
CLASSICAL GREEK ARCHITECTURE AT THE END OF HISTORY: ON HEGEL AND GREEK ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

In the following paper, I will attempt to argue that Hegel's theory concerning the end of art is possessed of solid aesthetical dialectic grounds when viewed against the background of classical Greek architecture. It shall be argued that the perennial appeal of Greek/Neo-classicism in architectural form and to a somewhat lesser extent in interior decoration (the latter being slightly less visible) makes a good supporting argument for the end of art theory, because in the Western world the Greek classical form continues to appeal through Neo-Classicism. I shall diverge from Hegel's theory of the human form and statuary in Greek classicism and confine myself in so far as is possible to architectural form as these are far more visibly prominent. The article will seek to make an argument for a form of metaphysical underpinning to the continual aesthetic appeal of classical Greek architecture.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Greek-Classicism, Architecture, Religion, Perennial Philosophy, Beauty, Intellect/Spirit



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I shall begin this paper by giving a brief overview of the three principal Greek classical architectural periods, and show the perennial appeal of Greek architectural classicism and neo-classicism on a metaphysical level. This will be done using the Perennial Philosophy to show how the Spiritual makeup of man is touched by the majestic nature of Greek architectural classicism and neo-classicism. We will then look at Hegel's End of Art Theory to see in what ways this timeless impact of Greek architecture illuminates Hegel's approach.

Thus, we shall begin by just giving a brief overview of the three primary classical Greek architectural structures, Doric, Ionic and Corinthian and their concomitant accoutrements; as these will be necessary for understanding perennial nature and appeal of Greek architectural classicism.

The oldest structure (circa 600 BC) is that of the Doric order, which according to Becker in his article entitled *Greek Architectural Orders*, marks the transition from construction in wood to stone for monumental structures. The Doric column is largely plain in nature when compared

to the Ionic and Corinthian columns. Doric columns were largely fluted unless unfinished and are characterized by not having a base which rests on the stylobate. Good examples of the early Doric would include the Temple of Artemis in Corfu and the Temple of Hera in Olympia both circa 580 BC.

The next architectural order is that of the Ionic, which is easily recognizable because of the two large eye like twirls that are at the top of each column and which are known as the volute, the abacus unlike that found in the Doric style, is much thinner and the horizontal architraves are typically made up of three layers which then have a further thin horizontal layer which is decorated with very short vertical flutes, this layer in turn supports a thicker horizontal layer which contains the mouldings which can typically be decorated with images of the gods or heroic Greek figures. There is a gable/pediment which ends with a raking cornice unlike its Doric equivalent which has an *acroterion* at the edge of its gable. Returning to the shaft/column, the flutes are narrower and the column itself terminates in a rounded base. The period for this particular style is around 500 BC and examples include the Aigina, temple of Aphaia from around 500BC and Paestum, temple of 'Neptune', early or mid-fifth century.

The third of the Greek classical architectural styles is that of the Corinthian column which is typically characterized by its upwardly flowing acanthus leaves, the said columns tended to be slender and were largely favoured by the Romans for use in more elaborate buildings like the Temple of Mars and the Pantheon in Rome. "The earliest known Corinthian capital comes from the Temple of Apollo circa 427BC." Apart from the leaves the column normally possess a rosette in the centre at the top of the acanthus leaves and above this on either side a volute which in the top centre has a boss.

It may be argued that Hegel's perspective on art was to try and understand it from an historical perspective. For Hegel, art is 'manifestation of truth' but it fulfils this function only during the Greek classical period, a form of art-religion. But, according to Hegel, art in the modern world is no longer the highest instrument of truth. It still speaks to us from the

past, but not as the highest *organon* of truth. In Hegel's words art has lost its edge, it no longer appeals in the same way as it did in ancient Greece:

Once the perfect content was manifested in perfect forms, the searching [*weiterblickende*] spirit turns away from this objectivity toward its own interior and shuns the former. Such a time is ours. We can still hope that art will continue to rise and to perfect itself, but its form has stopped to be the highest necessity for the spirit. We might find the Greek statues of the gods most excellent and God the father, Christ and Mary represented most dignified and perfect – it changes nothing, we still don't bow our knee anymore. (13. 142)

So, the role of art for the Greeks during the classical era was one in which form was the highest necessity of spirit. In our time, art no longer fulfils that role in the human psyche.

Ancient Greek art is a movement beyond symbolic art, for the depiction of the gods and goddesses is one akin to human form and thus mirrors the human mind. One may ask oneself what then is the problem here why can't we in the modern age turn to those forms of Gods and Goddesses? Because we are not entirely at home in our world in the way that the ancient Greeks were, we just don't have the same harmony between culture and nature, the human and the divine. The epics and tragedies that played such an important part in their religious beliefs, depicted the insolvable conflicts in lives of the Greeks. Poetry, music, and painting which Inwood labels romantic art, could not adequately express itself because it had too much to express. "Reflection on art, and in general reflection on the current state of the mind, gave rise to philosophy and to a theology independent of art. Art was now open to philosophical and theological assessment, and no longer the final authority on the absolute."

“Romanticism”: is a term associated both with mediaeval Christianity and with the Romantics of Hegel’s time. Hegel argues that Romantic art points to hidden depths that can’t be answered with art but with philosophy and theology. The need for philosophy and theology represents a disruption of the harmony of classical Greek art since art is never entirely divorced from religion. Before the ancient Greeks developed philosophy they lived close to the surface of things. He gives then four explanations as to why art has declined from its peak in ancient Greece. Firstly he says that the perfect art of the ancient Greeks will never reoccur, secondly that art will never regain the spiritual importance that it had for the Greeks, thirdly that modern art is not as good as Mediaeval or Renaissance art and finally that no matter how good future art may be it will not make any additions to the pantheon of art or the development of the resources of the human mind.

Yet we are still touched by the various forms of Greek architecture and we need to ask why this is so. We will argue that although the metaphysical underpinnings of Greek art have largely been obscured by modernity, there are still traces, metaphysical underpinnings that appeal to the Intellect and Spirituality of man. They manifest themselves in the human desire for the majestic expressed practically and without excessive ornamentation. But what is the root of this? Could it be spiritual, i.e. something appeals to the human artistic spirit that was best enshrined in classicism and neo-classicism? And if so, what is the basis of this spirit? Or is the appeal purely an aesthetic one, without any appeal to spirituality?

If one is to deal with the matter from a spiritual point of view, then there is no better place to begin than with Plato and his ideas on how to get craftsmen to “pursue what is fine and graceful in their works...” Plato is looking for what makes things *kalon*, fine, or that “by which all fine things are fine.” And his answer is that which “makes us be glad, not with all the pleasures, but just through hearing and sight” This trace of *kalon* seems to persist to this day when we view Greek classical architecture. One is then forced to ask concerning these underpinnings. It can be argued that it conforms with the notion in the *Symposium* of a beauty that neither

waxes or wanes and is not beautiful in one place and ugly in another. Because no matter from which angle one might stare at a column on a Greek classical temple, it retains its spherical symmetrical beauty. Greek architectural classicism possesses a Form-like appeal in what one might call a reflective momentary glimpse of truth or spirit in an illusory world, a sense of some greater beauty that we should continually aspire to.

All buildings require some form of physical support columns why not clad them in an Ionic or Corinthian façade as opposed to just leaving them as plain square columns; especially if they happen to be inside. Why choose to decorate the top of door frames with a classical Grecian temple pediments or when it comes to the entablatures of buildings with raking cornices, friezes, architraves, when simple blocks would suffice. Which of us fails to marvel at the august nature of such classical architectural structures again and again, yet they are far more universally appealing than those fine things that a connoisseur might delight in, such as the taste of a fine wine or an aesthete who marvels at the harmonies of a Bach chorale; for this classical and neo-classical architecture is not a matter of fashion or passing taste, or a refined education but one of continual appeal. Even the humblest of us with limited education backgrounds can hardly fail to be impressed by buildings such as the southern entrance of the British Museum with its neo-classical Ionic façade, pedimented and supported by Ionic columns. It is almost as though the building is saying “enter there is something great to be experienced here.” It is a building designed to appeal to both the humblest and the highest members in society. When we look at the United States Supreme Court Building with its quadruple rows of Corinthian columns, this venerable and imposing facade sends out a message of majesty and power. In addition, its East Pediment depicting images of great figures from ancient civilizations, it is as though it seeks to convey a message of finality of judgement. Like the British Museum it is a building designed to have a universal appeal. One may argue that the appeal goes beyond the work itself in the following sense:

“If the eye is satisfied, it is because a physical order in the organ of perception corresponds to the rational order present in whatever is intelligible, and not because the work of art was for the sake of the eye or ear alone.”

To see it is to be in awe of it. Therefore, it must correspond to a kind of rational order. We could argue that neo-classicism and classicism itself draw us beyond the surface of their aesthetic structures, to some kind of order which is why their appeal is perennial. This most certainly conforms to the first two requirements of beauty as laid down by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, “first, integrity or completeness, for broken things are ugly; second, due proportion and harmony.” St Thomas also adds that this clearness and proportion is rooted in our minds, allowing him to conclude that beauty dwells in a contemplative life. Might we not argue that part of the appeal of Greek classicism is precisely this contemplative aspect?

“Clearness and proportion are both rooted in mind, whose function it is to order and light up a symmetry. Hence beauty, pure and essential, dwells in the contemplative life, wherefore it is said of the contemplation of wisdom; and I became a lover of her beauty. Beauty is shed on the moral virtues in so far as they shine with the order of reason, especially on temperateness, which clears the lusts that fog the light of intelligence.”

Whether or not this appeal is due to some kind of metaphysical or platonic underpinning, Greek architectural classicism and neo-classicism has a perennial appeal to the spiritual nature of man.

We need not to characterize this spiritual aspect but point to its presence. The Maitri Upanishad says “One comes to be of just such stuff upon which the mind is set.” In this sense we can appeal to Perennial Philosophy to understand this relationship to something called Spirit,

something within us that is uncreated and awakened by the forms of classical Greek and neo-classical architecture.

Those who adhere to the Perennial Philosophy believe that there is a hidden Reality of which orthodox religions are mere manifestations. According to the traditional metaphysical view man has a three-part make up: Spirit, soul and body. This is the Spirit which is sometimes referred to as the Intellect, the latter should not be confused with the general use of the term, which tends to refer to the cognitive function of the mind. For the purposes of this work we shall use the term Spirit with a capital 'S', the second part of the make-up of man is his soul and then thirdly and finally, his body. The Spirit is the part of man that allows him to be able to conceive the Absolute, to quote William Stoddart in *Situating the Psyche*; "It is the source of his capacity for objectivity, and of his ability—in contradistinction from the animals—to free himself from imprisonment in subjectivity it is the very definition of the human state." The argument advanced by the adherents of the Perennial Philosophical school is that the Spirit can know through recollection in the platonic sense. Sotillos points out that the Spirit "is the only supra-individual, 'archetypal' or objective element in man's constitution. The soul on the other hand, is formal and individual." We could argue that the Spirit is appealed to by the majestic nature of Greek architectural classicism and neo-classicism.

Using mystical theology as opposed to ordinary theology which makes the distinction between God, soul and man, the distinction is now fivefold. God/Godhead, God the Creator, Spirit, soul, body. The Spirit is the reflection of the Absolute within the relative, or the uncreated within the created. This reflection manifests itself in Truth, Beauty, Virtue, Symbol and Sacrament. We would argue that the architectural classicism of ancient Greece and Neo-Classicism are a manifestation of Beauty and Symbol in the Perennial Philosophical sense. There are many forms of art that can make this claim, but the focus here is on Greek architecture because of the omnipresence of its forms. It is more common than other sacred iconography and religious symbolism, and moreover its form has remained largely unchanged throughout the ages. For Perennial Philosophy, it is not

the symbol that is worshipped but what it symbolizes. This is to emphasize the danger of worshipping the symbol itself or its aesthetic surfaces. The symbol is but itself an avatar of the whole which is greater than itself. Another analogy would be to read Dante's *Divine Comedy*, enjoying its use of prose and verse and not see its deeper meaning, "the teaching behind the strange verses." In our argument concerning the perennial appeal of Greek classical and neo-classical architecture one might make the argument that these are reflections of the Platonic Forms, Harmony, Beauty and so on. One might liken Greek classicism to the iconography of a lost religion, where the deeper meanings have been obscured but the aesthetic appeal continues unabated, because it still possesses the forms which open to those deeper meanings. "The appeal of beauty is not to the senses, but *through* the senses, to the Intellect."

Thus far we have sought to defend Hegel's End of Art theory on the grounds of the perennial appeal of Greek architectural classicism and neo-classicism in its various forms as a physical form of symbolism that appeals to the Spirit of man due to its reflection of meta-physical archetypes. One of the reasons the failure of modern man to appreciate the metaphysical aspects of Greek architectural classicism is perhaps because its metaphysical foundations are considered to be outdated. Most people are likely to consider the platonic Ideas or Forms as mere superstition. The following passage from Coomaraswamy perhaps best illustrates the point of how man has moved away from perceiving the metaphysical to perceiving that of the functionally physical:

"To have seen in his artifacts nothing but the things themselves, and in the myth a mere anecdote would have been a mortal sin, for this would have been the same as to see in oneself nothing but the "reasoning and mortal animal," to recognize only "this man," and never the "form of humanity." It is just insofar as we do now see only the things as they are in themselves, and only ourselves as we are in ourselves, that we have killed the metaphysical man

and shut ourselves up in the dismal cave of functional and economic determinism.”

Yet despite this lack of feeling for the metaphysical we would argue that light, so to speak still manages to shine through just like a window painted over, a few shades of light manage to peak through the darkness. We have sought to defend Hegel’s End of Art Theory on the grounds of Greek Classical Architecture and neo-classicism’s continuing appeal using the Perennial Philosophy. We have not sought to defend it on the grounds of theology or a specific religious spirituality which Hegel himself alludes to. Although we have alluded to cultural difference, we have not given this as a reason for the lack of understanding on the part of modern man. We have instead sought to argue that modern man still possesses a psyche receptive to the same spiritual experience that his ancestors had, yet it has been heavily obscured. Yet through this great span of history the symmetrical majesty of Greek architectural classicism still continues to touch us in some way.

ENDNOTES

¹<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/greek-art/beginners-guide-greece/a/greek-architectural-orders>

² A. Lawrence, revised by R.A Tomlinson, *Greek Architecture*, (New Haven & London: Fifth Edition, Yale University Press, 1996), 97.

³ Ibid., 101.

⁴<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/greek-art/beginners-guide-greece/a/greek-architectural-orders>.

⁵ David James, *Art, Myth and Society in Hegel’s Aesthetics*, (London & New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 4.

⁶ Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge, New York & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 102.

⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁸ Michael Inwood, edited by B. Gaut & D. McIver Lopes, *Hegel, Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, (London & New York: third edition Routledge 2013), 59.

⁹ Ibid., 59.

¹⁰ Ibid., 59.

11. Ibid., 61.
12. Plato, edited by John. M. Cooper, *Complete Works*, (Indianapolis: Hackett 1997) Republic 401 c-d (All quotations from Plato's works that are cited above are taken from this volume.)
13. Ibid., 911. *Hippias Major* 294 b.
14. Ibid., 915., 298 e.
15. Ibid., 493. *Symposium*, 211 a.
16. <https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/eastpediment.pdf> (accessed 9th March 2017)
17. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Essential Ananda Coomaraswamy*, edited by R. Coomaraswamy, (Indiana World Wisdom, 2004), 100.
18. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a. xxxix. 8 trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Rev. Daniel J Sullivan Great Books of the Western World vols. 19-20. (Chicago, Illinois: Encyclopaedia Britannica 1925), 2a-2ae. cxlv. 2.
19. Ibid., 2a-2ae. clxxx. 2, ad 3.
20. Ibid., 2a-2ae. clxxx. 2, ad 3.
21. Samuel B. Sotillos, editor, *Psychology and the Perennial Philosophy: Studies in Comparative Religion* (Indiana World Wisdom, 2013), 158.
22. Ibid., 25.
23. Ibid., 25.
24. Ibid., 27.
25. Coomaraswamy., 104.
26. Ibid., 104.
27. Ibid., 106.
28. Ibid., 130.

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