

IDEAS OF ANCIENT GREEK ART IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT FROM MARCUS AURELIUS UNTIL THEODOSIUS

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During the neosophistic age, in the period from Dio Chrysostomus until Athenaeus, we can prove, reading the Greek written sources of that age, a growing nostalgia towards masterpieces and monuments of great classical age. The works of art of late-classical and early-hellenistic times, in other words of the age of Alexander and of the most important masters of the fourth century, are particularly idealized, according to an interpretation coming down from the art criticism of Xenokrates. This art is considered through the mirror of the new comedy. The hetairai are regarded as emblematic figures of that age and several famous works of art are considered in keeping with this culture of the hetairai and thought to be speaking a language of seduction and pleasure.

In other words, the period of the ancient art which was considered the peak was interpreted in hedonistic terms. Not surprisingly, in the neosophistic age, figures of Aphrodite, Eros and of subjects related to them are very popular as well as the masters who interpreted them, above all Praxiteles and Apelles.

So, the Cnidian Aphrodite, the Eros from Thespieae, the Aphrodite-Phryne of Delphi and the Anadiomene of Apelles are the beloved symbols of the lost beauty of Greece in its great and remote age¹.

When the Christian writers started considering the ancient pagan arts in an organic and systematic way, and as an unitary problem, during the empire of Marcus Aurelius, it was inevitable that they shared and considered normal and widely accepted neosophistic interpretations of these works of art in hedonistic terms. So, the classical art is also for these writers a seductive production, emblemized by the figures of Aphrodite, Eros, mythical lovers, hetairai, etc. and done in order to exalt the sexual love and the world of pleasure.

The criticism of Tatianus

Tatianus, an heretical Christian writer, member of a sect characterized by an extreme dislike of sex, wrote the *Oratio and Graecos* probably in Greece

around 175 A.D. He wrote in this book the first outspoken condemnation of Greek works of art as immoral by a Christian writer. He contrasts the respect for women of the Christians with the representations of women and other figures considered immoral by Greek bronze sculptors, statues which he claims to have seen at Rome, where they had been brought from Greece².

He had seen these works of art, according to a detailed study of Filippo Coarelli, in at least four building complexes of Rome: especially in the theatre and porticus of Pompey, as well as in the *templum Pacis*, in the *aedes Fortunae huiusce diei* and probably also in the *porticus Europae*³. The Christian writer quotes statues of poetesses, of female musicians, of women with strange pregnancies, of hetairai, of other subjects who were responsible for immoral acts⁴. The condemnation of images related to love themes had antecedents in the ancient pagan opinion of works of art.

The gilded bronze statue of Aphrodite - Phryne at Delphi, a representation with precious materials of a famous hetaira over a high column and near the main altar of a very important shrine, had been criticized already by the Cynics, first of all by Diogenes, shortly after the dedication of this votive offering in the shrine, and then by Cratetes and by others until Aelianus⁵, on the grounds that this work of art was representing in fact the licentiousness of the Greeks. However, the Cynics were criticizing only some particularly lascivious works. Now, with Tatianus, the condemnation involves all the ancient images expressive of worldly culture. The Greeks look to Tatianus to have interpreted the statuarial images in a hedonistic way. As we have seen, this idea is taken from the neosophistic culture and is not new, but it is now emphasized and turned towards a totally negative judgement of the pagan arts on the claim that they are immoral. Of course, in this framework, there is no space for the consideration of the ancient masterpieces in terms of works of art independently of their subjects.

The opinion of Athenagoras

However, at same time and in the Christian world too, we have a very different point of view about the ancient pagan Greek arts, that of Athenagoras, in his *Legatio pro Christianis*.

This writer, of whom we know very little, was not a heretical Christian, but a follower of the orthodox belief. Being a citizen of Athens, he clearly feels in this pamphlet the heritage of the Attic art criticism. Moreover, he addresses his *legatio* to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus and tries to show an image of the Christian religion in keeping with the Roman Empire and the institutions and the culture typical of it.

In his pamphlet, he gives much space to the criticism of the images of pagan gods, claiming that they are false and only conventional representations of the gods and that therefore they are meaningless from a religious point of view⁶. In this context, he writes an *excursus* about the origins of the different figurative arts, in order to show that the idols are just results of the craftsmanship of the artists⁷. In this *excursus*, the writer shares the interest towards archaistic culture of the Antonine age⁸. In contrast with Tatianus, his criticism against the pagan imagery is based not so much on moral grounds, but philosophical, focused on the assertion that the idols are not faithful representations of the gods and therefore they mean nothing from a religious point of view. Furthermore, they are representations in completely human terms of their subjects. Also the idea that the images of the gods are arbitrary and not a credible representation of the gods was not new at all. I cite here just the important passages of Lucianus, *De sacrificiis*, 11, and *Pro imaginibus*, 8, where the neosophistic writer stresses the complete unreliability of the most famous representations of the gods from the point of view of knowing these gods. Lucianus was writing these two books around the years 163-165, that is about only ten years before the pamphlet of Athenagoras.

The answer of Philostratus

These objections to the faithfulness of the Greek statues of the gods had in answer in the defense of the reliability of these works of art in showing wise insights into these deities. This defence had been written at the beginnings of the third century A.D. by Flavius Philostratus, in his "Life of Apollonius from Tyana". This writer attributes to Apollonius the

claim that the wise artist, through his imagination, was able to translate the true being of the gods into human terms⁹.

The criticism of Clemens

The above haphazard criticism against the Greek images of the gods had received an organic and systematic elaboration by Clemens Alexandrinus, with his work *Protrepticus ad Graecos*, written about the beginnings of the third century A.D.

Clemens, in the fourth chapter of his "Hortative Speech to the Greeks", criticizes the production of statues of gods in the Greek world, giving the following reasons.

1) These statues are not gods, but works of men, resulting from a long historical process, because in the beginning idols with non-human features were worshipped. Only in a later period, the progress of the arts caused the worshipping of the gods to take the forms of statues. This reason, not new, as we have already met in Athenagoras with few variations, is based on a detailed illustration of the most ancient production of divine statues, especially in the Greek world, until Pheidias, in keeping with the attention reserved to the archaic sculpture, typical of the neosophistic world of the age of Pausanias and Athenagoras.

2) The sacred images do not show the true forms of the gods, because they have been made in imitation of living people in the time of their artists. Moreover, these creations are immoral, because those artists have transferred into their works subjective contents, like their own loves, and ignoble ones, as the apparent subjects were lovers and hetairai. This reason was already present in Tatianus.

3) The conventional character of the images of gods is strengthened by the observation that they can be recognized on the ground of attributes, which moreover characterize those figures in a materialistic way.

4) The immoral character of the statues of gods results from both the way they have been done (point no. 2) and their appearances (points no. 2 and 3). Thus they excite the lowest and bestial instincts of human beings. The supposed corrupting character of the pagan images, said to promote sinful acts, was also declared already by Tatianus, clearly one of the main antecedents of the criticism of Clemens against the figurative arts of the Greeks. The Alexandrinus brings as evidence supporting such a thesis the well-known phenomenon of men making love to statues¹⁰.

5) The images of gods are results of the human working of materials taken from the earth and therefore they are not living beings. It is thus irrational to consider them deities and to worship them. This thesis, enunciated in the fourth chapter, is developed in the tenth chapter.

That of Clemens is the most systematic and complete refutation of the divine character of the pagan idols written by a Christian. The Alexandrinus fights against the idea that some statues are echoes of the true forms of the gods and reveal their true presences. Such criticism, occupying a large section of the *Protrepticus* and developed with a great enthusiasm, shows that these concepts were still common in the pagan societies of the provinces of the Empire characterized by a strong Greek culture, around the year 200 A.D. Clemens, expressing a Christian Platonism, starts his argument with the need, of remote Platonic origin, for images to be made no longer by the imitation of the external form, but to communicate, as far as it is possible, the transcendent truth. This point of departure is close to the one already cited from Philostratus, but Clemens, not believing in the divine subjects suggested by the the Greek *Agalmatopoiia*, reaches conclusions which are very far from those of the Philostratus' Apollonius, denying any value to statues, which he considers false, as they represent that which does not exist, and are thus misleading¹¹.

Christian criticism and behaviours and pagan answers

After Clemens, the same arguments of this great thinker are repeated with few original additions. The important moment of the entry of these arguments in the latin culture is marked especially by the related section of the *Adversus gentes* of Arnobius, written around 300 A.D. in Sicca Venezia, in *Africa Proconsularis*¹².

With the triumph of the Christianity, the objections of the Apologists to the pagan idols could be translated into an operative program. Beginning from the last years of the reign of Constantinus and moreover during the reign of Constantius, the idea of banning pagan idols and persecuting their worshippers is clearly enunciated in imperial laws (a law of Constantine, forbidding pagan sacrifices, is not extant, but it is cited in *Codex Theodosianus*, XVI, 10, 2, in 341; see also XVI, 10, 3, in 342; 4, in 346, etc.) as well as by Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum*, 29, 1-4, probably in the forties of the

fourth century.

However, in the period around 350-370 A.D., the cultural phenomenon usually called "pagan renaissance" and the relative security of the Empire caused the revival of art tourism, as we can conclude especially from some passages of Himerius¹³, Libanius¹⁴, Iulianus¹⁵, and Ausonius¹⁶. This tourism was in fact not widespread from the Severian age until this period, because of the military anarchy, the economical depression, the barbarian invasions, like that of the Erulians of 267, and the decline of classical culture and pagan ideals. Its revival did not start immediately after the return of stability in the reign of Diocletianus, as we have not, as far as I know, allusions to travels undertaken in order to see works of art related to the pagan past, during the first forty years of the fourth century.

Thus, it is in the period of the pagan renaissance that we must date the book *De statu*s of Callistratus, who refers to art tourism in various passages¹⁷.

Callistratus answers the Christian objections about statues of gods indirectly, in keeping with the habit of several pagan writers of this age who never speak openly about Christianity. He stresses that his descriptions of statues come from divine inspiration and that the described creations are sacred. He explains that divine laws oblige the consideration of these art creations as sacred. The reason for this is that after the wise creation of a statue of a god, if this work of art is in keeping with the power and the personality of this god, this god can dwell in the statue entering it by magic¹⁸.

The consideration of ancient statues as works of art during the reign of Theodosius I

However, with the decline of the pagan renaissance and after the definitive victory of Christianity, during the reign of Theodosius I, the need to safeguard the classical heritage, ancient statues included, came to a head. The ancient statues are thus no longer considered pagan idols, but works of art.

In this period of transition, we have both approaches to the pagan statues outlined above.

The determination to destroy them continued, as is widely known. In particular Libanius, with his oration *Pro templis*, probably written in 386, mentioning the destructions of pagan shrines in Syria, and Palladas, with his epigrams about the destruction of pagan statues in Alexandria, particularly impressive in the case of the Christian

sack of the city in 391¹⁹, show indeed two salient moments of this phenomenon.

On the other hand, the distinction between the subject, to be condemned, and the work of art to be saved, is the basis of the justification for the imperial decision, dated the 30th of November, 382, that some temples having inside statues which are considered more for their artistic values than for the religious ones, should be kept open²⁰.

With the prohibition of the pagan cults and the closure of the temples decreed on the 8th of November, 392²¹, the problem of safeguarding the statues of gods which were considered having artistic value was inevitable.

The transfer of the most valuable statues, from an artistic point of view, from pagan shrines to new places functioning as museums, was the logical consequence of this situation. The most important of these museum-like institutions was the so-called Lauseion, in fact one of the twelve palaces formerly of Constantinus I in Constantinople, established as a collection of the most famous ancient statues as well as of models of rare and strange animals by Theodosius I, probably during the years 393-394²².

It is perhaps superfluous to stress that in this cultural framework the approach to the ancient

works of art in purely artistic terms is for the first time clearly expressed, an approach notoriously destined for a long history through the middle age, especially in the Byzantine world, and the modern one.

Fathers of the church as *media* between neosophistic culture and later idealizations of ancient arts

Therefore, the fathers of the church have transmitted to posterity the hedonistic conception of the great Greek classical art, which had been previously drawn inside the neosophistic culture. This hedonistic interpretation was the basis of a negative opinion on such works in the judgement of the early fathers. However, when this negative judgement receded, or at least limited itself to just the religious field, the persistence of this idea of ancient art as an art of pleasure paved the way for the appreciation of ancient works of art as a sort of paradisiacal and mythical lost beauty, which can be followed in its development from the middle byzantine culture to the western Renaissance²³.

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¹ Cnidian Aphrodite: LUC., ANTH. PL., IV, 163-164; *Am.*, 11-17 and 54; *Imagg.*, 4 and 6, *Pro imagg.*, 8, 18 and 22-23; *Iupp. trag.*, 10; PHILOSTR., *Apoll. Tyan.*, VI, 19 and 40; ATHEN., XIII, 591 a-b; Aphrodite-Phryne at Delphi: PS. DIO CHRYS., XXXVII, 28; PLUT., *De Pyth. orac.*, 14-15; *De Alex. fort. virt.*, II, 3; *Amat.*, 9; PAUS., X, 15, 1; AELIAN., *Var. hist.*, IX, 32; DIOG. LAERT., VI, 2, 60; ATHEN., XIII, 591 b-c.; Eros at Thespieae: LUC., *Am.*, 11 and 17; PAUS., I, 20, 2 and IX, 27, 3-5; ATHEN., XIII, 591 a-b; ALCIPHRO., IV, 1, frg. 3. Anadiomene Aphrodite: LUC., *Imagg.*, 7; AELIAN., *Var. hist.*, XII, 34; ATHEN., XIII, 588 c - 590 f.

² TATIAN., 35, 37. The basis of the negative opinion towards idols is, of course, biblical: see especially ISAIAH, 45, 9-20, about the golden thread.

The dislike of a Christian towards pagan symbols is well expressed also by TERTULL., *Ad ux.*, II, 5

See A. PRANDI, *L'arte nel pensiero dei primi scrittori cristia-*

ni, in *Tardo antico e alto medioevo*, Roma, 1967, pp. 105-120.

³ See F. COARELLI, *Il complesso pompeiano del Campo Marzio e la sua decorazione scultorea*, in "AttiPontAccArch", XLIV, 1971-'72, pp. 99-122.

⁴ TATIAN., 33, 34-35, 37.

⁵ Sources in note 1.

⁶ ATHENAG., *Leg. pro Christ.*, 15, 1-27, 2.

⁷ ATHENAG., *Leg. pro Christ.*, 17, 3-4.

⁸ Evidence supporting this statement in my book *Prassitele*, II, Rome, 1990, pp. 12-14.

⁹ PHILOSTR., *Apoll. Tyan.*, VI, 40.

¹⁰ About the loves for statues, R. ROBERT, *Ars regenda amore. Séduction érotique et plaisir esthétique: de Praxitèles à Ovide*, in "MEFRA", CIV, 1992, pp. 373-438.

¹¹ See my book (n. 8), pp. 26-36.

¹² ARNOB., VI, 12-27.

¹³ HIMER., *or.*, LXIV, 4.

¹⁴ LIBAN., *Decl.*, XXV, 40, R. 4, 444.

¹⁵ IULIAN., *Or.*, III (II), 4, 68 H, 54 b.

¹⁶ AUSON., *Epigr.*, 10-11; 20; 33; 51; 55-63 and 70 Pastorino.

¹⁷ Evidence collected in my book (n. 8), pp. 95-139. I don't consider here the Christian tourism, which has been developed beginning from the reign of Constantine, in order to discover holy *reliquiae*, to visit churches and holy sites and especially to admire the new Christian capital, Constantinople. The several pagan images adorning this city seem to have been considered decorative rather than admired works of art to be protected in museum-like institutions, during the period from Constantine until Theodosius.

¹⁸ See especially CALLISTR., 3, 1, and compare this passage with MELEAGR., ANTH. PAL., XII, 57, v. 3.

¹⁹ See my book (n. 8), p. 208, note 1823.

²⁰ COD. THEOD., XVI, 10, 8, referred probably to a particular temple in Edessa (see the article of Lepelly, cited in note 22).

The requirement to save some aspects of classical culture is in fact the result of a long process: see already TERTULL., *De idol.*, 11, who admits the rights for children of Christians to learn about classical mythology; and COD. THEOD., XVI, 10, 3, in 342, about the necessity that temples remain untouched and uninjured.

²¹ COD. THEOD., XVI, 10, 12.

²² See my book *Prassitele*, III, Rome, 1992, pp. 128-140. About the conservations of pagan works of art, it is fundamental C. LEPELLEY, *Le musée des statues divines. La volonté de sauvegarder le patrimoine artistique païen à l'époque théodosienne*, in "Cahiers archeologiques. Fin de l'antiquité et moyen âge", XLII, 1994, pp. 5-15.

²³ See my book (n. 22), pp. 122-167.