

Disquieting Beauty: The Contradictions of Ingres' Approach to Art

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate some of Ingres' theoretical contradictions, in particular his defense of an adhesion to the living model against the concept that the artist has to draw on an ideal beauty. Although he claims to refute the classicistic concept of artistic activity, which is found in Cicero and Plotinus and is revised by Quatremère de Quincy, it is possible to identify a peculiar dichotomy between nature and ideal which informs Ingres' reflection and which is manifested, sometimes in unexpected forms, in his paintings.

Keywords: classicism, ideal beauty, nature, model, aesthetics

1. Anatomies and ancient vases

An anecdote concerning Ingres' teaching, which becomes particularly significant if it is included in the context of the traditional teaching in painting studios, regards the painter's strong dislike for the instruments of anatomy study. As reported by Amary-Duval (65-7), the painter rejected in horror the attempt by one of his students to introduce a skeleton in the atelier in order to study the anatomical details of the human body. For Ingres, the study of anatomy is useless and even detrimental, as it freezes nature and deprives it of its main attraction, which is the very fact that it is alive. By adopting this position which is, in a certain sense, anti-scientific and emotional, Ingres seems to be directly opposed to the teaching practice of his master Jacques-Louis David, which was instead focused on the accurate study of muscular anatomy in order to recreate the ancient formulae of the heroic nude. For Ingres, such study does not capture the sublime essence of the practice of Raphael, who does not seem to have focused on the study of human anatomy, unlike Leonardo and Michelangelo. Raphael identifies the ideal in nature, and this is what for Ingres is the main value of the art of his Renaissance idol: "Raphaël au contraire avait si bien dompté la nature, il l'avait si bien dans la mémoire, que, au lieu qu'elle lui commandât, on dirait que c'est elle-même qui lui obéissait, qu'elle venait d'elle-même se placer dans ses ouvrages" (Ingres: 151).

The contemporary critics of Ingres' work could easily criticize the impossible proportions and the morphological forcing of the painter's figures precisely on the basis of his supposed anatomical ignorance. However, Ingres states that he understands the anatomical structure of the human body but he is simply not interested in it from a scientific point of view: "Ils sont tous mes amis, ces muscles: mais je ne sais aucun d'eux par son nom" (Ingres: 130); and also: "Je tiens à ce que l'on connaisse bien le squelette, parce que les os forment la charpente même du corps dont ils déterminent les longueurs, et qu'ils sont pour le dessin des points continuels de repère. Je tiens moins à la connaissance anatomique des muscles. Trop de science en pareil cas nuit à la sincérité du dessin et peut détourner de l'expression caractéristique pour conduire à une image banale de la forme. Il faut cependant se rendre compte de l'ordre et de la disposition relative des muscles, afin d'éviter, de ce côté aussi, les fautes de construction" (Ingres: 129-130).

In reality, his notorious adoption of dysphormic figures and of unnatural proportions has paradoxically allowed Ingres, a conservative and academic painter, to take on the role of model for the artistic avant-garde because of his lack of interest in rational formal codes. Among the many examples that could be taken from his work, most famously the *Grande Odalisque* (Maigne, Chatellier, Norlöff 2004), we could choose for ease of illustration the *Baigneuse à mi-corps* of the Musée Bonnat-Helleu of Bayonne, painted around 1807. The work is presented, in the intentions of the painter, as a variant of Raphael's feminine ideal and, in particular, of the *Formarina* in the use of a striped turban and (surprisingly in some respects if we consider this to be a naked figure) of the *Madonna della Seggiola*.

The pictorial surface of Ingres' painting is extremely smooth, following the neoclassical painting dictates, and it suits the remarkable two-dimensionality of the picture, in which the representation of the nude is executed with imperceptible shifts between the planes leading to a somewhat disconcerting result. The picture in fact represents a female nude which, like in many other works by the painter, does not support the scrutiny of rational analysis. Each part of the body seems to be subject to an ambiguous deformation that leads attentive viewers to identify what could be termed a monster. If we start with the face, the eyebrow and the right eyelid of the figure are visible as if the face was represented almost in three-quarters and inclined, but the position of the mouth, slightly open so that even a portion of the sky is visible between the lips, should instead belong to a full profile. Aside from the controversial depiction of the bovine eye, the eccentric position of the ear and the forced posture of the neck, the other elements that are puzzling in the depiction of the nude are the shoulders, almost entirely revealed to the observer, and the location of the breast in relation to the back, which would suggest more of a protrusion of the rib cage than the beautiful forms of a healthy model. If the bather was to turn, the vision of her might well be less pleasant.

As this is a relatively early work by Ingres, these limitations may be attributed to the lack of expertise of a young painter, but it is well known that Ingres continued throughout his life to play with the anatomical proportions of his subjects, so a likely explanation should be found elsewhere. Why was such a synthetic and eccentric language adopted in the depiction of a body? Although there is no unanimous answer to the motives which led Ingres to adopt such apparent anatomical anomalies, in the case of the *Bayonne Bather* or of the *Thetis* it is important to point out that the inspiration, consistent with his education as a neoclassical painter, came from the peculiar style of drawing of the ancient Greek vases (then called Etruscans) that Ingres admired and copied. In the Ingres Museum of Mountauban there are numerous copies made by Ingres of the pictorial decoration of ancient vessels, and it is precisely in the economy of lines and in the synthetic and expressive approach to the human figure specific to classical painting on vases that we can identify one of the keys to explain the anatomies of Ingres. One of the most recognizable motives of the synthetic language of classical ceramic painting is the multiplicity of points of view (in a sense analogous to Egyptian painting), for which in the depiction of the human body certain planes are preferred, such as, with respect to the representation of the face, the profile rather than three quarters and even less the frontal one, such as the bust rather than shoulders in profile etc. This approach, learned also through the influence of Flaxman's engravings, is chosen by Ingres as an expressive motif many times and in a consistent way (Picard-Cajan 2006).

The painter himself expresses his predilection for the pictorial definition of the ancient vases: "Toutes les fois que j'ai été me rassasier de la vue des compositions peintes sur les vases antiques, je suis sorti plus que jamais persuadé que c'est d'après ces exemples qu'il faut qu'un peintre travaille, que c'est là ce qu'il doit imiter lorsqu'il peint des sujets grecs. [...] Il y a encore du génie à savoir ainsi recréer par la perfection des couleurs, par cet achevé de la nature que donnera l'étude, — de la nature si bien indiquée déjà, mais cependant à demi exprimée seulement dans ces simples traits" (Ingres: 141-2). Inevitably, more than in portraits, it is in history painting and in mythological subjects in particular that such aptitude is fully revealed and is at the root of the impossible pose of *Thetis*, and its reprise in the representation of *Angelica* and, for a male and *troubadour* counterpart, in *Paolo* kissing *Francesca*. While it is true that the inspiration for the pose of *Thetis* derives in part from the same subject in one of Flaxman's engravings for the *Iliad*, the extreme distortion of the neck, as an expression of a state of distress of the supplicant, is actually drawn from a specific example of pottery painting (Picard-Cajan 35). Ingres seems to have adopted this pose for *Thetis* precisely for its expressiveness, with the inevitable disturbance of his contemporaries, many of whom did not appreciate its value of both learned and emotional citation.

It is *Thoré-Bürger* who, among the critics of the art of the time, seems to have detected Ingres' archaic inspiration better than others, when he writes: "La peinture de M. Ingres a plus de rapport qu'on ne pense avec les peintures primitives des peuples orientaux, qui sont une espèce de sculpture coloriée. Chez les Indiens, les Chinois, les Egyptiens, les Etrusques, par où commencent les arts? Par le bas-relief sur lequel on applique la couleur; puis, on supprime le relief, et il ne reste que le galbe extérieur, le trait, la ligne; appliquez la couleur dans l'intérieur de ce dessin élémentaire, voilà la peinture; mais l'air et l'espace n'y sont point. Les tableaux chinois conservent encore ce caractère, si bien écrit sur les vases étrusques, où les figures, coloriées de terres plates, n'ont pas d'autre prétention que de singer la statuaire et la ciselure" (*Thoré-Bürger* 49). The same type of bas-relief approach, which could be seen as similar to that of painting on ancient vases, can indeed be seen in the *Bayonne Bather*, the first of the genealogy of female nudes by the painter. Ingres himself, after all, points out that the simple forms are more effective for the expression: "Plus les lignes et les formes sont simples, plus il y a de beauté et de force.

Toutes les fois que vous partagez les formes, vous les affaiblissez. Il en est de cela comme du fractionnement en toutes choses” (Ingres: 125).

2. Theoretical roots of Ingres’ concept of beauty

Thoré-Bürger’s analysis of Ingres’ archaism, albeit poignant in many ways, is highly critical of the painter’s approach to art for its supposed moral weakness, due to the fact that it seeks formal beauty as the ultimate end of artistic expression: “M. Ingres est donc tout à fait au rebours de la tradition nationale, et particulièrement de la doctrine récente de Louis David. C’était là pourtant ce qui devait survivre de David dans l’école française, l’amour des choses généreuses, l’enthousiasme pour tous les dévouements héroïques. A Brutus, à Socrate, à Léonidas, ont succédé les Odalisques. L’artiste n’a plus d’opinion; il ne relève que de sa fantaisie, et ainsi isolé des autres hommes, il méprise, du haut de son orgueil, tous les accidents de la vie commune. Et, par exemple, durant l’invasion de la patrie en 1814, M. Ingres peignait l’Arétin, la Fornarina et Henri IV” (Thoré-Bürger 43). For this reason Ingres should therefore be considered as a full representative of the romantic current in French painting: “Au fond, M. Ingres est l’artiste le plus romantique du dix-neuvième siècle, si le romantisme est l’amour exclusif de la forme, l’indifférence absolue sur tous les mystères de la vie humaine, le scepticisme en philosophie et en politique, le détachement égoïste de tous les sentiments communs et solidaires” (Thoré-Bürger 42).

It must be pointed out that Ingres, from the point of view of his formal expression, can not be termed a romantic, since because of the strong synthetic component of his representation of the human body he still collocates himself within the specifically classical artistic practice. This tradition aspires to beauty, which for Ingres is to be found in nature but *de facto* is also a sort of ideal, and the painter is aware of the problem and contradiction within his reflection on his own art (King 1942: 69-113). If romanticism is in Ingres, it can be identified in some aspects of his choice of *troubadour* themes, and certainly in his orientalism. Ingres’ odalisques, nonetheless, can also be interpreted as a variant of the classic idea of the *Âge d’Or*, transferred from a mythical dimension in a temporal sense to a mythical one in a spatial sense, which accentuates their sensual appeal.

For Ingres, on the one hand, the typically idealistic practice of Zeuxis, which is to choose the single most beautiful parts from different models and then recombine them in an ideal figure, is to be discarded: “Il faut trouver le secret du beau par le vrai. Les anciens n’ont pas créé, ils n’ont pas fait: ils ont reconnu” (Ingres: 117). On the other hand, however, he praises the ability of the artist to discover the beauty that is not visible in the living model. Ingres, on this issue as well as on others, is not expected to have complete conceptual consistency, nor has he ever pretended to be an accomplished thinker. Nevertheless such contradiction is difficult to resolve, especially if one thinks of what he repeatedly argues about his adherence to the living model: the model is nature, and the painter does nothing more than copy the model, as in nature there is already everything beautiful: “Il n’y a pas deux arts, il n’y en a qu’un: c’est celui qui a pour fondement le beau éternel et naturel. Ceux qui cherchent ailleurs se trompent, et de la manière la plus fatale. Qu’est-ce que veulent dire ces prétendus artistes qui prêchent la découverte du «nouveau»? Y a-t-il rien de nouveau? Tout est fait, tout est trouvé. Notre tâche n’est pas d’inventer mais de continuer, et nous avons assez à faire en nous servant, à l’exemple des maîtres, de ces innombrables types que la nature nous offre constamment, en les interprétant dans toute la sincérité de notre cœur, en les ennoblissant par ce style pur et ferme sans lequel nulle oeuvre n’a de beauté. Quelle absurdité que de croire que les dispositions et les facultés naturelles peuvent être compromises par l’étude, par l’imitation même des oeuvres classiques! Le type original, l’homme, reste toujours là: nous n’avons qu’à le consulter pour savoir si les classiques ont eu tort ou raison, et si, en employant les mêmes moyens qu’eux, nous mentons ou nous disons vrai” (Ingres: 112).

Ingres believes that it is in such adherence to nature that the reason for the supremacy of the ancients and Raphael resides. This assertion, however, was surprising for his contemporaries, as reported by Aumary-Duval (1878: 60) about the painter Jean-Pierre Granger’s praise of Ingres’ *Oedipus*. Ingres claimed that in this painting he, like the ancients, had only copied the model, while Granger replied that the representation had in fact extensively embellished the model, causing in turn an exasperated response from Ingres. This attitude in the face of the beautiful ideal was the basis of the dispute between Ingres’ and David’s schools (Betzer 2012: 74-76). It is difficult to establish exactly the theoretical and practical differences between the two schools and why Ingres’ followers accused David of teaching how to create dead works for the sake of the search for the ideal. It is probably Zeuxis’ practice that was specifically rejected by Ingres’s school, and therefore the aspiration in David and his pupils to reproduce a kind of beauty that is more reminiscent of an immobile statue than a living being.

According to Ingres, the living model already has everything that the ancients would see: “Regardez cela (le modèle vivant): c’est comme les anciens et les anciens sont comme cela. C’est un bronze antique. Les anciens, eux, n’ont pas corrigé leurs modèles, j’entends par là qu’ils ne les ont pas dénaturés. Si vous traduisez sincèrement ce qui est là, vous procéderez comme eux, et, comme eux, vous arriverez au beau. Si vous suivez une autre marche, si vous prétendez corriger ce que vous voyez, vous n’arriverez qu’au faux, au louche ou au ridicule” (Ingres: 116). In this last paragraph Ingres might be commenting precisely on the idealism of David’s school, although this is not entirely clear.

It is therefore in the character and in the effort to represent individuals, that we should identify the specificity of Ingres’ approach to the beautiful and the natural. It should not be forgotten, however, that, as in the case of David, portraits are among Ingres’ most successful works, although the painter might disapprove of this. Among Ingres’ reflections that have been handed down to us, however, there are also specific thoughts on what is beautiful, and it is one in particular that may help to better understand his position and also the contradictions inherent to his art. As King correctly noted (86): “In Ingres’ case there was little need for an elaborate theoretical statement of doctrine, even if had he been so inclined, for his sparsely stated principles received a most adequate exposition, and one still more uncomprising than his own in the immovability of its premises and conclusions, in the writings of [...] Quatremère de Quincy.” Despite the strong propensity of the French thinker for a purely idealistic version of Neoclassicism, it is clear that Ingres relies entirely on the substantiated reflection of his friend. This is also confirmed by the adhesion of Ingres’ program as Director of the French Academy in Rome to the directives of de Quincy, who was secretary for life of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris and whose teaching had exemplified the aesthetic reflection of the era.

3. The issue of coherence of Ingres’ position

The assumption that Ingres is a representative of neoclassical idealism, although it has a foundation in some of his reflections, seems too simplistic (Prettejohn 2005: 94-5; Rifkin 2005: 43-57). Ingres undoubtedly reprises a series of concepts that are relevant to classical culture and, besides Raphael, he considers Poussin one of his main inspirations in art and philosophy, in the sense of ethics and aesthetics. The study, if not the imitation, of the ancients is the fulcrum of the practice of the painter, who sees in the binomial of ancients and nature a single reality, that of indivisible art. In his exaltation of Phidias, he emphasizes that the Greek sculptor, later emulated by Raphael, had merely followed nature: “Phidias parvint au sublime en corrigeant la nature avec elle-même. A l’occasion de son *Jupiter Olympien*, il se servit de toutes les beautés naturelles réunies pour arriver à ce qu’on appelle mal à propos le beau idéal. Ce mot ne doit être conçu que comme exprimant l’association des plus beaux éléments de la nature qu’il est bien rare de trouver parfaite en ce point, la nature étant d’ailleurs telle qu’il n’y a rien au-dessus d’elle, quand elle est belle, et tous les efforts humains ne pouvant non-seulement la surpasser, mais même l’égaliser” (Ingres: 114). The reference to the example of Phidias was a classic topos already in antiquity (Porter 2010: 408-415), and the concept that his Zeus is superior to the natural model, and consequently derived from the artist’s invention, can be found in Cicero, but it is with Plotinus that it finds its philosophically determined definition within a neoplatonic conceptual universe (Iozzia 2015: 16-20; Kuisma 2003: 111-130). Plotinus’ conception of the activity of an inspired artist had already impregnated the Renaissance and later reflection on the role of artists, and is part of the conceptual repertoire of classicism, as theorized by Bellori (Panofsky 1968: 155-75) and reprised by Quatremère de Quincy (1837: 16-8), who devoted one of his works precisely to the study and reconstruction of Phidias’ *Zeus* (1816). Ingres, however, clearly rejects Plotinus’ and Bellori’s idealism, pointing out that the artist corrects nature with something other derived from nature itself, although it is not clear exactly what constitutes the mimetic activity of the artist and where else he finds the proper corrections to the model, if he must not imitate details from different models. In the case of Ingres, one could say that the beauty intrinsic to the living model is seen by the painter and thus brought to light, in a heuristic operation that only the artist can perform. The dispute between David’s school and Ingres’ school therefore seems to centre more around an attempt to renew the classical tradition than around a naturalistic revolution in the manner of Courbet. Nevertheless the contradictions between Ingres’ thinking and his actual work remain strong, even if the painter never aspired to be a coherent theorist and acknowledged that this role belongs to Quatremère de Quincy.

The French thinker, in fact, questions the concept that ideal beauty can be separated or opposed to nature: “Ce mot *idéal* mal compris, mal défini, étoit devenu un objet de dispute: les uns croyoient l’idée de *vérité* et de *nature*, exclue de l’imitation, par l’effet de cette théorie; les autres soutenaient, que non-seulement la théorie de l’*idéal* n’excluoit ni l’idée de nature, ni celle de vérité, mais qu’au contraire, et la nature, et la vérité en fait d’imitation, considérée dans son principe élevé, et en grand, ne se trouvaient que dans l’*idéal*” (1837: 17). Ingres’ conception is related to Quatremère de Quincy’s reflection, however the painter highlights his point of view as an artist. The ancients recreated nature by choosing its best parts and assembling them harmoniously, while Raphael in Ingres’ eyes resumes this practice but sublimates it in his ability to choose grace in nature without depriving it of its qualities of being alive. The difference between David’s school and Ingres’ teaching may therefore lie between the search for a beautiful ideal separated from the living model, and the striving for a form of beauty in nature that has to be connected with the living being while still aspiring to an ideal harmony that is not given in the individual but is to be revealed by the artist. The issue of the theoretical fundamentals of Ingres’ art is mainly connected to the difficulty in reconciling what appears as inconsistency within his thought.

4. Conclusions

If we consider again the Bayonne Bather, we can now better analyze some of the aspects that seem to indicate a shift in the direction of the natural for Ingres, though in a rather synthetic manner. It is the profile of the bather which presents that natural approach which Ingres uses for the subject, for example in the way the light is reflected on the nose, which is however contradicted by the distortion between the eyes and the mouth. The Bather, of course, is not a portrait, yet Ingres tries to transport the mythological-erotic subject to an individual dimension, and to alternate moments of lenticular realism in the eyes, nose, ear, turban (which will be repeated in his most brilliant portraits) with the Etruscanizing stylization of the back and the arm and the schematicity of the landscape. In the *Bayonne Bather* Ingres seems to identify precisely that combination of antiquity and nature (rather than ideal and nature) which David’s school tended to disconnect, while for Ingres it constituted the only basis for art. “N’étudions le beau qu’à genoux”, says Ingres in one of his thoughts (114): the only way to study the beautiful is to admire it in awe and reverence. But what is *le beau* for Ingres? We cannot expect from the painter a deeply coherent system of thought, however we should also try to understand what sort of beauty he was after in his art, and this is not easily discernable if we start analyzing his conceptions. It is clear that the ancients and nature are his guidelines in finding beauty. As surprising as it might seem at first then, to search for the beautiful with religious fervour and humility actually means, for Ingres, in its very essence to study the living model.

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