

CIVILISATIONS

HOW DO WE LOOK?

MARY
BEARD

THE EYE OF FAITH

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INTRODUCTION: CIVILISATIONS AND BARBARITIES

‘Civilisation’ has always been contested, argued over and impossible to pin down. In 1969 Kenneth Clark opened his BBC series *Civilisation* by reflecting on the concept itself: ‘What is civilisation?’ he asked. ‘I don’t know. I can’t define it in abstract terms – yet. But I think I can recognise it when I see it.’ This betrayed a certain lofty self-confidence in his own cultural judgement; but Clark was also acknowledging the ragged and shifting edges of the category.

This book is written in the conviction that what we *see* is as important to our understanding of civilisation as what we read or hear. It celebrates a dazzling array of human creativity over thousands of years and across thousands of miles, from ancient Greece to ancient China, from sculpted human heads in prehistoric Mexico to a twenty-first century mosque on the outskirts of Istanbul. But it also prods at some of our certainties about how art works and how it should be explained. For it is not only about the men and women who – with their paints and pencils, their clays and

chisels – created the images that fill our world, from cheap trinkets to ‘priceless masterpieces’. It is even more about the generations of humankind who have used, interpreted, argued over and given meaning to those images. One of the most influential art historians of the twentieth century, E. H. Gombrich, once wrote, ‘There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists.’ I am putting the viewers of art back into the frame. Mine is not a ‘Great Man’ view of art history, with all its usual heroes and geniuses.

I concentrate on two of the most intriguing and contested themes in human artistic culture. Part One highlights the art of the body, focusing on some very early depictions of men and women around the world, asking what they were for and how they were seen – whether the colossal images of a pharaoh from ancient Egypt or the terracotta warriors buried with the first emperor of China. Part Two turns to images of God and gods. It takes a wider time range, reflecting on how all religions, ancient and modern, have faced irreconcilable problems in trying to picture the divine. It is not just some particular religions, such as Judaism or Islam, that have worried about such visual images. All religions throughout history have been concerned about – and have sometimes fought over – what it means to represent God, and they have found elegant, intriguing and awkward ways to confront that dilemma.

The violent destruction of images is one end of an artistic spectrum that has 'idolatry' at the other.

Part of my project is to expose the very long history of *how we look*. All over the world ancient art, its debates and its controversies still matter. In the West, the art of classical Greece and Rome in particular – and the different engagement people have had with that tradition, over many centuries – still has an enormous impact on modern viewers, even if we do not always recognise it. Western assumptions about what a 'naturalistic' representation of the human body *is* date back to a particular artistic revolution in Greece around the turn of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. And many of our ways of talking about art continue the conversations of the classical world. The modern idea that the female nude implies the existence of a predatory male gaze was not first thought up, as is often imagined, in the feminism of the 1960s. As Part One will explain, what is believed to be the very first life-sized statue of a female nude in classical Greece – a fourth-century BCE image of the goddess Aphrodite – provoked exactly the same kind of debate. And some of the earliest intellectuals that are known to us argued fiercely about the rights and wrongs of portraying gods in human form. One sixth-century BCE Greek philosopher sharply observed that if horses and cattle could paint and sculpt, they would

represent the gods just like themselves – as horses and cattle.

Clark's opening question – '*What is civilisation?*' – is one of my own main questions too. The two parts of this book are based on two programmes I wrote for the new BBC series of *Civilisations*, first broadcast in 2018. This was an attempt not to 're-make' Clark's original version, but to take a fresh look at its themes with a much wider frame of reference, moving outside Europe (Clark once or twice strayed across the Atlantic, but that was all), and back into prehistory. That is what the plural in the new title indicates.

I am even more concerned than Clark with the discontents and debates around the idea of civilisation, and with how that rather fragile concept is justified and defended. One of its most powerful weapons has always been 'barbarity': '*we*' know that '*we*' are civilised by contrasting ourselves with those we deem to be uncivilised, with those who do not – or cannot be trusted to – share our values. Civilisation is a process of exclusion as well as inclusion. The boundary between '*us*' and '*them*' may be an internal one (for much of world history the idea of a 'civilised woman' has been a contradiction in terms), or an external one, as the word 'barbarian' suggests; it was originally a derogatory and ethnocentric ancient Greek term for foreigners you could not understand, because they spoke in an incomprehensible babble: 'bar-bar-bar ...' The

inconvenient truth, of course, is that so-called ‘barbarians’ may be no more than those with a different view from ourselves of what it is to be civilised, and of what matters in human culture. In the end, one person’s barbarity is another person’s civilisation.

Wherever possible I try to see things from the other side of the dividing line, and to read civilisation ‘against the grain’. I shall be looking at some images from the distant past with the same suspicious eyes that we usually keep for those in the modern world. It is important to remember that plenty of ancient Egyptian viewers, or ancient Romans, may have been just as cynical about the colossal statues of their rulers as we now are about the parade of images of modern autocrats. And I shall be looking at some of those on the losing, as well as the winning, sides in the historic conflicts over images, and over what should and should not be represented, or how. Those who destroy statues and paintings – whether in the name of religion or not – are regularly seen in the West as some of history’s worst barbarian thugs, and we lament the works of art that, thanks to these ‘iconoclasts’, we have lost. But, as we shall see, they have their own story to tell too, even their own artfulness.

But let’s begin in Mexico, with the very earliest image in the book ...

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PROLOGUE: HEADS AND BODIES

There are many places where you can come face-to-face with the ancient world, but there are few as surprising as a corner of the Mexican jungle, which is home to a colossal stone head about 3,000 years old. Almost disconcertingly vast, more than seven-feet tall (with eyeballs nearly a foot across) and weighing in at almost twenty tons, it was made by the Olmec, the earliest known civilisation in central America. There is rather more detail to it than appears at first sight. Between his lips (and it almost certainly is a *he*), you can just about glimpse his teeth; his irises are traced out on his eyes; he has a furled, slightly frumpy brow – and on top there sits an elaborate, patterned helmet. It is hard not to feel just a little bit moved by the close encounter with an image of a person from the distant past. Despite that distance in time, and despite the fact that he is, after all, just

1. *Eyeball to eyeball. Close up, this ancient Olmec head (Fig. 2) betrays the distinctive pattern of his helmet and the faint outline of the irises of his eyes.*



a face of stone, it is hard not to feel some sense of shared humanity.

But the more we ponder it, the more enigmatic the head becomes. Ever since it was rediscovered in 1939, it has defied explanation. Why is it so big? Was he a ruler or perhaps a god? Was it a portrait of a particular individual, or something much less specific than that? Why is it just a head – and not even a complete one at that, but severed at the chin? And what on earth was the image *for*? It was carved using only stone tools, out of a single block of basalt that came from more than fifty miles away from where the head was found. It could not have been made without huge amounts of time, effort and human resources. But why?

The Olmec have left us no written record and few clues about themselves beyond their art and archaeology: the



2, 3. Two colossal heads originally from the Olmec site at La Venta – of strikingly similar style, both truncated at the chin. The impressive specimen I describe is on the right, his slightly open lips allowing a glimpse of his teeth.

traces of towns, villages and temples, pottery, miniature sculpture and at least sixteen other colossal heads. We do not even know what they called themselves: the name ‘Olmec’ – meaning ‘rubber people’ – was given to the people who lived in the region by the Aztec in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries CE, and has become a convenient label for the prehistoric population who lived there. And it is still debated how far the ‘Olmec style’ in art reflects a unified people, with a shared identity, culture or politics. Nonetheless, whatever mystery surrounds them, the Olmec

have left us a powerful in-your-face reminder that across the world, when people first made art they made it about themselves. From the very beginning art has been about *us*.

This section explores early images of the human body from many different places in the world: from classical Greece and Rome to ancient Egypt and the very first period of imperial China. I want to answer some of the questions raised so starkly by that giant Olmec head. What were these images of the body for? What part did they play in the societies that created them? How were they seen and understood by the men and women who lived with them? I will be focusing on the people who *looked* at this art as much as on the artists who *made* it. And not only in the past: I want to show how one way of representing the body, which goes directly back to classical Greece, became – and remains – more influential than any other in shaping western ways of seeing. Returning finally to the Olmec, we will see that *how we look* can confuse, even distort, our understanding of civilisations beyond our own.

But first, half a world away from the Mexican jungle and almost a thousand years later, let's watch a Roman emperor seeing the sights of ancient Egypt.

A SINGING STATUE

In November 130 CE, Hadrian and his entourage arrived in the Egyptian city of Thebes, modern Luxor, some 500 miles from the Mediterranean coast. By then, the imperial party – not just the emperor and his wife Sabina, but presumably a whole retinue of servants and slaves, advisers and confidants, domestic staff and security men, and any number of hangers-on – had been on the road (and the river) for months on end. By far the most committed and enthusiastic traveller of all Roman rulers, Hadrian seems to have got everywhere; he was part curious tourist, part devout pilgrim, and part canny ruler who wanted to find out what was going on in his empire. On this occasion, the atmosphere around the emperor must have been somewhat tense, for only a few weeks earlier, Hadrian had lost his greatest love: not Sabina, but a young man by the name of Antinous, who was also in the imperial party, and who drowned mysteriously in the waters of the Nile. Murder, suicide and a strange ritual of human sacrifice have all been suggested.

Not even personal tragedy, or guilt, was going to deflect the emperor from paying a visit to what was then one of the most famous heritage sites in Egypt, and one of the greatest five-star tourist attractions in the whole of the



4. This marble relief of Antinous, holding a garland in his hand, is supposed to have been discovered in Hadrian's villa at Tivoli, just outside Rome, in 1753 – suggesting that it was a commemoration of the young man put up by the emperor. But some archaeologists have found the soft eroticism of the piece too good to be true and wondered if it is a fake, or at least very imaginatively restored.

ancient world. This was a pair of vast statues of the Pharaoh Amenhotep III, sixty-five feet high, originally put up in the fourteenth century BCE to stand guard outside his tomb. By Hadrian's day, almost a millennium and a half later, the connection with the pharaoh had been partly forgotten, and one of them at least had been re-identified as a statue of the mythical Egyptian king Memnon: the son of the goddess of the Dawn, who had fought, it was said, on the Trojan side in the Greek war against Troy and had been killed by Achilles. This was the statue that attracted Roman tourists, not so much for its size but for the more surprising fact that it could sing. If you were lucky, and came early in the morning, you might experience a moment of wonder, when Memnon cried out to greet his mother at break of day. The statue made a noise that one down-to-earth ancient traveller compared to a lyre with a broken string.

Quite how this sound was produced is a puzzle. One or two sceptical Romans suspected a trick by some boys hiding round the back of the statue with just such an off-key lyre. The usual modern theory is a more scientific one: that after an earthquake had damaged the stone figure, it produced a natural wheezing sound through its cracks as it warmed up and dried out in the morning sun. It certainly stopped singing later, after it had undergone a major Roman repair job. Even in its prime, it could not be relied upon to make a sound every day, and it was taken as a very good





omen if it did. When the imperial party visited, Memnon remained resolutely silent on the first day – a PR disaster in the making, and a clear hint that the noise was not produced by anything so biddable (or bribe-able) as ‘boys round the back’.

We know of the bad luck on that first morning because one member of Hadrian’s group recorded the occasion in verse. She was a well-connected lady called Julia Balbilla: courtier, descendant of Near Eastern royalty, and sister of Philopappos, whose tomb monument, on ‘Philopappos Hill’, is even now a prominent landmark in modern Athens. Her verses, more than fifty lines of them in Greek, in four separate poems, were carved onto the left foot and leg of the statue itself, where they can still be seen and read, along with over 100 more tributes to Memnon and his powers composed by other ancient travellers. There is no need to imagine that Balbilla, or any of the other, mostly well-heeled, visitors, clambered up onto the statue, chisel in hand, to do the carving themselves. They presumably handed over their words on papyrus to some local craftsman or official, who – no doubt for a fee – would find an empty spot on what was by the early second century a rather crowded leg, and do it on their behalf.

Balbilla’s poetry is not of the highest literary quality

5. *The ‘Colossi of Memnon’, the singing statue on the right.*

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(‘some is atrocious’ is the brutal judgement of one modern critic); but it is the most extraordinary high-end graffiti, almost adding up to a diary of her Memnon experience, and giving us a first-hand glimpse of what it felt like to be here. She manages to invent a flattering excuse for the initial silence. In the poem headed, ‘When on the first day we did not hear Memnon’, she writes (in typically lumpy style):

Yesterday Memnon received the emperor’s wife without a sound
So that beautiful Sabina would come back here again.
For the lovely form of our empress pleases you ...



6. I was allowed climb onto the statue’s foot, just like the workmen centuries ago who would have been paid to transcribe the reactions of ancient tourists, impressed – or not – by the miraculous singing.

After Hadrian actually hears Memnon on a later morning, Balbilla's tone becomes rather more triumphalist. She compares the noise to 'ringing bronze' rather than a broken lyre, and puts down the three cries (not just the usual one) to the special favour of the gods for her lord. In other lines she ventures to suggest that Memnon will last forever: 'I do not think this statue of yours will be destroyed.' She would, I am sure, be delighted to know that so far she has been proved right.

There is something touching about being able to tread in the footsteps of Hadrian's party, to share their gaze almost 2,000 years later, even if sadly we cannot hear the singing. But, even more important, this whole story shows one of the ways that ancient people interpreted statues and paintings of human beings: not as passive art works but as active players with roles to perform in the lives of those who viewed them. Whether the singing was hype or a trick or a natural miracle, Memnon's statue reminds us very powerfully that images often *did something*. And Balbilla's poetry especially reminds us that the history of art is not just a history of artists, of the men and women who painted

7. This section of Memnon's foot (the particular crack is also visible in Fig. 6) gives a good impression of how the graffiti (mostly short poems in Greek) are crammed together on the 'skin' of the statue. On the far left is another poem by Balbilla: 'I Balbilla heard from the speaking stone the divine voice of Memnon ...'

and sculpted. It's also a history of the men and women, who like her looked and interpreted what they saw, and the changing ways in which they did so.

If we want to understand images of the body, we really have to put those viewers back into the picture of art. And there is no better place to do that than another site in the ancient world that was also very close to the emperor Hadrian's heart, into which he poured his money and where he often visited. That is the city of Athens in Greece, whose culture we can explore very closely, and almost from the inside, through the thousands of images and millions of words – in poetry, prose, scientific theory and philosophical speculation – the ancient Athenians have left us.