Extracts on 'beauty' from Johan Joachim Winkelmann, A History of Art among the Greeks, 1850.

8. I shall, in the first place, speak of beauty in

general, not only of forms, but also of attitude and

gesture, together with proportion; and then of the

beauty of single parts of the human body. In the

general consideration of beauty, I shall, in some preliminary

remarks, venture on an unusual view of it,

that is, consider its negative character ; and then present

some definite ideas of it. It is, however, easier

to say what it is not than what it is, as Cotta, in

Cicero says of God. There is nearly the same relation

between beauty and its opposite, as there is between health and disease ; we feel the latter, but not

the former.

9. Beauty, as the loftiest mark and the central

point of art, demands some preliminary discussion, in

which I should wish to satisfy both myself and the

reader; but this is a wish of difficult gratification in

either respect. When, after some general observations

upon the art of design among the Greeks, I sought to

advance farther into the examination of it. Beauty

seemed to beckon to me, probably that same Beauty

which exhibited herself to the great artists, and allowed

herself to be felt, grasped, and figured, or I have

sought and longed to recognise her in their works.

I cast my eyes down before this creation of my imagination,

as did those to whom the Highest appeared,

believing that I saw the Highest in this vision of my

fancy. At the same time, I blushed for the confidence

which had emboldened me to pry into her mysteries,

and to treat of the loftiest conception of humanity, as

I recalled to mind the fear which this undertaking

formerly caused me. But the kind reception which

my reflections have met encourages me to follow that

invitation, and meditate further on beauty. With an

imagination warmed by the desire of assembling all

the single beauties which I had observed, and uniting

them in one figure, I sought to create a poetic Beauty,

and place her before me. But in this second trial and

exertion of my powers, I have been again convinced

that this is still more difficult than to find in human

nature perfect beauty, if such can exist. For beauty

is one of the great mysteries of nature, whose influence

we all see and feel ; but a general, distinct idea of its

essential must be classed among the truths yet undiscovered.

. .... And for this reason we differ about that which is beautiful, just as

we differ about that which is truly good.

22. The highest beauty is in God ; and our idea of

human beauty advances towards perfection in proportion

as it can be imagined in conformity and harmony with

that highest Existence which, in our conception of unity

and indivisibility, we distinguish from matter. This

idea of beauty is like an essence extracted from matter

by fire ; it seeks to beget unto itself a creature formed

after the likeness of the first rational being designed in

the mind of the Divinity. The forms of such a figure

are simple and flowing, and various in their unity ; and

for this reason they are harmonious, just as a sweet and

pleasing tone can be extracted fi-om bodies the parts

of which are uniform. All beauty is heightened by

unity and simplicity, as is everything which we do and

say ; for whatever is great in itself is elevated, when

executed and uttered with simplicity. It is not more

strictly circumscribed, nor does it lose any of its greatness,

because the mind can survey and measure it with

a glance, and comprehend and embrace it in a single

idea ; but the very readiness with which it may be

embraced places it before us in its true greatness, and

the mind is enlarged, and likewise elevated, by the

comprehension of it. Everything which we must consider

in separate pieces, or which we cannot survey at

once, from the number of its constituent parts, loses

thereby some portion of its greatness, just as a long

road is shortened by many objects presenting themselves

on it, or by many inns at which a stop can be

made. The harmony which ravishes the soul does not

consist in arpeggios, and tied and slurred notes, but in

simple, long-drawn tones. This is the reason why a

large palace appears small, when it is overloaded with

ornament, and a house large, when elegant and simple

in its style.