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John Addington Symonds and the Ideal of Beauty in Greek Sculpture: An Introduction*

Greek art and its meaning obsessed some of the greatest minds of the Victorian period. Victorian scholars asked: What was the highest aim of classical art—truth to nature or an idealization of nature? Does Greek art reveal an absolute, ideal beauty? If so, should that beauty be expressive of the social and moral obligations of art? A previously unpublished lecture by the English historian and essayist John Addington Symonds in the Archives of the History of Art illuminates several of these issues which preoccupied British intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century.¹ In order to fully appreciate Symonds' lecture, the following introductory comments will sketch in a few important facts from his life, outline the main participants and currents of thought in the Victorian debate about Greek art, and suggest Symonds' role in the critical discussion.

John Addington Symonds (1840-93) was born into privileged position in Victorian society, and both his life and his work reflect the values and restrictions of that position and society. His father, a physician and reformer educated in Edinburgh, exerted a strong influence on Symonds' intellectual and psychological development. Dr. Symonds exhibited a concern for aesthetic inquiry which foreshadowed his son's interests; he even developed a theory in mathematical terms to demonstrate the existence of an intrinsic beauty, a beauty inherent in the art object.² Like most Victorian commentaries, his argument was grounded in empirical philosophy tempered by Christian doctrine.

The younger Symonds believed that mod-

ern culture was informed by false social values, inhibiting aesthetic rules, and a puritanical Christian morality. The main subjects of Symonds' scholarly research—the Elizabethans, the Italians of the Renaissance, and the ancient Greeks—reflect his search for prescriptive values appropriate for nineteenth-century life. Symonds undoubtedly wrote about those cultures because he found them aesthetically stimulating; however, Symonds also probably saw in them men who were able to express themselves freely, unhampered by Victorian taboos.³ His interpretation of history was shaped by his own desires and frustrations, and he received a kind of vicarious satisfaction through studying what he felt were less inhibited ages.

Although Symonds is best known today as an historian of the Renaissance, for many years his two volumes on Greek literature remained a standard work on the subject.⁴ Symonds saw his role as a religious and social reformer prefigured in the enlightened writers and philosophers of fifth-century Athens. He consciously modelled himself on his ancient predecessors, yet Symonds and other Victorian liberal writers such as George Grote, James Anthony Froude, and John Stuart Blackie forced literary traditions inherited from the Greeks "into new moulds such as their authors had never conceived."⁵

Symonds' lecture on Greek sculpture was probably presented as one of the series on Greek history and culture he gave to the Sixth Form students at Clifton College or at Cheltenham Women's College during the early 1870s. Although one might question