

Lise Beck: The Inconstancy of the Classical Ideal

Time and time again, from the end of the fourteenth and far into the eighteenth century, the art of Antiquity was regarded in theoretical art literature as the ideal for all artistic production, just as the authors of these texts largely based their writings on Roman art literature. Despite all similarities, however, this ideal did not remain constant throughout this period but assumed changing forms. Referring to a number of such authors – Filippo Villani, Leon Battista Alberti, Francisco di Giorgio Martine, Andrea Palladio, Nicolas Poussin, and Johann Joachim Winckelmann – this article shows how the inconstancy of this ideal may be viewed not only as an expression of changes in the conception of the monuments of Antiquity and of the written sources available within any one period, but also in the light of a change in the concept of nature.

From being in all its richness of detail the visible image of the

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supreme divinity in the Christian sense – just as the visible world in Antiquity was the fleeting illusion as opposed to eternal Being – nature became regarded in the Renaissance as a manifestation of the principle of universal order itself, i.e. geometry. In the seventeenth century this geometrical abstraction receded into the background as an ordering principle. Instead, the harmony that was the quintessence of the Classical idea became manifest in nature as physical form – a view that was in keeping with the new Newtonian physics. Thereby the possibility was created of a more positive evaluation of landscape painting – as artistic expression. Finally, in the eighteenth century the concept of nature was regarded as primordially and the state of innocence in human nature rather than as a quality inherent in the surroundings. It is this conception of nature that characterizes the Neo-Classical view of Antiquity. Both Winckelmann's writings and Thorvaldsen's works bear witness thereof.