are new thoughts and new statements that are valid, honest, and are of some importance are fundamental

questions that must be allowed to be addressed. To write, only to write, is vanity. Yet, I hope that there are new thoughts and new methods that may be provoked by the study of the ancient. It is my sincere belief that the unearthing of ancient statuary has presented artists of the present and near past with alternative forms of Art that could not be ignored, and therefore influenced their own work. The monetary and social conditions which permitted this confrontation would require an history of such conditions, discrete but related to the present subject, of such length and digression that it would not serve to prompt a discourse upon Archeology nor the influence of antiquities upon the Art of the present day.

After some months of consideration I have concluded that there are five aspects of any work that affect us. There will undoubtedly be some who disagree with my conclusions, and this is all to the good because I do not have sole custody of this subject. It is my intention to interest others in study, discourse, and hopefully an exchange of productive thought. I believe the five most important aspects are these: resemblance, proximity or nearness, distance, difference, and transformation. These aspects are not mutually exclusive, and indeed several may coexist in a single object. Now, I must define these terms and allow the reader to agree, or dispute, my interpretations.

Resemblance

Does an ancient work bear resemble us, and our present condition? Often the answer is decidedly yes. Many of the statues unearthed resemble various living persons to such a degree that they could have been modeled upon someone familiar to us. It may be that the original was intended to be the representation of some pagan god, but it bears a resemblance to a man or woman usually of uncommon beauty who walks among us. One very common theme is the rather numerous renditions of what has come to be known as the "Thorn Picker". These are statues of persons ranging in age from children to adults simply removing a thorn from the sole of the foot. This unpretentious position has been adopted by many modern artists and incorporated into their work not only because of the numerous examples but because the physical posture was so well defined as rendered by the ancients. The same may be said of the many torsos, such as the Torso Belvedere.

Proximity

Often the proximity, or nearness, of objects has the unusual effect of diminishing their relative importance. Here, in Roma, the very stones of the ancient via are ignored because they are so much a part of the city they remain unremarkable. Even a structure as grand as the Coliseum makes little impression on the inhabitants. These roads and edifices have been there before the birth of any person for centuries and remain unremarkable to those who are not visitors, foreigners, or students of engineering. It is an understandable attitude that those who have known nothing else see nothing more than their home. However, the inverse is true when a new object is discovered within, or close by the city. It is then that even common people take notice and often find a use for the object that may have been unintended. Pasquino would be an example of the appropriation of an object by the people for their own purposes.

Distance

Distance does not only refer to physical distance but also to the chronological distance of objects. The first case, physical distance may mean the distance traveled, whether it is to Tivoli or Ostia. As stated in the previous section on proximity distance does inspire more intense curiosity, and therefore scrutiny. There is also in this same current the distance of ownership and exclusivity. An object is thought to be more worthy of study if it is less accessible. Those pieces held in private collections, or restricted areas are more sought after than those that may readily be seen. Then there is that school of thought that considers those pieces known to be of a greater age to be inherently better by virtue of their antiquity. Thus a piece thought to be produced during the period of the Republic is thought to be superior to a piece produced during a later period of the Empire. Those thought to come from the Greek settlements are given the highest praise because they are imitations of the highest level of the Greek mastery.

Difference

Difference is most easily understood when the object has a decidedly pagan, mythological, or fanciful nature which is beyond our initial comprehension. It is also apparent by the remnants of the apparently huge sculptures that remain about the city. Some of these fragments are of such size that to extrapolate the possible dimensions are beyond comprehension. Even the largest of Michelangelo's works would be dwarfed by the size of the monuments erected by the ancients. Also those works, of any size, that depict satyrs, fauns and the like are seen as monstrous and often demonic.

Transformation

Finally, as stated, an ancient work influences artist of the present. And, in doing so transforms the methods and composition of the contemporary artist. This can be seen in numerous examples of painting and sculpture. The emphasis of the ancients on the rendition of the human form is apparent in many great works of recent artists. While one would think that sculpture would influence sculpture it has also transformed the art of painting as well.

For those of us who are not artists transformation occurs individually, and with some subtlety. It is at that point that when we cease to view an object as coming from a particular period and shed the restrictions of analysis. It is at that moment when an object is seen as fresh and without history, as though it were newly arrived that we, and the object, are transformed.

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