5

THE WHITE BEAUTY IDEAL AS SCIENCE

Historians reckon Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) to be the father of art history, a fitting tribute to his importance to the field. And while Winckelmann did not contribute directly to theories of race, he does play a large role in this story by passing along assumptions on the ideal form and color of human beauty that inspired much eighteenth-and nineteenth-century racial theorizing. The hard, pure, white aesthetic that Winckelmann popularized rested on the authority of the Renaissance, making the issue of whiteness versus color more than simply a question of taste. (See figure 5.1, Anton Raphael Mengs's Johann Joachim Winckelmann.)

Born a poor cobbler's son in Prussia, Winckelmann began his career as a librarian in Dresden, the capital of Saxony in eastern Germany. Converting to Catholicism in order to study ancient art in Rome, he lived with and worked for Alessandro Cardinal Albani, a politically powerful aristocrat and renowned collector of ancient art. At that time the study of art history was centered in Rome, for access to the glories of Egypt and Greece was severely constricted by Ottoman imperial control. Travel was perilous. Moreover, Italy was a sunny, welcoming place, and a great deal of fun, all of which appealed to eighteenth-century German scholars.

Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums (*History of the Art of Antiquity*, 1764–67), Winckelmann's towering, two-volume work, quickly became the international gold standard in the history of ancient art. This book, both a chronology and a canon of ancient art loaded with Winckelmann's knowledge, also seeks to correlate differences of style with history and archaeology. Such ambition laid the basis for scientific art historical investigation and lasted far longer than the details of his dating.

Winckelmann's main thesis held that Greek art, the finest of all time, grew

out of the freedom of its culture. Going further, Winckelmann advanced the notion that modern Westerners should embrace the Greek way of life and freedom, to achieve Greek excellence in art and, presumably, all of culture. Not only did he establish a chronology and a canon of ancient art; he also championed an ideology of ancient Greek beauty based on his own gay male aesthetic.[1] At the heart of this work were beautiful boys, themselves central to making ancient Greeks into timeless, universal paragons of beauty.

The fetishization of ancient Greek beauty is not of Winckelmann's invention. But as the icon of cultural criticism, he quite easily deepened it. For instance, Winckelmann declared the *Apollo Belvedere*, already the most famous statue in Europe, *the* embodiment of perfect human beauty. (See figure 5.2, *Apollo Belvedere*.)

Like many of his contemporaries, Winckelmann had to balance his Eurocentrism against a certain cultural relativity.[2] He admits that various peoples display different body types, thus causing tastes to vary. Clearly, human beings find people like themselves beautiful. Even so, trapped in his German-Italian aesthetic, he pronounces Chinese eyes "an offense against beauty" and Kalmucks' flat noses "an irregularity" equal to deformity.[3] In the final analysis, however, relativity loses out as he adopts the Kantian notion of a single ideal figure for all humanity—"the Greek profile is the first character of great beauty in the formation of the visage." White skin, he adds, makes bodily appearance more beautiful. Throughout the Western world, these rules soon became as carved in stone as the statues that inspired them.

Fig. 5.1.* Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *by Anton Raphael Mengs, shortly after 1755. Oil on canvas, 25 x 19 3/8 in.

Winckelmann's appreciation of whiteness initially sprang from his distance from Greece. In Rome, he had near at hand a great many Roman copies of ancient Greek sculpture translated into an Italian sculptural medium. Unaware that the Greek originals were often dark in color, he did not know—or glossed over the knowledge—that the Greeks routinely painted their sculpture. He saw only Roman versions of beautiful young men carved of hard Italian marble that shone a gleaming white. Thus, Winckelmann elevated Rome's white marble copies of Greek statuary into emblems of beauty and created a new white aesthetic. It would apply not only to works from antiquity, not only to Greek art, but to all of art and all of humanity.[*]

For Winckelmann and his followers, color in sculpture came to mean barbarism, for they assumed that the lofty ancient Greeks were too sophisticated to color their art.

The equation of color with primitivism meant that experts often suppressed and removed color when they found it in the Greeks. Even now, the discovery of ancient Greek polychromy can still make news, for the allure of Winckelmann's hard, white, young bodies lives on.[4*]

Fig. 5.2.* Apollo Belvedere (detail). *Roman marble copy of Greek bronze original.

Long after Winckelmann, students and museums all over the world copied classical art for purposes of education. Copying Greek art perforce employed a more common medium—white plaster—which, following Winckelmann, they purposefully left unpainted. Thus Winckelmann's white aesthetic marched on, trampling the fact that smooth white Italian marble was neither the original medium nor the original color of ancient Greek statuary.[5†]

We owe this knowledge to a Scot, Thomas Bruce, the Earl of Elgin, British ambassador extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to the Ottoman court at Constantinople. Bruce's admiration of Winckelmann's Greeks extended to decorating his new house in Fife, Scotland, with Greek art in order, he said, to elevate the standard of British art. On his way to Constantinople in 1799, he stopped at Athens, then a neglected Ottoman backwater, intending to draw and to take away a few smaller sculptures. But Bruce's desire soon grew into lust for larger pieces, and he started removing sculpture from the Parthenon, Greece's symbol of Athenian democracy.

When local Turkish authorities balked, Bruce appealed to central Ottoman authorities far away in Constantinople. Swayed by his argument that the Parthenon was already prey to vandals, the Ottoman court finally allowed him to pry off and ship huge pieces of the Parthenon's architectural sculpture—metopes, friezes, and pedimental figures—between 1802 and 1806. The cost ultimately exceeded Bruce's pocketbook, forcing him to sell the sculpture to the British government in 1816 for exhibit in the British Museum, where it remains, despite Greek campaigns for its return.

The Parthenon marbles Elgin took to Britain do consist of marble, but a darkly pitted Greek marble rather than the smooth, snowy white variety more common in Italy. Here lay an aesthetic problem: whiteness versus color. The alarming history of European marble "cleaning" includes a chapter on this statuary describing a drive to make ancient Greek art white that nearly destroyed the art itself. In the 1930s workers in the British Museum were directed to remove the dark patina with metal tools on the mistaken assumption that their proper color should be white. Such a "cleaning" seriously damaged the Parthenon marbles, prompting an inquiry by the museum's standing committee that halted the work.[6] Clearly, Winckelmann's obsession with whiteness had a large and lingering downside.

WINCKELMANN WAS murdered in Trieste in 1768 under questionable circumstances on his way back to Dresden from Rome. His most recent

biographer contends that the murder occurred in the course of a robbery that Winckelmann was resisting, but other authorities suspect that Winckelmann, an older gay man with a taste for adventure, ran afoul of rough trade.[7]

When Winckelmann died, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Germany's towering intellectual and the quintessence of German romanticism, was twenty-one years old. Before Goethe, German aristocrats had studied the ancient Greek language as one facet of a classical education. But Greek culture overall lacked mythic status, and after centuries of Ottoman rule, modern Greeks were considered little more than Turks. Sharing Winckelmann's love of ancient Greek beauty, Goethe eventually added to it an adoration of Greek intellectual superiority in what an English scholar termed the "Tyranny of Greece over Germany."[8*] Goethe's dear friend Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805) wrote several poems on Greek themes, notably *Die Götter Griechenlandes* (*The Gods of the Greeks*, 1788), and Goethe published *Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert* (*Winckelmann and His Century*, 1805). Over time, Goethe's prestige made ancient Greek intellectual superiority so dominant that German intellectuals began to claim ancient Greek bodies and culture as their true ancestors.

Goethe first encountered Winckelmann's work as a student in Leipzig in the mid-1760s. During his 1786–88 visit to Italy, Goethe employed Winckelmann's letters and books as guides, just as Ralph Waldo Emerson would rely on Goethe's *Italienische Reise* (*Italian Travels*, 1817) half a century later. Also like Winckelmann, Goethe never actually went to Greece; in the same way, Emerson adored Goethe and the Saxons without ever setting foot on German soil.

In his own work, Goethe repeatedly addressed Greek themes, such as those in *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1787) and in the unfinished *Achilleis*, abandoned in 1800. *Faust* (1808, 1832), his masterpiece, includes an implausible section featuring Helen of Troy, herself an embodiment of perfect human beauty. In *Faust*'s second part, Helen takes refuge from an angry Menelaus in Germany. There she meets Faust, who seduces her, and they have a son, Euphorion, an allegorical Lord Byron. The most famous of the English Romantics and a martyr to the Greek war for independence, Byron synthesized Nordic and Greek ideals. Like Lord Byron, Euphorion must die. Helen follows Euphorion back to the underworld, and Faust returns to Germany.[*] Here we see in Goethe how the mythologies of Germany and ancient Greece tightly intertwine and how, through Goethe, Winckelmann's aesthetic dominated nineteenth-century German thought.

IN THIS Grecomanic epidemic the anthropologists of Europe played a big role. Anthropological charts proliferated during the eighteenth century, many featuring images of whiteness borrowed from fine art. Two of the best-known illustrators—Petrus Camper (1722–89) of the Netherlands and Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801) of Switzerland—intended their elaborately illustrated books for artists as well as for natural scientists.

Camper's solid academic background in anatomy and art at the University of Leiden made him a formidable figure in both worlds. Over time he taught at the Universities of Franeker, Amsterdam, and Groningen and traveled widely to demonstrate the theoretical soundness of his facial angle, an angle between two lines drawn on a face. One line ran vertically from the forehead to the teeth; the other line went horizontally across the face through the opening of each ear. The result was a quantification of the relationship between the projection of the forehead, mouth, and chin, a relationship that was visual rather than functional.[*] The popularity of so simple and beautifully illustrated a method of human classification took Camper quite a long way. Welcomed in England, he was made a fellow of the Royal Society.

Camper's most famous chart (likely drawn in the 1770s but not published until 1792, after his death) delivers sharply conflicting messages in a deeply confusing manner.[†] (See figure 5.3, Petrus Camper's chart of contrasted faces.) Apparently comparing faces and skulls as viewed straight on with lines drawn through several points on each skull and face, the chart is intended to depict the "facial angles" of an orangutan (chimpanzee), at top left, a Negro, a Kalmuck, over to a European, and *Apollo Belvedere,* in that order. One source of confusion lies in the use of frontal views to illustrate measurements reckoned in the profile. The facial angles shown are 58 degrees for the orangutan/chimpanzee, whose mouth projects beyond his forehead; 70 degrees for both the Negro and the Kalmuck, whose faces are more vertical; 80 degrees for the European; and 100 degrees for the Greek god. Camper's order introduces a further, crucial ambiguity.

As an advocate of human equality, Camper held all along that this chart demonstrates the near parity of the human races. The numbers associated with the chart—58, 70, 80, and 100—do, in fact, reveal Negro and Kalmuck facial angles closer to the European than to the orangutan/chimpanzee and less separate from the European than the European is from the Greek god. This, Camper maintained, was his message, whose fundamental meaning lay in his numbers. He insisted on the unity of mankind, even going so far as to suggest that Adam and Eve might well have been black, because no one skin color was

superior to the others. Brotherhood, however, was not the meaning the chart conveyed to others.

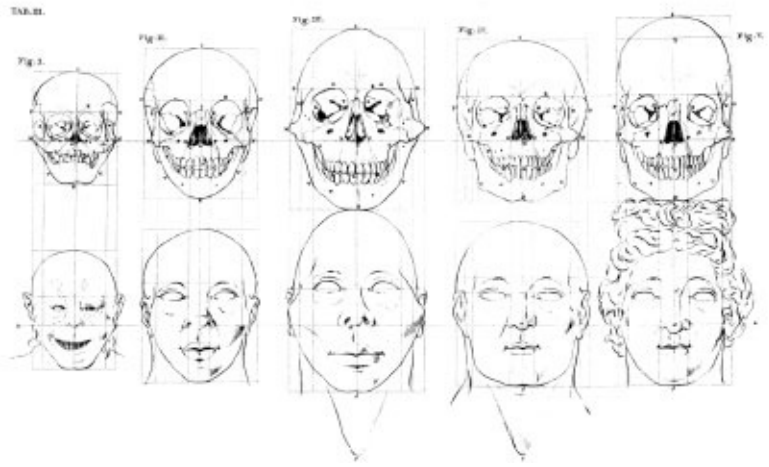

Fig. 5.3. Petrus Camper's chart of contrasted faces, 1770s.

A far different message emerges from Camper's chart's visual layout, one that completely undercut his egalitarian beliefs. Circulating at the height of the Atlantic slave trade in the late eighteenth century, his image places the Negro next to the orangutan/chimpanzee and the European next to the *Apollo Belvedere*. Position, not relative numbers, came across most clearly. The apparent pairing in this visual architecture soon embodied anthropological truth among laymen.

European scholars, meanwhile, were asking harder questions.[*] In France and Germany, Camper faced mounting criticism, and in the long run his paltry record of publication hindered his scholarly reputation. While he produced hundreds of papers and drawings, he published no one dominant book, and the "facial angle" lost credibility in academic science. By the mid-nineteenth century, methodical measurers of skulls had denounced Camper's simplistic reliance on a single head measurement. But even as Camper lost scholarly standing in continental Europe, scientific racists in Britain and the United States such as Robert Knox, J. C. Nott, and G. R. Gliddon went on reproducing his images as irrefutable proof of a white supremacy that Camper himself had never embraced. Johann Kaspar Lavater of Switzerland traveled a somewhat parallel trajectory.

AS A PROTESTANT clergyman and poet in Zurich, Lavater firmly believed that

God had decreed one's outer appearance, especially the face, to reflect one's inner state. His illustrated books *Von der Physiognomik* (*On Physiognomy*, 1772) and *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntis und Menschenliebe* (*Essays on Physiognomy Designed to Promote the Knowledge and Love of Mankind*, 1775–78) were immediately translated and widely circulated. Familiar among scholars and laymen alike, these works lavishly demonstrate the supposed correlation between personal beauty and human virtue, between outer looks and inner soul—an attractive and simpleminded notion.

Lavater amplified Winckelmann's views on the ancient Greeks, dedicating sections of his masterwork, *On Physiognomy*, to "the Ideal Beauty of the Ancients." He also repeated the commonplace that modern Greeks differed fundamentally from the ancients: "The Grecian race was then [in antiquity] more beautiful than we are; they were better than us—and the present generation [of Greeks] is vilely degraded!"[9] Although Lavater, like Camper, saw Greek beauty as typically European, he disagreed with Camper over the ideal facial angle, and this was an important feature in their minds. The forehead of Lavater's Apollo sloped backwards rather than rising vertically. Of course, none of these (to us) trivial disagreements undermined the central concept of white beauty's embodiment in the same Greek god.

Opinions swept back and forth across Europe on these racial matters. At first Lavater (like Camper) impressed practically everyone, including the young Goethe, with his vivid illustrations, and his books became best sellers. But Goethe and other supporters soon fell away as Lavater faced critics led by Blumenbach's friend, the Göttingen intellectual Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–99), known then for his witty epigrams (none understandable in English and now remembered mainly in Germany). Lichtenberg had excellent reasons for mistrust. According to Lavater's theories, he—being humpbacked and uncommonly ugly in the popular view—would thereby lack inner worth: there was nothing Grecian about Lichtenberg. Camper, too, viewed Lavater's work skeptically, even though the two men shared the same conceptual weaknesses.

Scholars also ultimately rejected Lavater's views as too simplistic, yet his conceits—that the skull and face, in particular, reveal racial worth and that the head deserves careful measurement—lingered on among natural scientists.[10] Lavater, for his part, went much further, publishing books filled with portraits of the illustrious and the lowly in order to document what he deemed the close relationship between head shape and character. Both Camper and Lavater correlated outer appearance with inner worth through the instinct of

"physiognomonical sensation," and both used images of Greek gods to stand for the ideal white person; others they took from people off the street. Their theories and images, a huge extension of the association of whiteness with beauty, soon reverberated through the work of authors writing in English, as Camper's and Lavater's images moved across the English Channel through the learned lectures and publications of John Hunter and Charles White.[11]

DR. JOHN HUNTER (1728–93), an overbearing, arrogant, unpolished Scot, had served as a surgeon in the British army during the Seven Years'/French and Indian War in North America. Returning to London in 1763, and now possessed of much practical knowledge, he gained high patronage positions (surgeon extraordinary to the king, surgeon general of the army, inspector of army hospitals) through advantageous political connections in prosperous Hanoverian London. By the mid-1780s Hunter also enjoyed the recognition conferred by membership in several learned societies.[*]

Scholarly communication between Europe and England flourished. Hunter knew Camper's work and, like Camper, had analyzed a series of human and animal skulls to illustrate gradations of the vertical profile, an exercise rather similar to Camper's work on the facial angle. Hunter compared various human skulls (*the* European, *the* Asian, *the* American, *the* African) to the skulls of an ape, a dog, and an alligator. And although he specifically denied any hierarchical intent, Hunter's imagery inspired the obstetrician Charles White (1728–1813) to think about race as physical appearance.

Like Hunter, White had made his reputation as an innovative surgeon. Specializing in obstetrics, he was known as a "man midwife" and initially practiced alongside his physician father.[†] As eighteenth-century industrial Manchester grew in wealth and power, White's social and intellectual reputation soared. Long interested in natural history, he increased his study of the links between various kinds of humans and animals in the 1790s. One of White's illustrated 1795 lectures to the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester (of which he was a founding member) appeared in print in 1799 as *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man, and in Different Animals and Vegetables; and from the Former to the Latter*.[‡] (See figure 5.4, Charles White's chart.)

Following Camper, White arranges his human heads (skulls and faces in profile) hierarchally, left to right, and names them by race, status, and geography. The "Negro," whose mouth juts far out in front of the rest of his face, sits next to the ape. On the other side of the Negro are, in ascending order, the

“American Savage,” the “Asiatic,” and three “Europeans,” one the model of a “Roman” painter. At the far right, next to the “Roman” painter’s model sits the “Grecian Antique,” whose nose and forehead hang far over his mouth. White’s text crucially departs from Camper’s, however, by questioning the descent of all people from a single Adam-and-Eve pair. Occasionally employing the word “specie” rather than “race,” White surmises that different colored humans grew from separate acts of divine creation. This view, soon known as polygenesis, traced humanity to more than the one origin of Genesis. Polygenesis went on to flourish in the mid-nineteenth century among racists of the American school of anthropology. While the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 much reduced the allure of creationism of all kinds, Darwinism did not kill off polygenetic thinking entirely.

White correlated economic development with physical attractiveness, joining the lengthening lineage of those who considered the leisured white European not only the most advanced segment of humanity but also “the most beautiful of the human race.” To close his *Account of the Regular Gradation in Man*, White poses a series of rhetorical questions focused on two persistent themes of racial discourse: intelligence and beauty.

White asks, “Where shall we find, unless in the European, that nobly arched head, containing such a quantity of brain…?” The mention of brain leads to a physiognomy of intelligence that recalls Camper’s facial angle; White continues, “Where the perpendicular face, the prominent nose, and round projecting chin?” He ends with a soft-porn love note to white feminine beauty that incorporates the fondness for the blush found in many a hymn to whiteness. White and Thomas Jefferson shared with many others this enthusiasm for the virtuous pallor of privileged women.[*] White asks, “In what other quarter of the globe shall we find the blush that overspreads the soft features of the beautiful women of Europe, that emblem of modesty, of delicate feelings, and of sense? Where that nice expression of the amiable and softer passions in the countenance; and that general elegance of features and complexion? Where, except on the bosom of the European woman, two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipt with vermillion?”[12]

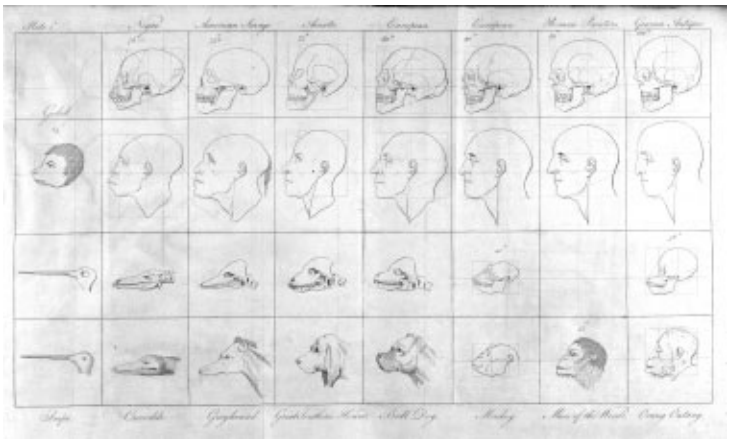

Fig. 5.4. Charles White's human chart, 1799, in Charles White,* An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man, and in Different Animals and Vegetables; and from the Former to the Latter *(1799).

IN GUSHING prose or in drier scientific utterance, beauty early rivaled measurement as a salient racial trait. While scholars seldom approached White's exuberance of language, others of much greater influence got the science of race barreling along, with beauty steadily rising as a meaningful scientific category.

THE HISTORY OF WHITE PEOPLE

NELL IRVIN PAINTER

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
NEW YORK LONDON

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

Manufacturing by RR Donnelley, Harrisonburg
Book design by Helene Berinsky
Production manager: Devon Zahn

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Painter, Nell Irvin.
The history of White people / Nell Irvin Painter.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-393-04934-3 (hardcover)
1. Whites—Race identity—United States.
2. Whites—United States—History.
3. United States—Race relations. I. Title.
E184.A1P29 2010
305.800973—dc22
2009034515

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd.
Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0