

## “Raphael without Hands”: The Idea of the Inner Form and its Transformations

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The idea of the inner form originates from the founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus (205-270); the idea significantly influenced aesthetic theories from the Renaissance to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The modern concept of artist is closely related to this Neoplatonic idea.<sup>1</sup> While the meaning of the idea of the inner form cannot be emphasized enough, few have thus far attempted to examine the role this idea played in antiquity and the changes the idea underwent in the modern era.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I first examine Plotinus’s theory in connection with Plato and Aristotle and then examine its influence on the aesthetic theories from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, providing a new perspective on modern aesthetics.

### Plotinus’s Innovation of the Concept of Imitating Nature

Plotinus’s theory of art presupposes Plato’s theory of three orders of reality. In the *Republic* (Book X),<sup>3</sup> referring to the example of bed, Plato argues that there are three types. The bed produced by God, which is the Form of the bed, belongs to the first order of reality and there is by its nature only *one* (597 b-d). The second order is any bed a carpenter produces by looking at its Form. As opposed to the Form of the bed, the second order is principally plural (596 b). The artisanship regulated by the Form is termed art (*technê*). Each art is distinguishable because of its Form providing the perspective each artisan employs. According to the parable of the Line (Book VI), the first order corresponds to the intelligible (*noêton*) and the second to the sensible (*aisthêton*, *horâton*) (509d). For the third order, a picture of a bed belongs to the sensible, as each bed is produced by a carpenter, but each picture only imitates a visible bed, producing a “shadow” that is “three steps down from true being” (599a, 597e). What a painter therefore attempts is not to “copy things, as they *are*,” but only “as they seem” to be, “without being master of any of their arts” (598b-d). The work of a painter that is not regulated by the Form exceeds the limits of each art: “copying is a long way from true being, and that, maybe, is why it is able to produce *everything*, because it grips only a small part of everything, and that an image” (598b). For Plato, painting or sculpture that copies is not worth being called art; therefore, such copies should be banished from the ideal state.

Plotinus follows Plato’s theory of three orders of reality while simultaneously questioning

<sup>1</sup> See Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> corrected ed. Translated by Joseph J. S. Peake, New York and London, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Jakob Minor, who addressed the concept of the inner Form for the first time, confined himself to the German-language texts from 1783 to 1836 (see Jakob Minor, Die innere Form, in: *Euphorion*, vol. 4, 1897, pp. 205-215). The most extensive article on this subject is Reinhold Schwinger, *Innere Form. Ein Beitrag zur Definition des Begriffes auf Grund seiner Geschichte von Shaftesbury bis W. v. Humboldt*, München, 1935.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Republic*, edited and translated by Ivor Armstrong Richards, Cambridge UP, 1966.

Plato's criticism of the imitative character of sculpture. Concerning a Zeus statue of Pheidias, Plotinus argues:

[...] the arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects; for, to begin with, these natural objects are themselves imitations; then, we must recognize that they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Reason-Principles [logoi] from which Nature itself derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where Nature is lacking. (V 8, 1)<sup>4</sup>

If the arts would content themselves with imitating natural objects, as Plato presupposes, Plato's criticism of artistic imitation would be legitimate. Plotinus, however, objects to Plato's criticism. First, imitations are not limited to the arts. Whereas a statue imitates Nature, Nature itself also imitates the Form. Second, the true arts are not content with copying Nature, but they bring Nature to its Reason-Principles (Forms) from which Nature itself derives. Consequently the arts are not subordinate to Nature, but can idealize Nature if Nature is lacking. Such an idealization justifies artistic activity.

Plato does not describe imitative painting or sculpture as art (*technê*) because it does not participate in the Form. Plotinus, however, rejects Plato's theory by arguing that painting or sculpture does not only copy Nature, but also brings Nature back to its principles.

Here, we should note a further difference between Plato and Plotinus - a difference that lies in Plato never calling the second order of reality Nature, as does Plotinus. According to Plato, so-called artwork is nothing but "what is three steps down from Nature (true being)" (597e). Plato considers Nature as "what has true being," the Form of the first order (597b). Consequently, what a painter or sculptor imitates is not Nature, but the products of an artisan. Plato disesteems artistic activity, not because art imitates Nature, as Plotinus thinks, but because art turns away from Nature.

Plotinus's proposition that art imitates nature traces back not to Plato, but to Aristotle. This thesis formulated by Aristotle in the *Physics* (194a 21) does not pertain to fine arts, but means that nature [*physis*] is the model guiding the principal structure of art in the broad sense of the word [*technê*]. By late antiquity, however, this proposition in the *Physics* was already associated with the Aristotelian definition of tragedy found in the *Poetics*: "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude" (1449b 24-25),<sup>5</sup> so that Aristotle's thesis of art imitating nature was applied to art theory.

A misunderstanding of Plato with an Aristotelian slant thus led Plotinus to confront the proposition that art imitates nature and to set art free from Plato's criticism. For Plotinus, the task of art is not to imitate, but to idealize Nature.

<sup>4</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads*, Stephen Mackenna, John M. Dillon, p. 411.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, edited with critical notes and a translation by S. H. Butcher, London, 1922, p. 23.

### The Inner Form as a Creative Principle

Now the questions arise what the “Reason-Principle” that the arts possess is and how this principle comes to its products:

We hold that all the beauty of this world comes by sharing the same Form [eidos]. [...] Where Form enters in, it groups and co-ordinates what, from a diversity of parts, is to become a unity; it rallies confusion into co-operation, making the sum one harmonious coherence; for Form is a unity and what it moulds must come to unity as far as multiplicity may. (I 6, 2)<sup>6</sup>

Seizing on a Zeus statue of Pheidias as an example, suppose there are two blocks of stone: one untouched by art and the other minutely wrought by art into a Zeus statue. Plotinus argues that only the Zeus statue is beautiful, concluding that the statue is beautiful “not as stone,” but “in virtue of the Form introduced by the art.” The Form, as a principle that coordinates a shapeless matter into a unity, does not belong to a stone from the beginning, but exists “in the sculptor before ever it enters the stone,” in so far as he holds it “not by his equipment of . . . *hands* but by his participation in his art” (V 8, 1).<sup>7</sup> This Form that preexists in the spirit of a sculptor before entering a stone by his *hands* is called the inner Form. By participating in an inner Form, which antedates all matter, the mass of external shapeless stone obtains a beautiful shape that is called a “Form in the bodily” (I 6, 3).<sup>8</sup>

The question is how these two Forms are related. Both Forms have unity in themselves, but they decisively differ. The inner Form is completely indivisible, whereas the inner Form instantiated in the body, that is, the Form in the bodily is not free from the manifold. The inner Form can reside in matter only “so far as it has subdued the resistance of the material” (V 8, 1).<sup>9</sup> That constitutes the ontological difference between the two Forms.

The question then becomes how those contemplating a statue pronounce it beautiful. According to Plotinus, they judge something beautiful when they see the “Form which has bound and controlled shapeless matter” in a certain object, relating this Form in the bodily to the inner Form that preexists in their spirit, so that the former is purified from matter and reduced to the inner Form (I 6, 3).<sup>10</sup>

Here we find a circle from the inner Form to the Form in the bodily that returns in turn to the inner Form. This circle also corresponds to Plotinus’s basic idea that the sensible that is produced by the emanation from the One returns to its source, namely the One, by reversion. The art is, therefore, located in the metaphysical structure of emanation and reversion.

<sup>6</sup> Plotinus, *op. cit.*, p. 47, slightly modified.

<sup>7</sup> Plotinus, *op. cit.*, pp. 410-411, slightly modified and italics are mine.

<sup>8</sup> Plotinus, *op. cit.*, p. 48, slightly modified.

<sup>9</sup> Plotinus, *op. cit.*, p. 411.

<sup>10</sup> Plotinus, *op. cit.*, p. 48, slightly modified.

### Raphael without Hands

Since the Renaissance, the Neoplatonic concept of the inner Form offered a foundation for the modern theory of art, according to which art was considered comparable to Creation by God. In *L'Idée de' Pittori, Scultori et Architetti* (*The Idea of Painter, Sculptor and Architect*) (1607), late Renaissance painter and theoretician Federico Zuccari [Zucaro] (1542/43-1609) called the inner Form the “disegno interno” and the Form in the bodily the “disegno esterno.”<sup>11</sup> The relation between these Forms corresponds to that between theory and practice, or that between spirit and body. Preferring theory to practice and spirit to body characterizes the theory of the Renaissance.

In the work of Lessing (1729-81), a passage in *Emilia Galotti* (1772) reflects this spirit-oriented view of art when the painter Conti speaks:

Art must paint in just the same way that plastic nature - if there is one - conceived of the picture: without the imperfections which the resisting material makes unavoidable. [...] Ha! What a pity that we do not paint directly with our eyes! How much is lost on the long path from the eye, through the arm, into the brush! [...] Or do you think, [...] that Raphael would not have been the greatest artistic genius had he unfortunately been born without hands?<sup>12</sup>

Conti's attitude comparing artistic creation to the Creation of plastic nature (God who works in Nature) is unambiguously imprinted by the Neoplatonic view of art.<sup>13</sup> Raphael without hands embodies the ideal of the Neoplatonic artist who creates based on purely spiritual conception without influence from the material world. Once the inner Form of an artist - or the image conceived by plastic nature - is instantiated in a body, it loses its original status because of the “imperfections which the resisting material makes unavoidable,” so that it cannot be received as such by a viewer. To “paint directly with our eyes” would be the sole way for artists to transmit their inner Form to a viewer. However, this peculiar idea of a Raphael without hands, an artist who does not paint materially, seems to allude to a problematic Neoplatonic concept of art.

### The Form Conditioned by the Matter

<sup>11</sup> Federico Zuccaro, *Scritti d'arte*, ed. by Detlef Heikamp, Florence, 1961, pp. 221-222. See Wolfgang Kemp, *Disegno. Beiträge zur Geschichte des Begriffs zwischen 1547 und 1607*, Marburg, 1974, pp. 219-240.

<sup>12</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker, Stuttgart, 1886-1924, Reprint: Berlin, 1979, vol. 2, pp. 381, 383, 384. See Richard T. Gray, *Stations of the Divided Subject: Contestation and Ideological Legitimation in German Bourgeois Literature, 1770-1914*, Stanford, 1995, p. 64 and p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> Ernst Cassirer, Die platonische Renaissance in England und die Schule von Cambridge, in: *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Birgit Recki, vol. 14, Hamburg, 2002; Brigitte Prutti, *Bild und Körper. Weibliche Präsenz und Geschlechterbeziehung in Lessings Dramen: Emilia Galotti und Minna von Barnhelm*, Würzburg, 1996, pp. 26-27.

First, I would like to examine the relationship between the inner Form and the matter (material). Without a concept within their mind, artists do not begin to practice. To this extent, the inner Form seems to precede the Form in the bodily. The question is whether this assertion is true.

Taking an architect, as Plotinus does, the question can be specifically reformulated: Does an architect design similarly regardless of the material, without considering in advance the properties of the material such as wood, stone or concrete? No, the properties of the material decisively condition architectural design.

The design can intentionally strive against the nature of the material as in a design of a great opening in a building whose construction is supported by walls. A new type of support then becomes indispensable, a support bearing the construct instead of walls, requiring the invention of a new form or construction, like the flying buttresses, as was the case for the transition from Romanesque to Gothic. Designing a building without considering the properties of the material is therefore impossible. They can rather lead an architect to design a new form. It follows that the inner Form and the outer matter are reciprocally conditioned and that, as a matter of principle, the inner Form never precedes the Form in the bodily.

Gottfried Semper (1803-79), who is often characterized as materialistic, proposed the theory that the properties of the matter condition the conception. He refers to three “laws of the style, as far as it depends on the matter”:

1. To always use the material suitable for the task at the time.
2. To derive every possible advantage from the material.
3. To consider the material as more than a passive mass, as a means that collaborates in stimulating the invention.<sup>14</sup>

Plotinus postulated that the inner Form should “subdue the resistance of the material,” in order to reside in matter.<sup>15</sup> For Plotinus, therefore, the matter can and must be completely passive toward the Form. In contrast, Semper regards the matter as a “means” that can stimulate new conception. Each material has advantages and disadvantages, but even the disadvantages should not be rejected, for they could be a “source of new formal means.” One should “make a virtue of necessity.”<sup>16</sup> Semper’s materialism does not consist of reducing the artistic activity to the matter, but rather in awaking the formal potentialities of the matter.<sup>17</sup>

Semper’s theory principally concerns a tool, whereas Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) draws a sharp line between a “tool” and a “work of art,” underlining the importance of the matter for the

<sup>14</sup> Gottfried Semper, *Kleine Schriften*, ed. by Manfred und Hans Semper, Berlin und Stuttgart, 1884, p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> Plotinus, *op. cit.*, p. 411.

<sup>16</sup> Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Ästhetik*, zweiter Band: Keramik, Tektonik, Stereotomie, Metallotechnik, München 1863, S. 257-258.

<sup>17</sup> As for the relationship between the material and the form in Semper, see Fritz Neumeyer, Das Werk der Stoffe, oberflächlich betrachtet, in: Christoph Mäckler (ed.), *Werkstoff Stein: Material, Konstruktion und zeitgenössische Architektur*, Basel et al., 2004, pp. 14-15.

work of art. In his article, “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935/36), Heidegger argues the following:

Because it is determined through usefulness and serviceability, tool takes that of which it consists into its service. In the manufacture of tool - for example, an ax - the stone is used and used up [gebraucht und verbraucht]. It disappears into usefulness. The less resistance the material puts up to being submerged in the toolhood of the tool [Zeugsein des Zeuges], the more suitable and the better it is. On the other hand, the temple work, in setting up a world, does not let the material disappear; rather, it allows it to come forth for the very first time, to come forth, that is, into the open of the world of the work [...].<sup>18</sup>

Heidegger addresses the relationship between the *technê* and the *physis* in the most general meaning of the words. The *technê* in the sense of craft exploits the *physis* to a certain end. In the tool brought forth by the *technê*, the *physis* is used up. The *technê* has precedence over the *physis*. Certainly the work of art belongs to *technê*. What Heidegger calls the “world” here is what the human *technê* produces. However, the work of art does not dominate the *physis*, as does the craft, but lets it stand out as such. Heidegger says: “To be sure, the sculptor uses stone just as, in his own way, the mason uses it. But he does not use it up. That can be, in a certain sense, said of the work only when it fails. To be sure, the painter, too, makes use of pigment; he uses it, however, in such a way that the colors are not used up but begin, rather, for the first time, to shine.”<sup>19</sup> In the *technically* molded human activity aimed at dematerialization, Heidegger ascribes a special role to the work of art: we realize that the *physis* underlies the *technê*.

Heidegger’s theory of the work of art having an affinity with modernism is noteworthy. In his article, “Toward a Newer Laocoön” (1940), Clement Greenberg (1909-94), one of the most important advocators of the modernist conception of art, considers art as a medium-specific activity and holds the view that the main characteristic of modernist art consists of manifesting the material means peculiar to each art.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Form Completed in the Matter**

If the inner Form is intrinsically conditioned by the matter, the relationship between the inner Form and the Form in the bodily cannot be regarded Neoplatonically as the relationship between the theory and the practice in which the theory has precedence over the practice.

Artists very often seem to have a clear form in their minds before practicing, when they

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, The Origin of the Work of Art, in: *Off the Beaten Track*, edited and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge, 2002, p. 24 - slightly modified by the author.

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, art. cit., p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. by John O’Brian, 4 vols., Chicago and London, 1986-1993, vol. 1, p. 32. See Roberto Simanowski, Transmedialität als Kennzeichen modernen Kunst, in: Urs Meyer, Roberto Simanowski und Christoph Zeller (ed.), *Transmedialität. Zur Ästhetik paraliterarischer Verfahren*, Göttingen 2006, p. 41.

realize their conception at a stroke without a moment's hesitation, as if the physical or corporal practice were a loyal servant of the inner conception. Such artists, however, conceive only what their body can carry out, being thereby convinced of the product. This means that the inner Form simply results from repeating physical practices, a conception sedimented in the body as a physical technique or routine habitus. Viewed in this perspective, we must say that, contrary to our previous assumption, the practice precedes the theory, as if the conceived inner Form were a servant of the body, an executer of the physical technique. Once such a technique is established, artists can bring forth a work of art at a stroke, so that one may have an impression as if a clear Form in the sense of a model or design preexisted in their mind. This Form, however, does not exist as a spiritual conception in the mind, but in the physical body that has appropriated a technique as a kind of physical habitus.

Such a technique is necessary for artists to realize their conception. Without being founded by a technique, no conception would be possible. If an artist is, however, content to design routinely, to simply accomplish what is already sedimented in the body as a physical technique, a conception in the real sense of the word is unnecessary. Rather, a conception should reorder a habitus in order to shape while searching a form, or to search a form while shaping. It follows that neither the theory nor the practice precede; they interact with each other. In order to seek a form that does not clearly preexist in the mind, a form that cannot be executed by a routine technique, an artist conceives, and the conception remains incomplete until realized in a tangible form. In this sense, the inner Form and the Form in the bodily cannot be distinguished; they are one and the same.

Conrad Fiedler (1841-1895) clearly expresses this idea in “The Origin of Artistic Activity” (1887), criticizing the traditional art theory that strictly distinguishes a “spiritual action” from a “physical action.” This distinction involves that “the artist who externally executes expresses only for others in a visible and lasting way what has already gained a form in his cognitive faculty that does not depend on external action, or even that the artist who is about to act artistically is compelled to do so, for no external means is able to render his spiritual forms in its pure perfection.”<sup>21</sup> By spiritual form, Fiedler means the inner Form, criticizing the position that idealizes Raphael without hands. Contrary to this traditional view, Fiedler argues that it is in the physical activity of painting that the cognitive faculty of seeing can be elaborated: “[The artist's] *hand* develops further what the eye does - precisely on the point where the eye has reached the end of its action.”<sup>22</sup> The artist's hand does not simply duplicate what the eye has seen; rather the hand continues the process of the seeing.

The reason why the hand should share in continuing the process of the seeing is that the inner activity of seeing is not determined clearly enough until the process is externally depicted on external materials by the physical act of painting. The artist, therefore, does not have to complain, as the painter Conti of Lessing did: “How much is lost on the long path from the eye, through the

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<sup>21</sup> Konrad Fiedler, *Schriften zur Kunst*, 2 vols., ed. by Gottfried Boehm. Munich, 1971, vol. 1, p. 174.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165, italics are mine.

arm, into the brush!” Fiedler says: “The artistic process proves to be a progress from the indeterminateness of the inner process to the determinateness of external expression.”<sup>23</sup> So is inverted the Neoplatonic theory of the inner Form.

We find the same inversion of the Neoplatonism in Goethe, who enthusiastically translated Plotinus’s article, “On the Intellectual Beauty,” into German, when he writes the following:

A spiritual form [...] is in no way lessened when it is made outwardly apparent, provided that its emergence is a true generation, a true new birth. What is generated is not less good than its generator; indeed, it is the advantage of living generation that the end-product can be more excellent than what generates it.<sup>24</sup>

### Neoplatonist Counterattacks in the 20th Century

Lastly, I would like to show the counter attacks of the Neoplatonic concept of the inner Form in the 20<sup>th</sup> century because Neoplatonism is - although in an unexpected way - related to the dematerialization that underlies the modern world.

First, we must note the emergence of the modern design. As mass production prevailed, a distinction between design and production came to be based on the division of labor, as was not the case for traditional art. What characterizes the modern design is that the quality of the end product is not determined by the “hand” of the executor, but by the “design” or “model” of the designer and that the end product is not a unique one any longer, but only an example of many products that were produced by the same model.<sup>25</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that the modern design presupposing the diffusion of mass production and the division of labor is incompatible with the traditional aesthetics underlining genial artists who create a unique work of art by their own design. It is, however, remarkable that the modern design follows the Neoplatonic view in distinguishing conception from production and preferring the design over the conception. In this sense, the concept of the modern design that is opposed to that of traditional aesthetics can be regarded as a young, although troublesome and unwanted, offspring of Neoplatonism.

Second, we must note the readymade of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). When Duchamp came to New York in 1915, he bought a snow shovel in a store and named it “In advance of a broken art” in his atelier. This object is said to be the first example of the readymade.<sup>26</sup> What is

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>24</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, London, 1998, p. 86. As for the meaning of Plotinus for Goethe, see Werner Keller, *Variationen zum Thema: „wär’ nicht das Auge sonnenhaft ...“*, in: Peter-André Alt (ed.), *Prägnanter Moment. Festschrift für Hans-Jürgen Schings*, Würzburg, 2002, pp. 439 ff.; Gert Mattenklott, *Cassirers Goethe-Lektüre im Kontext der deutsch-jüdischen Goethe-Rezeption*, in: Barbara Naumann und Birgit Recki (ed.), *Cassirer und Goethe. Neue Aspekte einer philosophisch-literarischen Wahlverwandtschaft*, Berlin, 2002, pp. 57 ff.

<sup>25</sup> See the article “Formgestaltung, industrielle.” in: *Lexikon der Kunst: Architektur, bildende Kunst, angewandte Kunst, Industrieformgestaltung, Kunsttheorie*, ed. by Harald Olbrich, Neubearbeitung, Leipzig, 1987-94, vol. 2, p. 555.

<sup>26</sup> Klaus von Beyme, *Das Zeitalter der Avantgarden*, Munich, 2005, p. 768.



essential for the readymade is, in Duchamp’s words, “to cut my hands off,”<sup>27</sup> alluding to the idea of Raphael without hands. Ironically Duchamp’s readymade clearly shows that the Neoplatonic view of art survived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Duchamp respects neither a creation with hands nor the material of the creation and displays a mass product as a work of art.

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<sup>27</sup> Naumann, Francis M.: “Retroactive Readymades,” in: *Aftershock. The Legacy of the Readymade in Post-War and Contemporary American Art*, New York, 2003, p. 10.