

PLATO'S NOTION OF BEAUTY IN CLASSICAL GREEK AND EGYPTIAN ART

Aphrodite Alexandrakis

Barry University, Miami Florida

Abstract:

This investigation aims at establishing a new understanding of Plato's notion of artistic beauty. It will be argued that Plato's theory of beauty is in perfect agreement with his metaphysical system, and is based on the Pythagorean notion of beauty, as this is reflected in the principles of proportion and harmony. Hence it will be shown that Plato's ideas of κάλλος and καλὸν in the later books of the *Republic* and the *Laws* reflect the voice of a "Pythagorean Plato." According to this view, the essence of what is intrinsically beautiful in art (τέχνη) is of an abstract and rational nature. It is the result of the combination and unity of the rational elements of symmetry, rhythm, and harmony.

Aesthetic theory in the past several decades has moved in a direction that underscored a steady decline in aesthetic evaluation and an increasing emphasis on the analysis of arguments in the various proposed theories of description, interpretation and theorizing in aesthetics. What was known as the "philosophy of art" tradition was made marginal to the investigations of aesthetic problems. This is crucial to this paper, which in a way may not be of value to the analytical approach in aesthetics.

This investigation aims at establishing a new understanding of Plato's notion of artistic beauty. It will be argued that Plato's theory of beauty is in perfect agreement with his metaphysical system, and is influenced by some Pythagorean ideas on beauty¹, as this is reflected in the principles of proportion and harmony. Hence it will be shown that Plato's ideas of κάλλος and καλὸν in the later books of the *Republic* and the *Laws* reflect the voice of a "Pythagorean Plato." According to this view, the essence of what

¹ I am well aware of the books and articles written by esteemed scholars questioning the Pythagorean theories's existence and their sources. However, this work will follow the twentieth century's old-school publications.

is intrinsically beautiful in art (*τέχνη*)² is of an abstract and rational nature. It is the result of the combination and unity of the rational elements of symmetry, rhythm, and harmony. Since education also plays a primary role in life and therefore in the artist's background, an account of Plato's ideas about education and the role of the "educated artist" will be given special emphasis as well.

The goal is twofold: The first objective is to establish the basis on which Plato analyzed and determined the kind of beauty found in various forms of art (*τέχνη*)³ in the early classical, fifth century B.C., of the Greek antiquity and ancient Egypt: music, literature, dance, sculpture and painting. Two types of art will be considered: art as the making of a likeness (*τέχνην εικαστικήν*), which is based on measure and proportion⁴, and art as the making of *semblance* (*φανταστικήν*)⁵ which is art of a simpler form, such as manifest in children's stories.⁶

The second objective is to explore Plato's views on early classical (high classical or *severe style*) art (480-450 B.C., painting and sculpture) and the art of the second half of the fifth century B.C. (450-408 B.C.). This inquiry will seek to elucidate even further Plato's formal theory⁷ of what constitutes the beautiful in aesthetic creation.

Finally Egyptian art, specifically the Abu Simbel temple's interior wall designs will be discussed as Plato may have evaluated them on the basis of his references to Egyptian art in the *Laws* and the *Republic*.⁸ By considering Plato's position, taking into account the *formal* standards (elements) he refers to in his dialogues, I will argue that early classical painting and sculpture as well as Egyptian art (specifically wall paintings) are clearly reflective of his *formal* theory of beauty, in which the beautiful is said to be equal to the true and the good (*Symposium* 201c5-6).

² See Janaway, p.47. What we today call "fine arts" (including poetry), Plato called *τέχνη* (craft). Thus, painting is a *τέχνη* and it exists "as a whole" (Ion 532d-e7-533a1). As Janaway (p.18) points out, painting, sculpture and music fall in the category of *τέχνη* whereas rhetoric does not. He recognizes Polygnotus as a "man with the skill to point out what is good and what is not."

³ For the meaning of *techne* (*τέχνη*) see Christopher Janaway, "Plato's Critique of the Arts in *Images of Excellence*," Clarendon Press 1995. All citations were taken from: Edith Hamilton, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Princeton University Press, 1963. For the Greek translation: Loeb Classical Lib., Trns, R.M.Lamp, Ed. G.P.Goold, Edition: 1983.

⁴ *Statesman*, 283b-285b, *Philebus* 64.

⁵ *Sophist*, 235d7-e2264c-267d, *Rep.* 377-383, 386-403, 595-608, *Laws* 667b-669e, 816e-817d.

⁶ This work will not attempt to give any kind of interpretation to the meaning of *mimesis*. The author is taking into account some scholars' views on this issue and concurs with them. See Christopher Janaway, "Images of Excellence", 1995, Alexander Nehamas, "Plato on Imitation and Poetry in Republic X" "in" Moravcsik and Tempo, "Plato on Beauty, Wisdom and the Arts, 1982, Stephen Halliwell, "The Aesthetics of Mimesis", 2002 and others.

⁷ Formal = rational.

⁸ I concur with the view that Plato does not consider painting as being a danger to the *polis*. See A. Nehamas on "Plato on Imitation and Poetry in Republic X."

On the basis of his dialogues, Plato did not disregard certain styles of art –*techne*. In fact, he praised some artists of the early fifth century high Classical period and thought highly of them, since he saw them as reflecting the visual expression of his rational analysis of beauty. However, he did make negative statements about some art forms in the *Laws* as well as in the *Republic* and elsewhere:

Art, the subsequent late-born product of these causes, herself as perishable as her creators, has since given birth to certain toys with little real substance in them . . .⁹ . . . the nature of the mimetic poet is not related to this better part of the soul . . . the painter and his creations are inferior in respect of reality . . .¹⁰

Such negative statements are about poetry and how this kind of art affects the inferior part of the soul. Thus Plato was aware of the effect of ‘good art’ on people. He distinguishes between those artistic creations that do not deal with the natural world, and those that deal with the artist’s emotions. He also indicates that the latter are of an inferior nature. This mimetic (φανταστικήν) art (τέχνη) is false, fictitious, and should be forbidden when teaching children.¹¹ Thus Plato rejects imitative poetry. While both poetry and painting are “paradigms of imitation”¹² he banishes only poetry, not painting. Poetry corrupts the listener’s soul and it is thus dangerous to the *polis*. He points out that the art of the educated artist need not be of an inferior nature, if it corresponds to a rational way of thinking. Consequently, there are good and bad artists and art. While for Plato certain artistic creations may not be the product of metaphysical thought, he acknowledges the beauty of such works of art; because (a) of the way they were made, that is, on the basis of the use of certain rational (*formal*) elements, and (b) because of the artist’s formal education. This supports saying that Plato would value certain works of art of the high classical period, and certain Egyptian works of art as well because they reflect a *formal beauty*, consisting of unchangeable and concrete elements such as geometric lines, shapes, and proportion, that reflect symmetry, good rhythm and harmony.

Plato’s Views on the Artist’s Education and the Arts

For the Greeks education was “*the ultimate justification for the existence of both the*

⁹ *Laws*, 889d.

¹⁰ *Republic*. 605a-b.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 377-383, 386-403, 595-608. *Laws*, 667b-669e, 816e-817d, *Sophist* 264d-267d. Art as an inspiration will not be discussed.

¹² See Alexander Nehamas “Plato on Imitation” “in” Ulius Moravcsik and Phil. Temko, 1982, also, Christopher Janaway, p. 10. I concur with the view that for Plato, the arts provide us with aesthetic pleasure but, at the same time, he does not give “them a prominent place in the best of human lives,” p. 58.

individual and the community... Education embodied the purpose of all human effort.”¹³ Plato's position for the ideal city in the *Laws*, is that the minister of education must supervise all students and schools.¹⁴ Thus, it is up to the legislator and the laws to form and shape young people's souls.¹⁵ The legislator's aim should be “... *the society for which he makes them must have freedom, must have amity with itself, must have understanding.*”¹⁶ An intelligent judge of any form of art must have three qualities: “. . . *he must understand first, what the object reproduced is, how correctly, and last, how well a given representation has been effected, in point of language, melody, or rhythm.*”¹⁷ Right education “... *must follow up the trail by investigating the goodness of figure, melody, song and dance. If we let the quarry escape us, all further discourse of right education—Hellenic or non-Hellenic—will be so much waste of breath . . .*”¹⁸ Hence, in addition to beauty, the ethical point of view must be present.

Plato's views on the curriculum - geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, harmony (the relation of the parts to the whole) - sound Pythagorean. The Pythagorean numerical, mathematical laws in musical sounds were of great importance in education. Behind harmony “*lay the mathematical conception of proportion, which, the Greeks believed, could be visually presented by geometric figures . . .*”¹⁹ Accordingly, Pythagoras advised the public to build a temple dedicated to the Muses because the arts “*comprehend symphony, harmony, rhythm, and all things breeding concord. Not only to beautiful theorems does their power extend, but to the general symphonious harmony.*”²⁰ As Aristotle points out, “... *for the so called Pythagoreans, numbers seemed to be the first things in the whole of nature, they supposed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all things, and the whole heaven to be a musical scale and a number.*”²¹

Plato emphasizes the importance of both the artist's function in life and his educational stages. Artistic creations involve two elements that the soul comes in contact with: the sensible world, that is, “*seeing*” and “*hearing*. ” The soul acquires knowledge through these two senses. Consequently, artistic form affects man's character accordingly.

¹³ William Jaeger, “*Paideia*”, v.I, xvii. Oxford University Press, 1967. The author, while aware of the modern and recent writings against Plato's influence by Pythagoreanism/Pythagoras, is following the ideas brought out by W.Jaeger.

¹⁴ *Laws*, 812e

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 672e-673d

¹⁶ 701d

¹⁷ 669a-b

¹⁸ *Laws*, 654e

¹⁹ Jaeger, p.165.

²⁰ Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, “*Iamblichus*” “*The Pythagorean Sourcebook And Library*”: Phanes Press. 1987, p. 67.

²¹ *Metaphysics*, 986a, 1-3.

... we must look for those craftsmen who by the happy gift of nature are capable of following the trail of true beauty and grace, that our young men, dwelling as it were in a salubrious region, may receive benefit from all things about them, whence the influence that emanates from works of beauty may waft itself to eye or ear like a breeze that brings from wholesome places health, and so from earliest childhood insensibly guide them to likeness, to friendship, to harmony with beauty and reason.²²

Not everyone can follow "*the trail of true beauty*." Basically, one does not and cannot follow "*the trail of true beauty*" unless they are well educated. Education must begin early in life so one can absorb and understand the *good* and the *beautiful* later on in life. Hence, education during the childhood years is crucial to developing a virtuous and rational character that will be capable of appreciating real *beauty*. Education is

... the drawing and leading of children to the rule which has been pronounced right by the voice of the law, and approved as truly right by the concordant experience of the best and oldest men. That the child's soul, then, may not learn the habit of feeling pleasure and pain in a way contrary to the law . . . but taking pleasure and pain in the very same things as the aged . . .²³

In order for children to attain the pleasure educated adults feel, they should not follow the public's notion of pleasure but that of the wise elders who taught them. The educated man has the "right standard" within him, and he develops it by having received the proper training during the stages of his early years of education.²⁴ "*This assumes an absolute standard of beauty.*"²⁵ The "right standard" refers to both the aesthetic and ethical capacity to recognize ugliness and beauty.²⁶ When trained properly, the educated man is capable of delighting in music's rhythm and melody.²⁷ The uneducated man will not be able to appreciate it for he has no knowledge and therefore does not understand the standards (*elements*) of beauty. Consequently, artistic forms reflect a man's character. The educated man (*mousikos*) has a sense of what is *beautiful* and what is *ugly*; his reason helps him recognize the beautiful because he is not influenced by his senses, and he is able to apply order to his thoughts. Thus, the function of the artist is to show us the beauty of the world through the knowledge

²² *Republic*, 401c-e, 402e.

²³ *Laws*, 659d

²⁴ *Laws* 654b-e. Plato refers to both, aesthetic and ethical beauty and ugliness.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 654e-655b

²⁶ *Paideia*, v.iii, p.228-9.

²⁷ *Laws*, 655a

he has attained.

Based on the above, the standards of what is beautiful in music and in art in general must be part of legislation created by highly educated lawmakers. Education and culture thus reflect the *ethos* of the city. It cannot be left up to any artist's fantasy and inspiration, since there are bad melodies that can directly affect the soul.²⁸ “ . . . Universally all postures and melodies connected with goodness of soul or body-whether with such goodness itself or with some image of it- are good, and those connected with badness universally the reverse.”²⁹

Plato's aesthetics amounts to saying that all artistic forms should be indifferent to and liberated from the public's hedonistic and materialistic taste, since most people are only looking for pleasure. This, however, does not mean that Plato was against the enjoyment of artistic productions or the pleasure one may receive from them, provided that well-educated artists create them. For the joy of *good* art inspires the best; that is, the best trained (educated) spectators³⁰ and the pleasure they experience is of an intellectual nature. The good citizen should seek out the noblest music and dance, those that are “right,” not just pleasing. He adds that the pleasure the educated person receives counts,³¹ assuming that there is a qualitative difference of pleasure that depends on how well the person is educated. One should ask, the Athenian says, whether a man sings and dances *good* songs and dances, and not *how well* he sings or dances.³² Good melody, song, and music in general have as their source virtue, and remind people of virtuous behavior and acts.

Thus the Athenian distinguishes between something beautiful and something pleasant. While something (music, or any other form of art) may be experienced as pleasant through hearing and seeing, in order for it to be also called *beautiful*, it must be sharing “*a common quality which appertains to both of them in common and to each singly otherwise they could not both of them be beautiful as a pair, and also each separately . . .*”³³ It will be argued that this “common quality” constitutes the standard(s) (*formal elements*) that all *good* art must share. “*It is only that love of beauty that can take the Greek soul and forge it into a permanent form in the fire of youth and enthusiasm.*”³⁴

Plato's theory of education in the *Laws* includes dance and music,³⁵ and in the later passages he includes other forms of art. It is through the understanding of how the

²⁸ *Laws* 656c

²⁹ *Laws* 655b

³⁰ *Laws* 658

³¹ *Ibid.* 659a

³² *Ibid.* 654b

³³ *Hippias Major*, 300b.

³⁴ Jaeger, v. 1, p.230 (*Laws* 666a).

³⁵ *Laws*, 656e, 795e, 799a, 800a.

composite parts of an artwork interrelate that beauty is realized. Accordingly, in order for a person to develop the love of beauty, one must start with education in music. He says:

... Education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained, and otherwise the contrary?³⁶

Only human beings have the ability of perceiving and enjoying the “*order or disorder of the dance motions or of rhythm and melody.*” The origin of dance “comes through the Muses and Apollo.”³⁷ The educated man must have a thorough “choric training” (dance and song), provided that he sings *good* songs and music and dances *good* dance.³⁸ When melody consciously accompanies rhythm, the result is choric dance. Choric art, “*embraces both dance and song.*”³⁹ And if one understands “*what is good in song and dancing,*” then one knows who is rightly educated.⁴⁰ It is “... the acquisition of a sense of rhythm has generated dancing. Since melody suggests and awakens consciousness of rhythm, the two in conjunction have given rise to the play of the choric dance.”⁴¹

It follows that choric art is “... the same thing as the whole of education, and one half of the art, that which has to do with the voice, consists of rhythms and melodies.”⁴² Additionally, “... the part which deals with bodily movement has rhythm in common with the movements of the voice, but posture and gesticulation are proper to it, just as melody... is to vocal movement.”⁴³

All musical melodies and body postures that are directly related to goodness are good (*pure unmixed notes*) and those that are connected to badness are bad.⁴⁴ So it is with the kind of pleasure these kinds of music give “*audible sounds, which are smooth and clear, and deliver a single series of pure notes, are beautiful not relatively to something else, but in themselves, and they are attended by pleasures implicit in themselves.*”⁴⁵

The training of voice should be continued, “Till it reaches the soul”⁴⁶ with the

³⁶ *Rep.* 401d-e.

³⁷ *Laws*, 654a

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 654c

³⁹ 654b-e, 795d, 6-e 1.

⁴⁰ 654d

⁴¹ 673d

⁴² 672e

⁴³ 673e

⁴⁴ 669b

⁴⁵ *Philebus*, 51d

⁴⁶ *Laws*, 673a

proper training (through the voice to goodness). Citizens should aim “*at the noblest kind of song . . . and not at a music which is just pleasing but at one that is right.*”⁴⁷ For music follows the voice through hearing, and that detects and regulates the motions that are the harmony, which, in turn, corrects the soul’s discord.⁴⁸ The person who has real understanding of music knows the nature and number of intervals and how, through low and high pitch, they form the sound as well as the notes that “*bound*” the intervals and their result.⁴⁹ He knows and recognizes which pitch and sound can or cannot be blended.⁵⁰

Plato’s belief in music’s being an important educational element is a result of the fact that the Greek theory of music was largely based upon the acoustical mathematics of the *Pythagorean* ratios, according to which various *modes*,⁵¹ were employed. They, in turn, were based upon *tetra chords* (groups of four adjacent tones) arranged in conjunct order (the lowest note of one *tetra chord* being the same as the top note of the *tetra chord* immediately below), or *disjunct* order (the lowest note of one *tetrachord* being adjacent to the top note of the *tetra chord* immediately below).⁵² According to Plato, the above elements and their *modes* are *formal*, objective, that is, rational elements whose rhythms reflect goodness and, when present, constitute a good piece of music.

In reference to the proper musical instruments, Plato is against the “many-stringed *polyharmonic* instruments”⁵³ and prefers the simplicity of the *lyra*, which, he says, should be taught around thirteen for three years.⁵⁴ Both the *lyra* and the *cithara* are allowed, for they are simple instruments and useful to the city.⁵⁵ The elements of music are based on the correspondence of strings and notes.⁵⁶ However, in order for the *cithara* instructors/trainers to be successful, they should follow well and clearly defined, proper assignments. They should be “exceptionally sensitive to rhythmic and melodic structure to ensure . . . and distinguish a good musical education of a soul under the stress of its emotions . . . ”⁵⁷ For education in music is most important to the soul’s rhythmical and harmonic function. Thus one must search for “*those craftsmen*” who

⁴⁷ 668b

⁴⁸ *Tim.* 47c

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 17d

⁵⁰ *Sophist*, 253b

⁵¹ *harmony*

⁵² Hugh M. Miller, “History of Music”, third ed. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1964, p.6.

⁵³ *Rep.* 399c-d

⁵⁴ *Laws* 810a

⁵⁵ *Rep.* 399d. Note the importance of the notion of ‘simplicity’.

⁵⁶ *Theatetus*, 206b.

⁵⁷ *Laws* 812a-b

follow “*true beauty and grace*.⁵⁸

When Plato refers to instruction for boys and girls so that they grow up “*ambicrural and ambidextrous*,”⁵⁹ he divides dance into two kinds: “*physical culture*,” which is concerned with bodily movements, and music, which is concerned with “*mental excellence*.” Physical culture has two branches: dancing and wrestling. Dancing is divided into two kinds: dance inspired by poetry and gymnastics for physical fitness:

. . . the presentation of works of poetical inspiration of dignity and decorum; the other, which aims at physical fitness, nobility, and beauty, ensures an appropriate flexure and tension in the actual bodily limbs and members, and endows them all with grace of movement which is incidentally extended to every form of the dance and pervades all intimately.⁶⁰

Thus, Plato favors gymnastics with its precisely calculated graceful and careful movements of the body. The right dance movements, he says, are as effective to the soul as the rocking of the baby in his mother’s arms, accompanied by her soothing song. The right combination of bodily movements with the proper song is soothing to the mind. “. . . *The external motion . . . dominates the internal*” and this domination “*produces a mental sense of calm and relief from the preceding distressing agitation of the heart . . .*”⁶¹

Hence, while music is for the good of the soul, gymnastics is for the good of the body; a balance of mind and body. Through practice and experience, knowledge is achieved by balancing the body and soul.⁶² Hence athletics and music were given promising places to foster the beauty of body and mind and “*is not this the fairest spectacle . . .?*”⁶³ This rational and physical combination and balance is reflected in the sculptural idealism of early fifth century.

Interestingly, in the *Laws* the Athenian points out that dance should also be part of war training, and he refers to the “*virgin queen*” of his country (goddess Athena the protector of soldiers),

. . . who delights in this chorric pastime, deemed it wrong to disport herself with empty hands, and right to perform her dance in all the splendor of full battle array. It would certainly be most proper that our boys and girls should copy these models in courting the favor of the goddess, both for their usefulness in

⁵⁸ *Rep.* 401d

⁵⁹ *Laws* 795d

⁶⁰ 795e

⁶¹ 790-791b

⁶² *Rep.* 376e. As will be shown later on, classical Greek sculptures’ ideal goal also was the balance of body and mind (spirit).

⁶³ *Rep.* 402d.

war and for the embellishment of our festivals.⁶⁴

Plato's reference to dance as part of war training reflects his ideas of the citizens' responsibility to protect their country as loyal, obedient to the laws, and ethical human beings. At the same time, he distinguishes a kind of dance (war dance) that he calls Pyrrhic, from the dance of peace, for both have a different character and movements⁶⁵ and is accepted in the ideal city for these kinds of dances are the "political" because they are accepted in the "ideal" city. Then, he adds the "*mimic*" dances of the bacchanals done under the influence of liquor, the "non-political," those are unsuitable for Plato's ideal city.

Plato disapproved of the kind of music that was being played during his time. He praised the traditional music of Egypt, noting that innovative new tunes were not allowed. Changes in poetry, he said, are taking place by "*unregulated taste*," except in Crete and Sparta. They are not "*fixed and permanent as in the case of Egypt . . .*"⁶⁶ And while he praises Sparta for its fixed values, at the same time says to the Spartans ". . . *your cities are organized like armies, not like societies of town dwellers.*"⁶⁷

It follows that certain values must be present in order for music and poetry to be effective and educate the young. It is these values that the poet must express in his lines, in music, and written in the proper form. This is the expression of the beauty of the true doctrine (*ορθος λογος*).⁶⁸ And this is how one understands, enjoys and loves the good and the beautiful. The true musician is one whose words are in harmony with his virtuous personality. This kind of man is "*attuned to a better harmony than that of lyra or any pleasant instrument of music.*"⁶⁹

In the *Laws* the Athenian proposes to employ and follow the Egyptian model according to which Egyptian consecrations and festivals are strictly organized. Accordingly, there should be an annual calendar with fixed dates for festivals and one to honor the god(s). There must be good lawgivers as well..

A true lawgiver likewise will persuade, or if persuasion fails, will compel the man of poetic gifts to compose as he ought, to employ his noble and fine-filed phrases to represent by their rhythms the bearing, and by their melodies the strains, of men who are pure, valiant, and, in a word, good.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ *Laws* 796b-c.

⁶⁵ 815a

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 660b-c

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 666e

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 645b

⁶⁹ *Laches* 188d

⁷⁰ *Laws* 660a

In the above discussion, Clinias and the Athenian agreed against “*endless innovation*” that was taking place elsewhere (apparently, though, not in Athens), in dancing and all branches of music.⁷¹ The overseers, says Plato, must throughout be watchful against innovations in music, for a change to a new type of music “*is something to be wary of as a hazard of all fortunes.*”⁷² Above all “. . . frequent modifications of moral approbation and disapprobation are of all changes the gravest and need to be most anxiously guarded against.”⁷³ The well educated and trained men will interpret “*the legislator’s intentions and construct the whole scheme of dance, song, and choric activity in the closest conformity to their support.*” Any other kind of music or dance must be subjected to the system. Thus, no innovations should take place in dance and song for the citizens, and their city “*must preserve their identity by a uniform life of unvarying pleasures . . .*”⁷⁴ The minister of education, Plato says, must supervise

. . . the actual tunes and words which the trainers of our choirs are to teach, and the character of them . . . they must be consecrated and assigned each to each appropriate festival to provide a society with a pleasure that is in every deed fortunate.⁷⁵

Critics, no younger than fifty years old who are experts in poetry and music and do not judge on the basis of their own taste or preference, should determine the regulations. Accordingly, he says:

. . . All these distinctions shall be awarded alike to persons of either sex who have been illustrious for their goodness . . . The music of earlier times is rich in fine old poems, and similarly also in dances for the body, from which we shall be perfectly free to select whatever is appropriate and suitable for the society we are instituting . . .⁷⁶

Furthermore, a true lawgiver must persuade the poets to compose “*noble and fine-filed phrases to represent by their rhythms the bearings, and by their melodies the strains, of men who are pure, valiant, and, in a word, good.*”⁷⁷ For songs are composed of “*the words, the tune, and the rhythm.*”⁷⁸ And the virtuous man’s actions follow his

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 660b

⁷² *Rep.* 424b-c

⁷³ *Laws*, 798d

⁷⁴ *Laws*, 816

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 813e

⁷⁶ *Laws*, 802a-b

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 660a

⁷⁸ *Rep.* 398c

“measured” words.⁷⁹ This man: “truly has in his own life a harmony of words and deeds arranged not in the Ionian, or in the Phrygian mode, nor yet the Lydian, but in the true Hellenic mode which is the Dorian, and no other.”⁸⁰

The simple, says Socrates, will speak directly to the soul. Mixing up various strings and rhythms complicates and slows down the youth’s learning.⁸¹ Hence Socrates emphasized the importance of exact measurements and the principle of simplicity. He states:

. . . let us complete the purification. For upon harmonies would follow the consideration of rhythms: we must not pursue complexity nor great variety in the music movements but must observe what are the rhythms of a life that is orderly and brave . . . simplicity in music begets sobriety.⁸²

In his discussion of sound and tones, the Athenian makes the distinction between the tones of the sound and the number and nature of the intervals formed by high and low pitch and the systems (scales) that resulted: “Rhythms and music generally are a reproduction expressing the moods of better and worse men.”⁸³ He supports the musical modes that imitate the actions of a brave man, a man who is voluntarily engaged in peace, the non-arrogant man, the modest and moderate.⁸⁴ It is the training of men in “austere classical music that makes those who are brought up on it better men . . . ”⁸⁵ Any man who is brought up with this kind of music will be “. . . repelled by the sound of the opposite kind and pronounces it unmanly . . . ”⁸⁶ Consequently, the educators teach the young the stories and eulogies “of good men,” while

The music masters by analogous methods instill self-control and deter the young from evil doing. And when they have learned to play the lyre, they teach them the works of good poets of another sort, namely the lyrical which they accompany on the lyre, familiarizing the minds of the children with the rhythms and melodies. By this means they become more civilized, more balanced, and better adjusted in themselves and so more capable in whatever they say or do, for rhythm and harmonious adjustment are essential to the whole of human

⁷⁹ *Laches* 188c-d. Measure embraces both, the principle of the good and the beautiful.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* The emphasis on the Dorian mode expresses Plato’s preference of simplicity.

⁸¹ *Laws*, 802a

⁸² *Rep.* 399e-400a

⁸³ *Laws*, 798d. Here he alludes to the problem of the one and the many.

⁸⁴ *Rep.* 399a

⁸⁵ *Laws* 802c-d

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 802

life.⁸⁷

This is how the soul becomes virtuous, and “*by its virtue it renders the body the best that is possible*” and comes into a position to understand and love beauty and the good. Thus, “. . . the end and consummation of culture is the love of the beautiful”⁸⁸ Conformity to the laws on dance movements, song, ritual, and chorric performance, must be faithfully followed. Those who do not conform to the rules will be punished.⁸⁹ Plato’s insistence on permanent educational rules is parallel to, and expresses his idea of the permanent, universal and unchangeable moral rules and standards that should be taught at an early age (3-6).⁹⁰

The Formal Elements

In his description Socrates lists four kinds of music. The first is “the *hymns to the gods*.” As a contrast, he refers to the *lament*, then the *paeans* and *dithyramb* (birth of *Dionysus*). Additionally, the *nome* was used as the *citharoedic*, where “. . . they imitated the strains of the flute on the harp and created a universal confusion of forms”⁹¹ Of all these kinds of music, Plato favors the *Hymns to the gods*.⁹² However, his preference is a paradoxical one since in Book III of the *Republic* he dismisses those arts, especially poetry and rhetoric, which produce stronger images than some other forms of art. In other words, his focus is on the *content* the arts deal with and how this affects and influences people by the emotions it arouses. Contrary to this, in *Republic III* (after 398b), he disregards the content and he considers only the “manner,” that is, *how* the art work was made through the formal elements, which are “*akin to goodness*.” These formal elements are “*pure form*,” and only *pure form* develops the love for the beautiful; and the love of the beautiful is the love for the good (*Symp.* 201c5-6).

Socrates continues the discussion of the *formal elements* and their importance for the role harmony and rhythm play on speech delivery, poetry, music, painting and the crafts. We must observe, he says, the rhythms of an orderly and brave life. These rhythms are related to the musical notes, and they form the iambic and trochaic foot, and on the basis of this the good or bad rhythm can be determined.⁹³ *Good rhythm*

⁸⁷ *Protagoras*, 326a-b.

⁸⁸ *Rep.* 403c

⁸⁹ *Laws* 800a

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 794a

⁹¹ *Laws* 700a-d

⁹² On this issue, see R.C.Gross & A.P. Woozley, *Plato’s Republic* (1966), 273, J.Tate “Plato and Imitation” *Classical Quarterly*, XXVI (1932), 161, 163, R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford, 1932) 46-48, A. Nehamas, *Plato on Imitation and Poetry in the Republic* in Moravcsik and Temko, *Beauty, Wisdom and the Arts* (1982).

⁹³ *Rep.* 400c.

determines the quality of speech, music, etc. The same standards determine what a good soul is:

... Good speech, then, good accord (*εὐαρμοστία*), and good grace (*εὐσχημοσύνη*), and good rhythm (*εὐρυθμία*) wait upon a good disposition not that weakness of head which we euphemistically style goodness of heart, but the truly good and fair disposition of the character of the mind . . . And there is surely much of these qualities in painting (*ζωγραφικήν*) and in all similar craftsmanship-weaving is full of them and embroidery and in architecture . . . For in all these there is grace (*εὐσχημοσύνη*) or gracelessness (*ασχημοσύνη*).⁹⁴

...

Plato's main *concern* in *Republic III* is that the youth should be taught only through whatever consists of formal elements found in *εικαστική μίμησις*, and these are not the products of emotion, but of thought and reasoning. Consequently, what is important in the arts is the *form* (*σχῆμα*), not the content (story). Hence, the formal elements are also the criteria on the basis of which a particular artistic achievement should be judged. Form (*σχήματα - περιγραφὴν*)⁹⁵ as Plato sometimes calls the outline and the complete design, beauty of form (*σχημάτων τε γὰρ κάλλος*)⁹⁶, good rhythm (*εὐρυθμία*), good form (*εὐσχημοσύνη*), good harmony (*εὐαρμοστία*), and proportion (*ισότης*) are the formal elements of all good works of art. These formal elements reflect the ideal beauty and are Plato's target of discussion in *Republic III*. It follows that "aesthetic form" means good (well balanced) and beautiful design that consists of elements whose nature is rational and therefore *formal*.

The ideas of the artist educated in the type of music Plato supports and under the instructions of the proper *good* teacher would praise, delight in, and love beautiful forms. Through reason he would welcome the *good*, which is also the *beautiful*. Thus, the identification of the *good* and the *beautiful* is the basis for saying that the *beautiful* recognized through its formal qualities reflects the *good*, and vice versa. It is the qualities of *measure* (*μέτρου*) and *proportion* (*συμμέτρου φύσεως*) of the *form* (*σχῆμα*) that constitute beauty and excellence.⁹⁷ The educated musician when he creates is assisted by a "divine spirit,"⁹⁸ and this kind of imitation is *εικαστική μίμησις*

⁹⁴ *Rep.*, 400e-401a.

⁹⁵ *Philebus* 51c., *Politicus* 277c.

⁹⁶ *Philebus* 51c "For when I say beauty of form, I am trying to express, not what most people would understand by the words, such as the beauty of animals or of paintings, but I mean, says the argument, the straight line and the circle and the plane and solid figures formed from these by turning-lathes and rulers and patterns of angles; perhaps you understand. For I assert that the beauty of these is not relative, like that of other things, but they are always absolutely beautiful by nature."

⁹⁷ *Philebus* 64d, 12e.

⁹⁸ *Phaedrus*, 245a; *Ion* 533-5.

which is true imitation based on *measure* and *proportion*, that is, on the intellect and on the moral rules of the city for “*the excellence of beauty of every work of art is due to this observance of measure.*”⁹⁹ The well and rightly educated man in music will be able to detect the “*failure of beauty in things.*”¹⁰⁰ Thus, only the good artist can make good judgments.¹⁰¹

Though Plato praises music, as part of a good education through which the guardians learn the rhythm of *measure* and *grace*, he also thinks that music is inferior to science, since it does not deal with number and calculation. The latter is the most important part of education.¹⁰² The unity of the formal elements in Plato’s theory of beauty creates a rhythmical transition of levels, which end up in a harmonious whole (ἀρμονία). Like the scientific theories that possess “*the property of uniformity,*” a work of art, whether painting, sculpture or architecture, must consist of variety within uniformity from which “*arises a very great pleasure.*”¹⁰³ This uniformity is the result of the proper mixture of *formal* elements. Accordingly, . . . any compound, whatever it may be, that does not by some means or other exhibit measure (*μετριότης*) and proportion (*συμμετρία*) . . . is no real mixture, but literally a miserable mass of unmixed messiness.¹⁰⁴

These and other properties are intrinsic elements in Plato’s theory of beauty. Accordingly, beauty is akin to measure (*μετριότης*) and proportion (*συμμετρία*) and therefore to reason, for “*the rhythm and harmony follow the words and not the words these . . .*”¹⁰⁵ In the next section, he adds that beauty, proportion and truth are together and are regarded as one “. . . the qualities of measure and proportion . . . constitute beauty and excellence.” The same ideas are found in the element of proportion for “. . . the excellence of beauty of every work of art is due to this observance of measure.”¹⁰⁶ Measure, proportion and the other rational (*formal*) elements exhibit an intrinsic

⁹⁹ *Statesman* 284a-b.

¹⁰⁰ *Rep.* 401e. and in 401d: “. . . education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the innermost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained, and otherwise the contrary. And further, because omissions and the failure of beauty in things badly made or grown would be most quickly perceived by one who was properly educated in music, and so, feeling distaste rightly, he would praise beautiful things and take delight in them and receive them into his soul to foster its growth and become himself beautiful and good . . .”

¹⁰¹ *Hip. Maj.*, 290.

¹⁰² *Rep.*, 522b

¹⁰³ Hutchenson, Francis, *An Inquiring Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, (Ed. Peter Kivy. The Hague: Martinus Nishoff, 1973). He means intellectual pleasure.

¹⁰⁴ *Philebus*, 64e.

¹⁰⁵ *Republic*, 400d

¹⁰⁶ *Statesman*, 284

rightness, which points to beauty in its purest form.¹⁰⁷ These *formal* elements exist in painting (*γραφική*) also and “*in all similar craftsmanship . . . for in all these there is grace* (*ευσχημοσύνη*) or *gracelessness* (*άσχημοσύνη*).”¹⁰⁸ Hence, he continued his search for and analysis of the same kind of *formal* beauty in both painting and sculpture for “. . . we must look for those craftsmen who . . . are capable of following the trail of true beauty and grace that our young men . . . may receive benefit . . . and guide them to likeness, to friendship, to harmony with beautiful reason . . .”¹⁰⁹ As will be shown in the following sections, both painting and sculpture of the early fifth century of the “severe” style (480-450 B.C.) demonstrate human reasoning and idealism through the formal elements.

Painting¹¹⁰ and the Formal Elements

As discussed above, the *formal* elements are the main constituents of beauty; they are objective and rational, their nature is beautiful, and for Plato they constitute pure form. “*Only pure form develops the love for the beautiful; and the love of the beautiful is the love of the good.*” This is Plato’s main point in *Republic III*. Hence, the formal elements of a work of art seem to be rather important criteria for judging its beauty. Accordingly, one recognizes beautiful art through the formal elements, for they reflect goodness (*καλόν*)¹¹¹ and beauty (*κάλλος*).

The beauty of figures . . . (*σχημάτων τε γὰρ κάλλος*) is not what most people would understand as such, not the beauty of a living creature or a picture . . . is something straight or round, and the surfaces and solids which a lathe, or a carpenter’s rule and square, produces from the straight and the round . . . Things like that . . . are beautiful not, like most things, in a relative sense; they are always beautiful in their very nature, and they carry pleasures peculiar to themselves . . .¹¹²

The Platonic beauty of all forms of art (painting, sculpture and architecture) is found in and depends on the *formal* elements such as the *σχῆμα*, (the shape) and/ or *περιγραφὴν*¹¹³ (outline), harmony, rhythm, symmetry, beauty of form (*σχημάτων κάλλος*), good rhythm (*εὐρυθμία*), good form (*ευσχημοσύνη*), good harmony (*εὐαρ-*

¹⁰⁷ *Laws*, 657a, *Statesman* 299c

¹⁰⁸ *Rep.* 401a

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* c-d.

¹¹⁰ I concur with the scholars’ view that Plato does not consider painting as being dangerous to the polis. See Alexander Nehamas (1982), E. Keuls (1974), Urmson (1982), Belfiore (1983).

¹¹¹ On the *kalon* see Irwing (1979), P. Woodrugh (1982), Moravcik (1982), p. 30-2, 43.

¹¹² *Philebus*, 51c.

¹¹³ *Politicus* 277c.

μοστία) and proportion (συμμετρία).¹¹⁴ For Plato, these formal elements are a reflection of ideal beauty. All the *formal* elements Plato refers to in the *Republic* and in the *Philebus*, may rationally be defined by the educated man who possesses this knowledge and is therefore able to construct art (τέχνη) that is beautiful both for the soul (man's character) and for nature in general. For “*the educated man has the right standard within him of ethical and aesthetic beauty and ugliness.*”¹¹⁵ And “*this assumes that there is an absolute standard of beauty.*”¹¹⁶

The above ideas lead to the discussion of the role that the formal elements play in relation to painting and sculpture during his time. According to Plato, the artist produces illusory ideas, and he refers to the similarity of writing to painting¹¹⁷ in that, for example, the painting of a figure and of something written down lacks the liveliness of a real person and of a speech. In other words, he does not hold that particular paintings or written speeches are bad or ugly but that they have “*no life.*” They remain “*silent*” when one asks them a question. Hence, they are not effective when it comes to knowledge because one cannot conduct a dialogue with them for they are not true. However, earlier in the same book his description of the form of beauty is of a “visual” nature, as if one is describing a painting, when he says: . . . *and he sees her once again enthroned by the side of temperance upon her body seat; then in awe and reverence he falls upon his back, and therewith is compelled to pull the reins so violently that he brings both steeds down on their haunches . . .*¹¹⁸

Despite what Plato says in the above quotation, which expresses a visual realistic style, in the *Republic* he opposes scene painting (σκιαγραφίαν –shadow rendering) and any other kind of art that uses illusionistic elements such as shading (σκιά), or perspective. To illustrate his point, he makes a parallel between “apparent virtue” and “scene painting,” and he excludes both from knowledge. The reason for this exclusion is that the artist is deceiving the viewer by using shading that creates perspective. This kind of painting, he says, is a semblance (φανταστική) and is far from the original image and from the εἰκαστική τέχνη. It is concerned with whether the art “*appears*” beautiful and not whether its elements are measured, that is, are in good proportion and in good order. This kind of art, the image making, does not make us wiser.¹¹⁹ It is, he says, like art of colossal size in which the proportions are not equal because we look at them from a distance and certain parts have to be smaller or bigger than others. Consequently, artists do not deal with the “*real proportion*” but those that “will

¹¹⁴ Plato refers to σχῆμα as the form and σχημάτων κάλλος as the beauty of form (the complete design).

¹¹⁵ *Laws*, 655d, 656d

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 654e-655b

¹¹⁷ *Phaedrus*, 276 c-d

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 254b

¹¹⁹ *Epinomis* 975d; *Sophist*, 235.

*appear beautiful.*¹²⁰ He then distinguishes the second kind of imitation, which is the “making of likenesses” (εικαστικη),¹²¹ and he defends this form of art that conforms to the proportions of the original and uses the proper color to every part. The rightness of this art depends on “*accurate correspondence in quality and magnitude.*”¹²² Thus Plato favors the “making of likeness.” Naturally, Plato rejected both the subject matter and the two-dimensional technique used on the Attic and Corinthian vase painting. The use of σκιαγραφια¹²³ (perspective) resulted in an illusionistic depth effect along with a rather “vulgar” subject matter that did not conform to his *formal* elements.

During the fifth and fourth century B.C., there were also some excellent classical painters who, by the time Plato was an adult, had probably ceased to exist. They were *Apollodorus* (480 B.C.), *Agatharthus* (460 B.C.), *Zeuxis*, *Apollodorus'* pupil (464 B.C.), and *Polygnotus* (500-440B.C.). While *Agatharthus* and *Zeuxis* were painting in a realistic style, *Apollodorus* was painting in an idealistic style. In addition to light and dark shades, *Zeuxis* added the highlight (σκιαγραφια) in order to create perspective.¹²⁴ Naturally, Plato rejected *Zeuxis'* illusionistic effect, for it “deceives” the viewer.¹²⁵ This type of illusionistic painting was to be viewed from a distance. Plato attacked it for it was not capable of withstanding examination, and only ignorant adults and children could appreciate it.¹²⁶ Looking at a picture from a distance is judging its general effect. Plato, however, was interested in pure rather than mixed colors,¹²⁷ with a strong outline and with immediately discernible objects.¹²⁸ Therefore he appreciated *Polygnotus'* simple, non-embellished, well-calculated style. The simple form or outline (σχημα) and the correct proportions reflected knowledge and *ethos* (*ηθος*), that is, the inner character, with no use of σκιαγραφια. Plato’s positive attitude towards *Polygnotus'* work is reflected here: “. . . *Have you ever seen a man with the skill to point out what is good and what is not in the works of Polygnotus, but without the power to do so in the works of other painters?*”¹²⁹ However, even though Plato praises *Polygnotus'* style, we will see that his admiration for the Egyptian paintings was greater than that of any

¹²⁰ *Sophist*, 236a

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 235d-e

¹²² *Laws*, 667d

¹²³ For an explanation of *skiagrapia* see Christopher Janaway.

¹²⁴ *Gorgias* 453c.

¹²⁵ *Theatetus* 208e.

¹²⁶ *Rep.* 598c.

¹²⁷ *Philebus* 51b, 53b

¹²⁸ *Rep.* 523b

¹²⁹ *Ion*, 532e-533a. *Polygnotus* had painted some walls on the Acropolis of Athens and in the Cnidian treasure at Delphi. Pausanias informs us that his style was simple, and his drawing was accentuated with a strong outline, thus not leaving space for aperspective. He was paintingethical and ideal characters. His style was simple and noble, graceful and charming in a grand manner.

other style of art.

Classical Greek Sculpture and the Formal Elements

Plato favored Polygnotus' paintings, for they represented the identification of the *good* and the *beautiful*, according to which the beauty in art expressed the virtue of the soul as a harmonious whole. But Polygnotus' style was exemplified in early Classical sculpture also. Artworks, especially sculpture, in Classical Greece between 480-430 B.C., represented the ideal in the arts and in society through a new political system: *democracy*. The sculptors' chief interest was the creation of ideal beauty based on the Pythagorean concepts of *symmetry*, *rhythm*, and *harmony*. This approach to artistic forms was also the result of stressing the balance between the beauty of body through athletics, with that of the mind (soul) through education. Plato indicates this principle when he says: "*In keeping the harmony of his body in tune, his constant aim is to preserve the symphony which resides in the soul.*"¹³⁰ The grandeur and idealism of Pheidias' sculptures were reflected in the faces and the perfection of style with correct and balanced proportions and shapes. This grandeur and nobility, the sublimity and precision, the quiet and rhythmical composition of Pheidias' sculptures, resulted in idealism: the distinctive quality of Greek art. This was the result of the Greek artist's feeling for beauty, simplicity, and precision, a feeling for the whole. "*From the love of the beautiful has sprung every good in heaven and earth.*"¹³¹ During this time (early fifth century [480-430B.C.]), sculptors produced some of the best, most idealistic sculptures ever created in the history of man. It was through the genius of Pheidias, Kallimachus, Polycleitus, Ictinus and other artists that the Greeks were able to communicate and express their ideas and the ideal. Through their masterpieces the Greeks' social, political and psychological ideas were reinforced, and education was at its peak.

During Plato's lifetime, some sculptures in Athens and in Peloponnes (Argos) continued to be made in the "severe" transitional style. Plato favored Peloponnesian art for it retained its Doric archaism, simplicity and formalism. Whether it was painting or sculpture, the Peloponnesian style was simple and strict, and reflected the "severe" sculptural style with its simple, precise and correct proportions. It seems that Plato favored the simplicity, severity and the perfection of proportions of that Classical impersonal, lofty style.

The Classical art of the beginning of the fifth century, at least in Attica and Peloponnes, was designed on the basis of the formal elements: symmetry, rhythm, harmony. As a result of this, these sculptures were the expressions of pure idealistic beauty with no trace of realism, not even naturalism, but rather an aloof, lofty face, and perfect body proportions resulting in an idealistic harmonious whole.¹³² This quality of aloofness, universality and impersonality of those sculptures is what made

¹³⁰ *Republic*. IX 591.

¹³¹ *Symposium* 197.

¹³² Polycleitus wrote a book on the perfect human body's proportions called "Canon."

them great throughout the centuries. This style was the visual representation of “*a good soul rendered by a beautiful body*.” All formal elements can easily be detected in some surviving early to middle fifth century sculptures. Representative examples of this style and era are the *Charioteer of Delphi*, the *Zeus of Artemision*, and the Roman copies of Polycleitus¹³³ *Doryphorus*. The rhythmical movement of the sculptures’ *οχήμα* (lines of the entire design) from one line and shape to another and the perfectly balanced proportions (symmetry) formed a unified, harmonious whole. The graceful and harmonious composition of the body corresponds exactly with the peaceful, aloof, abstract, non-emotional and perfectly symmetric face that reflects the calm spirit and soul of the “*inner character*” (*ēthos*).

In showing his appreciation and admiration, Plato refers to some sculptors whose masterpieces are not in existence today; one of them is Pheidias¹³⁴ (490-430 B.C.), whose sculptures embodied nobility and grandeur. In a dialogue¹³⁵ on beauty, Socrates asks Hippias if Pheidias was a good artist whereupon they both agree that not only is he not a bad artist, but a good one too. It is obvious that Plato admired Pheidias’, Polycleitus’ and Polygnotus’ works. All three artists created a non-realistic, ideal style (removed from nature), based on the formal elements (symmetry, rhythm and harmony), and they embodied nobility and grandeur. Additionally, Plato defends sculpture in general for it is constructed “in silence,” contrary to rhetoric (Gorgias 450c-d). And, again, in the *Protagoras* (311c), he refers to both Polycleitus of Argos and Pheidias of Athens with great respect for their work.

Plato on Egyptian Art¹³⁶

Despite Plato’s praise of some early Classical artists, his admiration for Egyptian art is far greater. The reasons for this remain the same: the Egyptian use of formal elements to create figures that are based on simple and correct lines and shapes reminiscent of geometric shapes. These shapes result into geometrically symmetric, simple rhythmical forms creating harmonious static compositions.

¹³³ In the second century A.D., Galen wrote: “Chrysippus holds beauty to consist not in the commensurability of “*symmetria*” (i.e., proportions) of the constituent elements (of the body), but in the commensurability of the parts, such as that of finger to finger, and of all the fingers to the palm and wrist, and of those to the forearm, and of the forearm to the upper arm, and in fact, of everything to everything else, just as it is written in the *Canon* of Polycleitus. For having taught us in that work all the proportions of the body, Polycleitus supported his treatise with a work: he made a statue accord to his tenets of his treatise, and called the statue, like the work, ‘*Canon*.’ ”

¹³⁴ According to Plutarch, the chief characteristics of his style were sublimity and precision.

¹³⁵ *Greater Hippias*, 289e-290a

¹³⁶ I specifically refer to the Abu Simbel interior incised designs. I am indebted to the Cairo Fulbright Commission for giving me a four-month special permission to visit and study the museums’ and temples’ paintings and drawings.

While Classical Greek sculpture was constructed in an all round, three-dimensional style, Egyptian sculpture was colossal in size: frontal, schematic, and motionless, eternalizing the pharaohs. These sculptures are missing the graceful proportions and idealistically perfect treatment of each part of the body. Like with Pheidias and Polycleitus, the aim of Egyptian sculpture was to achieve ideal beauty of perfect proportions with idealistic faces and no sign of emotion but indicating in a subtle way the ethical way of living. The aim of Egyptian sculpture was to achieve eternality, power and fear to the viewers in order to reflect the limitless power of the Pharaohs over the people they governed. What Plato admired from that kind of art was the continuous, non-interrupted, unchanged flow of this civilization's sculpture and painting for thousands of years. The psychological effect on people was the people's realization of the Pharaoh's godly power. Egyptian art was underpinned by the people's religious beliefs about the soul's preservation in the mummified body. This was displayed by the painted scenes on their tomb walls accompanied by the colossal sculptures of the Pharaohs. The result was the glorification and deification of the Pharaoh as a deity. For almost three thousand years, Egyptian art continued unchanged.: monumental, massive, stylized, yet simple style.

Plato's conservative and formal views of art (*téxyn*) were inspired by the Egyptian artistic timeless style. However, as mentioned, Egyptian art's goal is the opposite of the Greek ideal, in which the center of the universe was man and rationality exemplified in the formal elements as represented in Polygnotus' simplicity and archaism of design and in the perfectly symmetric early classical sculpture, And even though Plato does not refer to any particular Egyptian work, his admiration is based on two factors he insists on: the Egyptians' persistence in following unchanged traditions and customs without change, and their reliance on mathematically calculated geometric lines and shapes for the composition. The result is that the figures appear flat, without the perspective, which Plato found offensive. In other words, there is no trace of shadow rendering. What he admires is the well-calculated and geometrically flat drawn figures. This was an intrinsic "rightness" reinforced by law. This formal approach to beauty is best exemplified in the Abu Simbel temple (1279-1213 B.C.). The incised outline of the figures into the granite, and the figures' geometric shapes result in an elegant, sophisticated, flat monumental design. The figures' design becomes one with the building/architecture.¹³⁷ This is knowledge that produces beneficial pleasure (*Hippias* 303e9), that is, what we today call "aesthetic"¹³⁸ pleasure (*Hippias* 303e9). Additionally, Egyptian representations such as these are not illusionistic for they create no perspective; they are flat, mathematically precise and stylized as the Athenian says in the *Laws*. This kind of effect "speaks" to the "inner soul."

Plato was aware of the needed foreshortening of the gigantic parts of Egyptian

¹³⁷ See Janaway (174) on Socrates preference of buildings as *techne*.

¹³⁸ I concur with and borrow Christopher Janaway's idea that although Plato has no word for "aesthetic," he recognizes that there is aesthetic finesse of beauty.

sculpture because they needed to be seen from a distance. This, he criticized the same way he did the σκιαιραφία, 'shading' (perspective) of the Greek paintings. Plato's attraction to Egyptian art was based on its timeless quality through the presence of the formal elements. These were the "ingredients" of beauty (harmony, rhythm, symmetry) he admired in the works of Polygnotus, Polycleitus and Pheidias.

Plato's preference for Egyptian music, and the way it was set up by laws regulated by the state, left a great impression on him. He says:

... it has actually proved possible, in such a sphere, to canonize melodies which exhibit an intrinsic rightness permanently by law. . . . if we can but detect the intrinsically right in such matters, in whatever degree, we should reduce them to law and system without misgiving, since the appeal to feeling which shows itself in the perpetual craving for novel musical sensation can, after all, do comparably little to corrupt choric art, once it has been consecrated by deriding it out of fashion. In Egypt, its corrupting influence appears to have been no-wise potent, but very much the reverse . . .¹³⁹

He also admired that "*fixed and permanent*" taste and regulation of Egypt:

That nation, it would seem, long enough ago recognized the truth we are now affirming, that poses and melodies must be good, if they are to be habitually practiced by the youthful generation of citizens. So they drew up the inventory of all the standard types, and consecrated specimens of them in their temples. They were forbidden to innovate on these models or entertain any but the traditional standards, and the prohibition still persists . . .¹⁴⁰

Plato's conception of good forms of art should include *good rhythm*, *good grace*, and *good accord*, or otherwise, it would be *graceless* and have *evil rhythm* or *disharmony*. The type of art that is constituted of and reflects the rational (*formal*) elements that constitute beauty were found in Egyptian tombs and the palaces' wall paintings. Egyptian art for him was beautiful for it contains all these *formal* elements that appeal to reason. In the *Laws*, the Athenian praises the Egyptians, who allowed only "*poses and melodies*" that are good. This was contrary to the *Greek attitude of having no "sound" laws for the poets and artists*. ". . . If you inspect their paintings and reliefs on the spot, you will find that the work of ten thousand years ago—I mean the expression not loosely but in all precision— is neither better nor worse than that of today; both exhibit an identical artistry.¹⁴¹

Thus Plato's praise of Egyptian art is because the Egyptians continued to create

¹³⁹ *Laws* 657a-b

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 656d-e

¹⁴¹ *Laws*, 657a-b

the same artistic style for thousands of years, a simple style that consisted of rational elements: symmetry, harmony and rhythm. His contemporary artists in Athens were free to create anything they wished, not bound to any laws or tradition, and did not base art on the rational (formal) elements. What followed later on, was the development of a naturalistic style such as Praxiteles'. By contrast, the Egyptian legislators supervised all artistic activities, and they, in turn, conformed and restricted their art to the legislated laws. Painters were not allowed to be innovative with new designs but had to follow the old traditional ones in the same style and subject matter. The legislators controlled and allowed only art (melodies, representations) that exhibited "*an intrinsic rightness permanently by law*." Consequently, Plato was against "change" "*except when it is change from what is bad for it is always "highly perilous."*"¹⁴² There is "*... fixity, purity, truth, and what we have called perfect clarity, either in those things that are always unchanged, unaltered, and free of all admixture . . .*"¹⁴³

At first sight, it seems as if Plato admired more the fact that the Egyptians had a great respect for the preservation of their old customs and traditions than their paintings. He praised the fact that the legislators were continuing the same unchangeable laws for art and traditions for thousands of years, that is, the application and continuation of the belief in the same ideal. However, and importantly, there were two additional factors that contributed to Plato's praise of Egyptian art. The first was that whether it was about music, sculpture or painting, Egyptian art was made on the basis of the formal elements such as symmetry, harmony, rhythm, *schema* that Plato was interested in for those were the ingredients of beauty. The second reason was that during his lifetime, art in Athens had indeed changed from the idealistic fifth century "*severe*" style, to the new "*naturalistic*" fourth century style that was based on the contemporary changing life lifestyle. That, of course, distanced those artists from the old order of classical style and from following the traditional rational and objective elements of beauty.

It is interesting that Plato completely ignores the content of Egyptian painting representations as if it does not exist. What he is impressed by is the simplicity and elegance of the well-calculated abstract forms. The absence of perspective and shading, and the strong outline of the figures, gave them a "*static*" and formal appearance. This simplicity of style, along with the continuation of a very old style, which carried with it traditions repeated through thousands of years, and the fact that this style was founded by the legislators and faithfully followed by the artists, were what Plato admired most.

Conclusion

While Egyptian art remained unchanged for many centuries, Greek art kept evolving and changing. Plato praised the stability and strictness of the Egyptian schematic *formal* style for it agrees conceptually with the eternal ideas of his metaphysical system. The Egyptian figures lead the mind to a beauty that is derived from their geometrical

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 797d-e

¹⁴³ *Philebus*, 59c

construction resulting in the unity and simplicity of the whole. For Plato all these qualities constitute the *form* (*σχῆμα*) that is beautiful, void of any sensual elements.

Despite the fact that Egyptian art was totally different from Greek art, Plato, on the basis of their *formal* elements, admired the artworks of both cultures. He admired the early fifth century B.C. idealistic, impersonal, *severe* style sculptures and praised Pheidias and Polycleitus, as well as the simplicity and austerity of Polygnotus' archaism of design, as much as he did the figures of Egyptian art. The reason for this was the fact that the basis of construction was the *formal* elements: *symmetry* (*συμμετρία*) *harmony* (*αρμονία*), *rhythm* (*ρυθμός*) and their parts: *σχῆμα*, *περιγραφή*, *σχημάτων κάλλος*, *εὐρυθμία εναρμοστία*. These elements are for Plato the providers of aesthetic pleasure, and this is another reason for his admiration of Egyptian art. For as is put, “*Every sort of pleasure that is pure of pain will be pleasanter, truer, and fairer than one that is not . . .*” provided that this pleasure leads to truth and rational thought and all its parts are harmonious by been “proportioned and beautiful.”¹⁴⁴ «*for the quality of measure and proportion invariably, constitute beauty and excellence.*»¹⁴⁵

It was the classical Greeks' love of ideal beauty that lead them to the creation of the fifth century masterpieces. As Plato says: “*From the love of the beautiful has sprung every good in heaven and earth*” and “*the love of the beautiful is the love of the good.*” For the same reasons, his emphasis is on the use of the formal, rational elements. Plato defends the beauty of Egyptian art because the *formal* elements depend on precise geometric forms and design. The result is a kind of beauty that is in agreement with his abstract metaphysical system. This kind of design, depends on geometry and mathematics and ends up in precision and perfect proportions. Thus, the *Pythagoreanizing*¹⁴⁶ Plato's admiration and praise of certain early fifth century Classical artists' works is clearly reflected in his later books of the *Republic* and the *Laws*, according to which the essence of what is intrinsically beautiful in artworks is of an abstract and rational nature. This kind of beauty, impersonal, non-sensual and ideal, is the product of the use of the *formal* elements whose nature is eternal and unchangeable.

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¹⁴⁴ *Philebus* 53b10—c2 and 64e..

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 64e.

¹⁴⁶ My selection of this term.

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