

Winckelmann's Travels to Nowhere

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The eighteenth-century German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann claimed his life began when he traveled to Rome, yet although famous above all for his writings on Greek art, he never went to Greece itself. Geography was thus both essential to his work and somehow elusive. The Italian physical landscape shaped his *History of Ancient Art*, but served too as a kind of pilgrimage landscape, a threshold to less definable truths. This paper explores the ways in which Winckelmann's physical travel gave rise to the mental geography of his *History of Ancient Art*, in which he argued for art history as the intuition of indefinable beauty.

Travel through Italy, a kind of ecstatic contact with palpable beauty (artistic, climactic, human), changed Winckelmann's research methods. He began to privilege the visual over the textual. Yet, as with a pilgrimage, this travel did not mean so much the covering of physical space as the leaping by way of objects to a mental space; it was the proximity to the ancient works of art that allowed Winckelmann to channel the essence of Greece. For Winckelmann, artistic bodies revealed the ancient Greek character; this character was shaped in turn by the landscape of Greece itself. Thus his narrative depends on the geography of Greece as distilled in bodies shaped from stone—yet both body and place emerge as strangely indefinable. Winckelmann's notion of beauty is abstract, his Grecian geography unmappable. Vision is all-important, but a transcendent vision that included acts of intuition and imagination. Looking and journeying become acts of longing.