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5 Etruscan Art or Art of the Etruscans?

Abstract: It is agreed that Etruscan art may be associated with the whole range of figural pieces produced in the historic region usually referred to as Etruria, and with a period extending from the Early Iron Age to the Middle Hellenistic (ninth–second centuries BCE). This definition, though seemingly obvious, presents us with a historical and ethnic context which is both challenging and compelling.

As Greek art belongs to the Greeks and is an expression of what it is considered Greek, so must Etruscan art belong to the Etruscans and reveal specific elements of their cultural identity. We may question, however, whether it is really justified to claim to be able to identify a uniform and consistent Greek identity among the fragmented Greek city-states (for as long as they maintained their independence and autonomy) or, later, within the variegated context of the Mediterranean koine of the Hellenistic era. As a consequence, and much more seriously, we must face the problem of recognizing a *single* Etruscan identity reflected by manifestations of art, which, although local, developed under the influence of concepts that emerged largely from ethnically Greek—and not Etruscan—contexts. We may say, then, that the paradigm for Etruscan art was in fact derived from a different source, namely Greek art (though of questionable homogeneity), and that this source paradoxically became the determining criterion of an Etruscan identity, always defined in the negative, *ie.* as non-Greek.

We mean that, if Etruscan art may be said to rely on Greek sources, its alleged original elements must be sought on those occasions when this dependence on the Greeks appears to have become somewhat looser or to have lessened.

Keywords: antiquity, renaissance, iconology, Etruscan art's history

Introduction

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1 In antiquity

This critical dilemma is evident in the reflections of at least two ancient writers who, united by an idea of ethnicity which is far less problematic than our own, identified Etruscan art as possessing the features of an exemplary non-Greek artistic language.

Strabo (17.1.28) compared the bas-reliefs which adorn the "wings" of Egyptian temples with those of archaic Greek and Etruscan art, a suggestion that was to enjoy an extremely long life. Some seventeen centuries later, Johann Winckelmann and Christian Heyne likewise identified a primitive and "Egyptianizing" phase of Etruscan art.[1]

According to the ancients, just what this so-called "Egyptian" Etruscan art was is unclear, but a well-known passage in Quintilian (*Inst*. 12.10.7–9) may be of assistance. It narrates a sort of evolutionary sequence of Greek bronze sculpture, and places the works of Callon and Hegesias next to Etruscan pieces (*Tuscanicis proxima*) on the basis of a chronological-stylistic parameter related to the hardness of their modeling or shape. The rigidity of modeling to which Quintilian refers would have gradually softened, from the most archaic sculptures (and therefore the more "Tuscan") in the works of the masters of Aegina, up to the time of Calamis and Myron. The use of this hard approach seems to have lessened with the *diligentia* and the *decor* (of Polyclitus), and to have been finally abandoned in the works of Lysippus and Praxiteles. Therefore, the ideal of softness in sculpture should be assumed to be the same as naturalness—that is, naturalism (Lysippus's *veritas*); and the ideal of hardness, which seemed to be so characteristically Etruscan (or Egyptian), to be nothing but a lack of naturalism. When one finds in the same essay (12.10.1) the possible suggestion of a comparison that claimed some similarity between Tuscan sculpture and Asian eloquence, and so between Greek sculpture and Attic eloquence (*ut Graecis Tuscanicae statuae, ut Asianus eloquens Attico*), one would understand that the lack of naturalism of Etruscan art was caused not only by its morphological delay, but also by an overload of exaggerated, unnatural schemata and postures.

We have stressed these passages of ancient literature because they contain more than one of the slogans that extend through all of the (modern) history of Etruscan art

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1 On this point see Cristofani 1978, 11–12; 1983b, 165. Also Harari 2012a, 21, 26–27.

criticism: the idea of the persistently exotic and archaic connotations and an almost rhetorical emphasis on an artistic language that seemed to belong more to the original figural world of the eastern Mediterranean than to the later spread of the great Greek naturalism.

2 In modernity

2.1 From Renaissance to Enlightenment

As early as the sixteenth century, the penetrating stylistic comments made by Giorgio Vasari on the impressive bronze known as the Chimaera (unearthed in November 1553 during work on the fortifications of Arezzo)[2] highlighted the contradictory "Etruscan manner" of this piece. The stylistic character of Etruscan sculpture—indicated by the "clumsiness" of the Chimaera's mane—was recognized on the basis of a somewhat vague notion of Greek art, which Vasari was able to gather from his knowledge of Roman sculpture.

We must, therefore, seek the critical fate of Etruscan art—although considered to be indigenous, Tuscan and thus Italian—between the poles of Egypt and Greece. In the fundamental theoretical debates of the eighteenth century, the studies of Winckelmann and Heyne and the work of the Count of Caylus and the Abbot Luigi Lanzi began to understand the formative history of the Etruscan artistic language in terms of its participation in a process of Hellenization, whereby it was gradually freed from those primitive elements—whether Egyptian or Pelasgian or Egyptian and Pelasgian—from which it had in part originated.[3] It is important to note that by this understanding, it is simply not possible to identify any unmistakably Etruscan elements within the works of the more advanced—and so, more fully Hellenized—stages. As a consequence, such ethnic, non-Greek elements were sought in intermediate stylistic periods. Winckelmann's so-called "second style" refers to the "strained and violent" figures—colored, we might say, by an Asian eloquence—that were taken as an indication of a collective psychology characterized by a sense of jealously guarded freedom and violent melancholy, personality traits which can be applied to the Tuscan people of the Middle Ages and beyond.[4]

The recognizably "Etruscan" elements of Etruscan art were therefore based on the extent to which they differed from Greek art. The latter abounds in attractive and

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2 Most recently, Maggiani 2009; Iozzo et al. 2009. On Vasari's opinion see Pallottino 1977; Cristofani 1978, 6–8; Harari 2012a, 22–24.
3 Cristofani 1978, 10–14; Cristofani 1983, 142–81; also Harari 2012a, 26–28.
4 Harari 1988.

authoritative models, for just this reason having been called "classical;" but a truly "classical" supreme model is eminently inimitable. In such a perspective, the unavoidable failure of Etruscan art had to be ascribed to a hereditary predisposition and temperament. Here we may notice a significant deviation from the ideology of the Enlightenment. The early romantic concept of a "spirit of the people" was even being applied to the visual arts.

2.2 Nineteenth century

Etruscan studies in the nineteenth century, which had developed alongside advances in archaeology and epigraphy as sciences with an increasingly solid methodological foundation, yielded useful corpora of figural monuments, including engraved mirrors and urns with reliefs. But they addressed the theme of the difference between Greek and Etruscan art in nothing more than taxonomic terms (this was particularly the case with discussions of decorated pottery).[5] In comparison with the intense debate of Winckelmann's time, scholars did not take significant steps toward a general historical interpretation of Etruscan art until the end of the century, when the synthesis by Jules Martha—despite the promising title of *L'art étrusque*—was nothing more than a comprehensive, purely antiquarian survey.[6]

2.3 Early twentieth century

The most critical period for debate on Etruscan art is in fact the twentieth century, with a particularly lively phase, at least in Italy, from the 1920s to the 1940s. The reasons for this chronological and cultural framework are clear. From a methodological perspective, we may refer to the work of the anti-Winckelmann group that had developed among art historians at the University of Vienna, which led to the abandonment of Hellenophile prejudices and to the historical contextualization of other possible figural options (especially those of Roman art).[7] On the other hand, from an ideological-political perspective, the completion of the process of the political unification of the Italian State led some of the major scholars of antiquity to reassess the evidence of the several pre-Roman archaeological cultures of Italy and, most notably, the Etruscan.[8] Lastly, we should also take into consideration anti-classical artistic

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5 Cristofani 1978, 14–17; Harari 2012a, 28–32.
6 Martha 1889.
7 See Sciolla 1993.
8 Harari 2012b.

tastes,[9] which were stimulated within the intellectual milieu of the early twentieth century by the displays of unexpected masterpieces, such as the terra-cotta statues of the temple of Portonaccio at the Museum of Villa Giulia.

In Italy, this debate, which precedes the tragic cut-off point of World War II, developed almost entirely on the assumption that particular ethnicities are connected to artistic productions, and it involved a close comparison of the figural world typical of the Etruscans with that of other ancient Mediterranean cultures. This approach claimed that Etruscan artistic concepts survived and extended into the Italian Middle Ages and the Renaissance (such claims were made to argue for the originality of such works and to grant them a position within the nation's cultural history). The attempt to maintain this position was carried out with critical tools and terminology that were much closer to Winckelmann's than to Alois Riegl's, and that were dangerously exposed to the Romano-centric propaganda of the fascist regime. In fact, they produced an irreversible crisis within the interpretative model of ethnicity, a model consumed by internal contradictions.[10] The extent of this crisis can be clearly read in the studies of Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, who had a firsthand knowledge of German bibliography and found in the philosophy of Benedetto Croce a theoretical approach appropriate for the full reestablishment of a historical view of ancient art. The art of the Etruscans (and of other ethnic groups in pre-Roman Italy) was described in his studies, through the metaphor of language, as being something of a lowly "dialect" in contrast with the high and "literary" paradigm of Greek art.[11]

2.4 Post-World War II

Immediately after the war, Italy saw a substantial slowdown—almost a collapse—of this debate, with Bianchi Bandinelli himself even turning to other issues: the representation of Greek figural art as an art of reality; and regarding the field of Roman art, the development of a characteristically dialectical model of interpretation.[12] In Germany, on the other hand, Guido von Kaschnitz-Weinberg identified what he presumed to be a structural and unchanging aspect of Etruscan (and Italian) art, a persistently "stereometric" organization of the form; so he relocated the connotation of ethnicity to within the artwork itself, a process that led the Viennese *Kunstwollen* ("taste") to become an irrational metaphysical category.[13]

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9 Harari 1993; 2000a; 2000b.
10 Harari 1993. See also Cristofani 1978, 18–20.
11 Bianchi Bandinelli and Giuliano 1973, 343–52. See Harari 2012a, 34.
12 Harari 1992.
13 Cristofani 1978, 18–19.

As a result, the general awareness that it was impossible to speak of an "Etruscan" art (understood as a product and expression of an ethnic culture) gradually surfaced. In place of "Etruscan art," an alternative model was developed in which the art *of the Etruscans* (that is, *for the Etruscans*), although produced in Etruria for the Etruscan market, appeared to be quite largely based on an alien, imported figural repertory. So Massimo Pallottino introduced and developed new ways of understanding the relationship—the dualism—between an artistic center and its periphery, and argued that the periphery, too, could be characterized by activity and creativity, both of which could be identified in the selection criteria used and in the timing of the adoption and application of Greek historical styles.[14] The idea of an Etruscan civilization, which inspired a memorable and multifaceted series of exhibitions in 1985,[15] still fit into the varied social context of the Greek city-state and could be used to explain (sometimes using the anthropological model of colonial "acculturation") the relationship between and application of external contributions and local modifications.

It is no coincidence that two of the most influential art monographs of the 1970s and 1980s were entitled *The Art of the Etruscans* instead of *Etruscan Art*.[16] This signified a conscious detachment from any illusory ideas of ethnicity and the use of a strategic approach to the analysis of the economic and social structures (*Production and consumption* is the eloquent subtitle used by Mauro Cristofani).

This approach has led research to focus on content rather than form. If there is no "Etruscan" style as such, but only a range of Greek styles (and before these, Levantine styles) that were introduced over time in Etruria and from which Etruscans extracted the forms of their artistic language, it is the themes within Etruscan art that become the true object of the critics. An exegesis of such topics has become the high point of any analysis. These forms of visual communication are not Etruscan, in this sense, because of their morphology, but on account of what it is that they represent, in that the *how* (i.e., the style, the way they look) is modeled on the *what* (i.e., the subject, the content of the images).

This, I believe, may justify the turning point that originated in Erwin Panofsky's iconology, one of the most innovative critical trends of the last thirty years. It may help us to understand why Françoise-Hélène Massa Pairault identified this methodology as the best way to coherently develop the teachings of Bianchi Bandinelli.[17] Given the scarcity (or absence) of literary sources and the lack of a sufficiently instructive context, the interpretation of iconographic codes must be pursued through a cir-

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14 Harari 2000a, 30–31; 2012a, 35.
15 In Arezzo, Chiusi, Cortona, Florence, etc.; one may name, among a number of catalogues, Colonna 1985 and Cristofani 1985. On Etruscan exhibitions in the second half of the twentieth century, see Harari 2012a.
16 Cristofani 1978; Torelli 1985.
17 Massa-Pairault 1985, xiii–xvii; 1992, 7–14.

cumstantial reconstruction of the representational programs, and it is within such schemas that it may be possible for us to recognize the specific contribution (which is to some extent a cultural identifier) of the Etruscan "producers" and "consumers" of art.

An alternative form of criticism, built on the seemingly more traditional base of morphological analysis and on the history of styles, is exemplified by the (posthumous) essay of Otto Brendel,[18] a figure who has, with a few prominent exceptions, been unjustly marginalized within the Italian debate. Brendel does not doubt that it is possible to identify an Etruscan art that was organic, and that appeared to him to be the only Western equivalent of the Greek classical (thus virtually international) experience. As a consequence, he made use of the same Greek sequence of art styles (from the Geometric to the Hellenistic) to classify Etruscan art, arguing that such an approach would allow for the systematic identification of the ways in which Etruscan productions differed from the Greek norm.

In my opinion, a stylistic criticism based on Brendel can very profitably accompany and complement the interpretation (and decryption) of figural programs. Let us assume that there was a certain amount of continuity and group cohesion among the purchasers of art. In the Etruscan city-state, these consumers were for centuries a structured and aristocratic elite, and, as a consequence, the figures and monuments that were designed for commemorative purposes—both in life and above all in death—were almost always of a private and not a civic character. It is possible, then, to detect in the adoption (or rejection) of Greek language the presence of a conscious strategy of communication, which adopted Greek styles according to circumstances and requirements that were strictly related to the contents.

This point may be clarified with some examples. The artisans who served the seventh-century Etruscan *aristoi* adapted the animalistic and mythological iconography expressed in the grandly naturalistic manner of the palatial schools of the Near East. They did this in order to express princeliness in funerary contexts[19] through a direct transfer of key images of power, legitimacy, and divine protection from the Levantine royal citadels to the necropolises of Tyrrhenian Italy. This choice obviously involved an irreversible conversion to a properly figural art.

In a similar sense, in the second half of the sixth century, the sophisticated language of Eastern Greek sculpture and painting—created to lend an appealing grace to the luxury of the tyrannical courts—became the typical Etruscan style that can be found on the antefixes and *acroteria* of temples as much as on the walls of tombs and on high-quality painted pottery. At the end of the century, Thefarie Velianas, the king of Caere, built an architectural complex like a Levantine sanctuary in the sacred

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18 Brendel 1995 (with updated bibliography), originally published in 1978.
19 Principi 2000.

northern precinct of Pyrgi and dedicated it to the Phoenician goddess Ishtar.[20] He commanded his terra-cotta modelers to design the antefixes of the house of the sacred prostitutes by an East-Greek reinterpretation of images, which were at least partly derived from ancient Mesopotamian and Urartian models. Such an iconographic choice constitutes a revival of the Orientalizing culture and does not appear to have been borrowed from the Greeks, but must be regarded as genuinely Etruscan.[21]

Some other examples may be taken from the Hellenistic era, with its engraved mirrors displaying mythological scenes, highly complex painting programs (such as the François Tomb at Vulci), and reliefs of the funerary urns of Volterra, Chiusi, and Perugia. The valuable and pioneering iconological survey of Massa-Pairault[22] was followed by contributions from young scholars.[23] Using not entirely coincidental interpretative criteria, they agree in identifying the presence of an articulated system of schemata that were derived from the Greek narrative repertoire and were reused in these late monuments as adaptable all-purpose additions. Those schemata can be assembled to signify ethical concepts as well as the fundamental values of family life and *concordia civium*.

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20 Colonna 2000.

21 Harari 2014.

22 Massa-Pairault 1985.

23 Domenici 2009; de Angelis 2015.

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