

The Searching Gaze

The Doctor

Of all people he met in Rome, John Morgan wrote, it was Angelica Kaufman he grew fondest of. Already in his lodgings in Florence, people recommended that he should have his portrait painted by the young German painter who had resided there some time before. After the Accademia Clementina, the Florentine Accademia del Disegno, the oldest in Italy, had made her an honorary member, too – in spite of her youth, her gender – and some weeks ago, the Accademia di San Luca had accepted her as well.

„She is painting all the English in Rome, Morgan wrote. David Garrick, whom he had seen in London’s Drury Lane theatre playing Macbeth, had sat for her in Naples. An unusual portrait, the American doctor decided: The most famous actor of the world leaning over the back of a chair like an innkeeper, mustering the painter with the hint of a leer.

John Morgan liked the portrait of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, which the painter was in the process of completing, better. Winckelmann, he explained, was the greatest authority on antiquity ruling over all the ancient monuments of Rome. Morgan intended to be painted by Angelica, but he realised during their first encounter that the young painter was in need of his help, too.

„With my trained eye, he wrote, „I recognised the exhaustion in her pale complexion, I saw emaciation in her slender appearance. I have studied women’s anatomy in London. My teacher, Dr Hunter, has become the Queen’s physician, assuming ‘sole direction of Her Majesty’s health as a child-bearing Lady’. John Morgan, therefore, saw it as his duty to enquire after the charming Angelica’s well-being, and after struggling with her understandable shyness, she confessed to not feeling well.

His questioning, which, as he could confirm, never transgressed the boundaries of decency, and during which he did not discomfort her in any way, showed the origin of her pains to be in the stomach produced by a disorder in her digestion, resulting ‘from her sedentary life and close application to painting’.

Angelica related to him how she had, already as a young girl, grown accustomed to eating nothing during the daytime, except some fruit perhaps, so as not to have to interrupt her work in the galleries and churches. Now, she was plagued by acid humours at night and sickness during the day.

John Morgan prescribed a laxative and a tonic. He explained to Angelica the importance of the circumstances of eating, such as the location, the company and even the state of mind.

He told her how he had, as a young sergeant during the French Wars, misled by his comrades, slaughtered the colonel’s chicken, whose eggs had complemented the officers’ frugal diet, and how his stomach had punished him for days for his selfishness. A little story, Dr. Morgan wrote, would impress a patient more than longwinded, scholarly expositions.

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Angelica showed John Morgan a painting she had just completed; it was not a portrait. A young woman leans against a rock face. The wind tears at her pleated hair, the white dress has slid from her right shoulder and in her left hand, she holds a cloth with which she dries her tears. There is a man in front of her with a wreath of vine leaves in his hair, carrying a staff wrapped in ivy.

Under his red cloak, fur can be glimpsed at. Surprised as well as delighted, he leans forward, stretching out his hand towards the crying woman. Angelica explained to John Morgan that this was Ariadne, having been abandoned on an island, being saved by Bacchus; and indeed, a small

patch of sea could be seen in the background.

The painting was a failure, Morgan decided. The woman did arouse pity, he conceded, but the man looked unsteady on his feet, not at all like a god of nature, and there was, he added, a strange shadow stretching across his naked shoulder and his arm. The musculus biceps brachii seemed to have changed places with the musculus triceps, while the musculus deltoideus... The visible part of the body, the doctor concluded, looked like a badly stuffed cushion.

(Excerpts from p. 83 – 89)

The Poet

The conversation focussed on Italy, and one of the ladies mentioned Herculaneum. Füssli explained that excavations had ceased because poisonous fumes had seeped from the shafts.

It was much easier and less dangerous to salvage treasure from Pompeii as it was not entombed under sixty feet of petrified ashes.

„And the most important conclusions can be found in any library, by now, Maria’s godfather added.

„In the works of the great Winckelmann, one of the ladies said dreamily to no one in particular. There was a brief silence, and I wondered what had attracted the ladies to the German scholar.

„Great!, Füssli cried, and I realised that everyone’s eyes were fixed on him. „There is nothing great about being stabbed by a tavern cook for a few pieces of gold. Füssli’s face had turned crimson.

„They were medals he had received from the Empress, Maria Theresia, one of the ladies interjected tearfully. She could have been the daughter or the sister of the lady who had spoken first. Under their sombre bonnets, their age was hard to estimate. Winckelmann’s violent death had happened a few years before.

„His thoughts will endure, the first lady said.

„All he ever did was to collate what others had thought before him,, Füssli replied stubbornly, „a book-keeper of antiquity.

„He should have fought the ruffian, one of the gentlemen remarked, seizing the pommel of a rapier which was propped against his chair.

„If he was in a position to defend himself at all, the man beside him added.

„Nobody is immune from evil, Maria’s godfather pronounced regally.

„...*plentifully beautiful and handsome, tumescent muscular hills arise, surrounded by imperceptible shallows, akin to the current of the Meander, less obvious to the eye than to the soul,* Füssli recited, his voice raised.

The gentleman with the rapier smirked. „You mean to say the great scholar was ?

The godfather’s wife busily turned towards Maria.

„No one escapes his own demons, Füssli explained. The ladies chatted amongst themselves.

„One only has to read his publications, he continued, „to understand how eager the cobbler’s son would have been to peep under the short skirts of Sparta’s girls at Elis – the men began to grin –

„and to grope *the naked male contours devoid of any superfluous accretions*.

The godfather harrumphed menacingly.

„Was his name not very peculiar? Maria chipped in, having extricated herself from the ladies' conversation.

„Winckelmann?

„No, his assassin. All eyes were on her.

Füssli's mouth widened into a smirk: „Arcangeli.

„Archangel? one of the ladies repeated in disbelief.

„An archangel murdered him, another shuddered.

„Stabbed him seven times, the gentleman with the rapier confirmed.

„A heathen, actually, wasn't he?, the godfather's wife surmised.

„A converted Catholic, her husband corrected.

„And you suggest that his death was in punishment for his , the lady asked eagerly with a frisson.

„Dinner is served!, Maria's godfather interrupted, springing to his feet. We followed, politely bowing to give others precedence. It was only when he rose from his armchair that I noticed that Füssli barely reached my shoulders.

(p. 105 – 108)

The Courier

I have watched Angelica's features grow smooth as she faced the baron for the first time. I saw her avoid his gaze. And there was her bright laughter, nearly indecent, just as when she had talked to Winckelmann. However, who amongst us had not in some way fallen in love with Winckelmann, the serious gaze of his hazel eyes, focussed somewhere into the distance, his wide, curved mouth, his slender scholar's hands? Half of Rome was aware that the fabulous Margarita Mengs undressed for him while her husband worked himself to death as a court painter in Madrid.

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Winckelmann taught us to not merely see beauty but to sense it. „Only hearts can penetrate hearts, Füssli was to say later, and I recognised this immediately to be Winckelmann's phrase. Only he who can feel beauty can create it. Would Angelica ever have become as successful as she did if he had not urged her to observe quietly and diligently, during those heady early years, when men swarmed around the gracious painter? She must have sensed his inclination while she worked on his portrait, she must have heard of Margarita and all the other women who assiduously tried to dissuade him, she must have known about his involvement in many obscure affairs.

And yet, despite all that, Angelica remained faithful to his principles until today, and when I see her in the evenings, sitting in her salon, wrapped in transparent veils, I invariably remember that statement about grace, that we do not desire to see, as Winckelmann wrote, in her finery, but „in a light cloak, freshly risen from the bed.

(...)

'In his letter, the baron also expresses his appreciation for Angelica's drawing of Iphigenia, he praises the idea to portray the moment when Orestes discovers himself to be in the presence of his sister and his friend, he extols the sensitivity of the creative rendition and agrees that this scene is, indeed, the hub of the play. After our first visit to Angelica's studio, he said she had an incredible, nay, for a woman phenomenal amount of talent, and that it behoved us all to see and appreciate what she did, rather than what she left behind. I objected that the works of most artists would not stand scrutiny if they were judged on what was missing.'

June: 'The baron is back in Rome, more contemplative, interested solely in nature, he speaks about the vast school in which his powers were maturing slowly. Sicily, he says, is the key to it all. Tischbein paints him (life-size, clad in a long white travelling cloak, wearing a black hat with its rim turned up, leaning on a fallen obelisk, with the Campagna in the background).

The classic profile lends the baron dignity, the receding hair line above the template age. They will love it in Weimar. He thinks that everyone will like the painting, even though it is too big for Nordic apartments. He does not, however, appreciate Angelica's portrait. He can detect nothing more than a handsome fellow in it, not a trace of himself.

Angelica is distraught. She wants to please him but he does not like himself. She is worried to have aggravated the baron. I cannot tell her that he thinks too little of her skills to avoid her because of one painting just confirming his perception of her shortcomings as a painter. She decries her failure, which is actually her mastery. Just as with Winckelmann, she has succeeded in rendering the baron's likeness perfected.'

(Excerpts from p. 153 – 157)