Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Extracts from *A History of Ancient Art,* Book V, 1764.[1]

[…] The [ancient] artist shaped the forms of Heroes heroically, and gave to certain parts a preternatural development; placed in the muscles quickness of action and of motion; and in energetic efforts brought into operation all the motive powers of nature. The object which he sought to attain was variety in its utmost extent; and in this respect, Myron [the fifth century BCE Attic sculptor] exceeded all his predecessors. It is visible even in the Gladiator, erroneously so called, of Agasias of Ephesus, in the villa Borghese, whose face is evidently copied after that of some particular individual. The serrated muscles on the sides, as well as others, are more prominent, active, and contractile than is natural. The same thing is yet more clearly seen, in the same muscles, in the Laocoön, - who is an ideally elevated being, — if this portion of the body be compared with the corresponding portion in deified or godlike figures, as the Hercules and Apollo of the Belvedere. The action of these muscles, in the Laocoön, is carried beyond truth to the limits of possibility; they lie like hills which are drawing themselves together, — for the purpose of expressing the extremest exertion in anguish and resistance. In the torso of Hercules deified, there is a high ideal form and beauty in these same muscles; they resemble the undulations of the calmed sea, flowing though elevated, and rising and sinking with a soft, alternate swell. In the Apollo, an image of the most beautiful of the gods, these muscles are smooth, and, like molten glass blown into scarce visible waves, are more obvious to touch than to sight.

In all these respects, beauty was uniformly the principal object at which the artist aimed.

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Next to a knowledge of beauty, expression and action are to be considered as the points most essential to an artist, just as Demosthenes [fourth century BCE orator in Athens] regarded action as the first, second, and third requisite in an orator. Action alone may cause a figure to appear beautiful; but it can never be considered so, if the action is faulty. An observance of propriety in expression and action ought, therefore, to be inculcated at the same time with the principles of beautiful forms, - because it is one of the constituents of grace. For this reason, the Graces are represented as the attendants of Venus, the goddess of beauty. Consequently the phrase, *to sacrifice to the Graces,* signifies among artists to be attentive to the expression and action of their figures.

In art, the term *expression* signifies imitation of the active and passive states of the mind and body, and of the passions as well as of the actions. In its widest sense it comprehends action; but in its more limited meaning, it is restricted to those emotions which are denoted by looks

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[1] Johann Joachim Winckelmann. *A History of Ancient Art,* translated by G. Henry Lodge (4 volumes 1849-72), New York: Frederick Ungar, 1968, 245-251. [Winckelmann was an eighteenth century German art historian. He moved from Dresden to Rome in 1755 in his late thirties. His *History* dates from 1756-61.][The notes in square brackets are mine, AF.]

and the features of the face. Action relates rather to the movements of the limbs and the whole body; it sustains the expression.

[...]

Expression, in its limited as well as more extended signification, changes the features of the face, and the posture, and consequently alters those forms which constitute beauty. The greater the change, the more unfavourable it is to beauty. On this account, stillness was one of the principles observed here, because it was regarded, according to Plato [in for example *Phaedrus,* 370 BCE], as a state intermediate between sadness and gaiety; and, for the same reason, stillness is the state most appropriate to beauty, just as it is to the sea. Experience also teaches that the most beautiful men are quiet in manners and demeanour. In this view, even abstraction is required in an image not less than in him who designs it; for the idea of lofty beauty cannot be conceived otherwise than when the soul is wrapt in quiet meditation, and abstracted from all individuality of shape. Besides, a state of stillness and repose, both in man and beast, is that state which allows us to examine and discover their real nature and characteristics, just as one sees the bottom of a river or lake only when their waters are still and unruffled, and consequently even Art can express her own peculiar nature only in stillness.

Repose and equanimity, in their highest degree, are incompatible with action. The most elevated idea of beauty, therefore, can neither be aimed at, nor preserved, even in figures of the deities, who must of necessity be represented under a human shape. But the expression was made commensurate, as it were, with the beauty, and regulated by it. With the ancient artists, therefore, beauty was the chief object of expression, just as the cymbal guides all the other instruments in a band, although they seemingly overpower it. A figure may, however, be called beautiful even though expression should preponderate over beauty, just as we give the name of wine to a liquor of which the larger portion is water. Here we also see an indication of the celebrated doctrine of Empedocles [fifth century BCE] relative to discord and harmony, by whose opposing actions the things of this world are arranged in their present situation. Beauty without expression might properly be termed insignificant, and expression without beauty, unpleasing; but, from the action of one upon the other, and the union of the two opposing qualities, beauty derives additional power to affect, to persuade, and to convince.

Repose and stillness are likewise to be regarded as a consequence of the propriety which the Greeks always endeavoured to observe both in feature and action, insomuch that even a quick walk was regarded as, in a certain measure, opposed to their ideas of decorum. It seemed to involve a kind of boldness. Demosthenes reproaches Nicobuius with such a mode of walking; and he connects impudent talking with quick walking. In conformity to this mode of thinking, the ancients regarded slow movements of the body as characteristic of great minds. [...]

The Greek artists were convinced that, as Thucydides [fifth century Greek historian] says, greatness of mind is usually associated with a noble simplicity. Even Achilles presents himself to us in this aspect; for, though prone to anger and inexorable in wrath, his character is ingenuous, and without dissimulation or falseness. The ancient artists accordingly modelled the faces of their heroes after the truth thus taught them by experience. No look of subtlety is there, nor of frivolity, nor craft, still less of scorn, but innocence is diffused over them, blended with the calmness of a trustful nature.

In representing heroes, the artist is allowed less license than the poet. The latter can depict them according to their times, when the passions were as yet unrestrained by social laws or the artificial proprieties of life, because the qualities ascribed to a man have a necessary relation to his age and standing, but none necessarily to his figure. The former, however, being obliged to select the most beautiful parts of the most beautiful conformations, is limited, in the expression of the passions, to a degree which will not conflict with the physical beauty of the figure which he models.

The truth of this remark is apparent in two of the most beautiful works of antiquity. One of them is a representation of the fear of death; the other, of extreme suffering and pain. The daughters of Niobe, at whom Diana has aimed her fatal shafts, are represented in that state of indescribable anguish, their senses horrorstruck and benumbed, in which all the mental powers are completely overwhelmed and paralysed by the near approach of inevitable death. The transformation of Niobe into a rock, in the fable, is an image of this state of deathlike anguish; and for this reason Æschylus [sixth century Greek tragedian] introduced her as a silent personage in his tragedy on this subject. A state such as this, in which sensation and reflection cease, and which resembles apathy, does not disturb a limb or a feature, and thus enabled the great artist to represent in this instance the highest beauty just as he has represented it; for Niobe and her daughters are beautiful according to the highest conceptions of beauty.

Laocoön is an image of the most intense suffering. It manifests itself in his muscles, sinews, and veins. The poison introduced into the blood, by the deadly bite of the serpents, has caused the utmost excitement in the circulation; every part of the body seems as if straining with agony. By this means the artist brought into action all the natural motive powers, and at the same time displayed the wonders of his science and skill. But in the representation of this intense suffering is seen the determined spirit of a great man who struggles with necessity and strives to suppress all audible manifestations of pain. [...]