

Classicism and Truth

Juhan Maiste

Writing about classicism, we inevitably write about reception. The classics leave their descendants a form whose content is connected with its time and aspirations. The texts of classicism should be read in the light of the era's symbolic values; in order to understand them, we have to take into consideration the entire intellectual and material culture of the era, seeking the meanings for universal visual metaphors in literature, philosophy and verbal texts. The truth of classicism exceeds the frames of written pages. Anything outside of the frame is essentially elusive and mysterious, like a letter written with a quill and green ink, still lying in an unopened envelope in the treasure trove of the intellectual heritage of the Ermenoville hermit.

Choosing classicism, we inevitably choose archaeology, the language of 'norm and form'. In this way, the art style which developed in the late 19th century was still able to survive in the 1980s as a 'period style', which in today's focus of critical art research has largely exhausted itself and can be associated with several other movements of the era: 'enlightenment', ideology of historicism, and formation of modern art language. The issue of classicism contains one of the most complicated and contradictory problems in all of art history; in the words of Hugh Honour, the wish to explain classicism leads art historians into 'the impenetrable jungle of word semantics, threatening to drown whoever approaches in the myriad of metaphors, meanings and interpretations...'.¹

By agreeing with the opinions presented in the current collection, which examines the Vitruvian teaching of order (from Goldman – Sturm to Viparsini), as well as freemasonry or German early romanticism, as a semantic

alternative to classicism, I basically agree with the alternative nature and ambivalent content of classicism. However, I am not prepared to give up using classicism as an independent term, or to eliminate it from the great general names and landmarks of art history, or to reserve a niche position for it somewhere amid arcaded barn buildings in manor house courtyards and pillared porticos of mansions. Granting classicism only metaphoric or adjectival meaning, we exclude ourselves from an inner circle of an era.

The criteria of evaluating art cannot, after all, merely be morphological, iconological or even linguistic qualities, but must encompass the era as a whole – both its ideological and contextual thought. As a historical category, classicism and the values matured within it denote the process of national cultures finding themselves, which, according to Giles Worsley, does not connect classicism with universal requirements of any specific era in a search for ultimate truth; rather, classicism is connected with the co-existence of many artistic and stylistic trends.

Classicism is essentially ambivalent and, besides tradition, which is usually mentioned in writings about classicism, it is also connected with innovation. This is a magical word invented in the 20th century, which raises the projection of art as truth in Heidegger's sense to the level of divine recognition because, in almost everything that is important to it, classicism speaks to us not in a language determined by its external rhetoric, not on the level of physics, but rather in terms of metaphysics, representing a meta-text rather than an open book in the complicated pattern of all its typical qualities.

The message of classicism is the message of philosophy. Without including the idea as the inner reason of things and a progressive force, we can describe the trajectory of its

external form inspired by the classical, mark out periods in history, and talk about old and new classicism, the stages of its 'early', 'mature' and 'late' development, but nothing more. To read the texts of classicism, we need double glasses, a researcher's character, which does not merely describe but tries to turn the translated text into philosophy and poetry, into something from which art once started. Wishing to understand what is concealed behind the word 'classicism', the 'legacy' of Socrates is at least as significant as the books of Vitruvius. Philosophy, as a general term of the science of thinking, is more significant than science. Terms borrowed from the latter help to understand the texts in our collection. Let us therefore tackle classicism as a parasol in the temperate climate zone, with terms such as 'classicism in the spirit of Winkelmann', 'Kantian classicism', 'Hegelian cult of the absolute', or even 'desire of the Marxist utopia', and place it in context. These terms make an era not only richer but probably also more transparent and understandable.

Translated by Tiina Randviir
proof-read by Richard Adang