

## Hellenistic Ekphrasis and Art

In Hellenistic poetry, there is no unproblematic way of relating actual (or fictional) works of art, ways of viewing art, and so on, with literary descriptions of or reactions to such things. On the one hand, even the most straightforwardly descriptive ekphrasis are still poetry and should therefore be considered as independent artistic entities rather than, for example, manuals for the reconstruction of cultural practices. On the other hand, it would be excessive to rule out the potential of using poetry in this way on the grounds of epistemological circumspection. What is called for is a careful consideration of each poet and poem on an individual basis, striking a middle path between the over-credulous assumption that poetry is a mirror for the way an entire culture looks at art and the equally unfortunate insistence on treating all poetry as only self-reflective.

The first of these views is probably best represented by Graham Zanker; his book, *Modes of Viewing in Hellenistic Poetry and Art*, takes as its starting point the claim that a “Hellenistic poetic description of a person, an animal, the weather, a scene, or an *objet d’art* adopts a particular way of viewing, we have independent evidence for the habits of viewing that Hellenistic people would have brought to their contemplation of representational art.”<sup>1</sup> This idea has much to make it attractive. First, it unifies broad cultural practices (art and poetry throughout the “Hellenistic” world-era) by focusing on and universalizing common themes; second, it would enable us to say a good deal about

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<sup>1</sup> Zanker, G., *Modes of Viewing in Hellenistic Poetry and Art* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004): 4.

Hellenistic art's place in society and maybe even help us to understand the place of troublesome works such as the so-called "grotesques"; third, Zanker's inclusive definition of ekphrasis warrants approval, since often a poetic description of (e.g.) a scene is highly artistic in character and even terminology.<sup>2</sup> Finally, there is a sort of commonsense plausibility to the idea that a description (poetic or not) of art would reflect the way the author of the description looks at art.

But there are two problems with the generalization from that observation to the more broad claim made by Zanker (and others). First, it fails to consider the motivation behind an ekphrasis, which may range anywhere from allegorical self-aggrandizement to an honest and accurate *descriptio*. There is no reason to think that the "mode of viewing" embodied in all these sorts of ekphraseis is consistent or even reflects the way the poet would look at an actual object outside the poetic context. Second, and more seriously, the Hellenistic poets were "learned"<sup>3</sup> (whether in a positive or negative sense) and in general not exactly in touch with the everyday course of life. They were preoccupied, if modern scholarship is to be believed, with burgeoning knowledge of the world, philosophy, their own poetic craft, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Even if the majority of Hellenistic works of art are from a similar elite context, they probably did not reflect the same set of concerns.

Even so, it is clear that there are many concerns shared between poetry and art. Before discussing them, however, I would like to point out that the opposite tendency (that is, assuming that 'references to material objects in Hellenistic poetry always refer us

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the description of the harbor Aeneas and his men enter in *Aeneid* I.159ff.

<sup>3</sup> Fowler, B., *The Hellenistic Aesthetic* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989): 3.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g. Erskine, A., "Culture and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Museum and Library of Alexandria," *Greece and Rome* 42.1 (1995): 38-48; Hunter, R., *Tradition and Innovation in Hellenistic Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Fowler, B., *The Hellenistic Aesthetic*: 5ff. See too, Gruen, E.S., "Culture as Policy: The Attalids of Pergamon," *From Pergamon to Sperlonga: Sculpture and Context*, ed. de Grummond and Ridgway (University of California Press, 2000): 7-31.

back to the poet and his literary technique') is unproductive. Even though it surely true of many Hellenistic poems that they are in some sense about their authors' skill, that is rarely if ever the whole story.

For example, Simon Goldhill discusses several playful epigrams and also a section of Theocritus' fifteenth *Idyll*.<sup>5</sup> In lines 78-83,<sup>6</sup> Theocritus has his characters express wonder and delight at the craftsmanship of some embroidered garments of some sort. One way of interpreting this passage (which Goldhill does not do, but is not too far from either) is to say that it is a self-reflective comment on Theocritus' own poem. That is, just as the characters in the poem are impressed by the garments in question, so the reader is supposed to be impressed by the realism and loveliness of Theocritus' description of their reactions. A second way is Goldhill's own, which is that passages like this are "self-consciously and [sometimes] ironically" participants in a way of "creat[ing]...particular ways of *seeing meaning*."<sup>7</sup> It's not clear exactly what implications this would have for our interpretation of this particular passage. Surely it is just a slightly mocking description of two foreign women, too easily impressed by the cosmopolitan products of art in Alexandria.

In any case, the idea that Hellenistic poems are always self-referential does not seem to have much in the way of grounds. Zanker gives many convincing readings of juxtaposed art and poetry where the authors and artists can be seen to employ similar

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<sup>5</sup> Goldhill, S., "The Naïve and Knowing Eye: Ecphrasis and the Culture of Viewing in the Hellenistic World," *Art and Text in Ancient Greek Culture*, ed. Goldhill, S., and Osborne, R. (Cambridge University Press, 1994): 197-223.

<sup>6</sup> GORGO.---Do come here, Praxinoi. Look first at these embroideries. How light and how lovely! You will call them the garments of the gods.

PRAXINOI.---Lady Athena! what spinning women wrought them, what painters designed those drawings, so true they are? How naturally they stand and move, like living creatures, not patterns woven! What a clever thing is man!  
(Translation from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/250theocritus15.html>)

<sup>7</sup> Goldhill, S., "The Naïve and Knowing Eye": 223.

techniques. For example, in his examination of erotic art and poetry<sup>8</sup> he effectively compares the statue Aphrodite Kallipygos<sup>9</sup> with a passage from the *Argonautika* of Apollonius. The most outstanding feature of the statue is the way Aphrodite is apparently engaged in self-absorbed contemplation of her own shapely buttocks. The viewer is invited by her revealing gesture to join her admiration, but (unlike most other major nude Aphrodites, such as the Crouching and Knidian figures) the goddess makes no attempt to cover herself, thus establishing a narrative framework in which she is unaware of the viewer. This self-absorption is a novel development of the Hellenistic period, for in earlier (Classical and Archaic) art, statues of the gods are usually (when not in battle scenes) depicted neither involved in nor aloof from engagement with the viewer.

Consider, just as an example, the Aphrodite from the Parthenon (figure M in the East pediment), a canonical work of pre-Hellenistic Greek art. Particularly on account of being a pedimental figure, this Aphrodite pays no attention to the viewer; however, on the other hand, she is clearly relating in some way (highly debated!) to the other women in the group. By contrast with this and in similarity to the Aphrodite Kallipygos, Apollonius “draw[s] [a] picture of Aphrodite”<sup>10</sup> at home which possesses a “soft, erotic charm” the reader “intrudes” upon.<sup>11</sup>

In closing, let us consider rather briefly one of the newly-discovered poems of Poseidippos, no. 13:

This is a tricky stone; smear it with oil, and all around  
it swims in radiance, a marvel of deceit;  
but when it's dry, all of a sudden the Persian [...

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<sup>8</sup> Zanker, *Modes of Viewing*: 119-23 is that passage I have in mind, although there are others.

<sup>9</sup> Fig. 27, p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> At *Argonautika* 3.43-7.

<sup>11</sup> Zanker, *Modes of Viewing* 119-21.

...] lightens, reaching for the beautiful sun.<sup>12</sup>

Considered as an ekphrastic epigram, this is fairly unusual. Beyond the fact that the stone shows the “Persian [...]” (the Persian landscape? mountains? ruler? scene?) lightening, it’s not descriptive at all; further, it contains no reaction on the part of the poet to the scene depicted. Instead, Poseidippos remarks on how deceitful the stone is. And why would one be rubbing oil all over it in the first place? It is hard not to read this poem as a commentary on the act of ekphrasis itself. Interpretation is indeed a “tricky” matter. Only when the reader, poet, and artist are aligned in some sense does the work of art transmit its meaning effectively, through the mediation of the ekphrasis to the reader. In conclusion, then, Hellenistic poems can indeed tell us about Hellenistic art, but we must be careful in interpreting them and always consider the poet’s own project.

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<sup>12</sup> Translated by Frank Nisetich, in *The New Posidippus: A Hellenistic Poetry Book*, ed. Gutzwiller, K. (Oxford University Press, 2005): 20.