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Review: *Imitatio Alexandri in Hellenistic Art*

Trofimova, Anna A. Rom: L'erma di Bretschneider, 2012, ISBN: 978-88-8265-753-6, XV, 190 pages.

In his 1993 monograph on Alexander the Great's portraiture, *Faces of Power*, Andrew F. Stewart deliberately waived the opportunity to explore "the physical response to Alexander's image, […] the monuments that imitate or critique him" (Stewart XXXV). In doing so, Stewart followed the example of a myriad of other historians of Classical Art: Friedrich Koepp in 1892, Margarete Bieber in 1964, and R.R.R. Smith in 1988, to name but a few, all conceded that Alexander's image "entered the common stock of Greek iconography […] and was absorbed into a whole series of other images, divine and mythological" (Smith 59). A systematic discussion of the subject, however, was omitted in each case. In addition, it was seldom mentioned without its indissoluble connection to the ubiquitous issue of the ‚split-identity' of a vast number of heads, statues, and other works of art in museums around the world that are labeled Alexander-Achilles, Alexander-Herakles, Alexander-Helios, etc. The topic got short shrift, to say the least.

Anna A. Trofimova's book now provides a first and thus applaudable attempt to systematically account for images of Hellenistic Greek myth "that were inspired by images of Alexander" (Trofimova XI). On 150 densely illustrated pages Trofimova has laid out an ambitious piece of scholarship that every scholar engaged with Alexander's portraiture will have to consider and wrestle with. Among Trofimova's greatest contributions is her detailed discussion and illustration of many relatively unfamiliar works in the St. Petersburg Hermitage and her thorough reference of Russian scholarship on Alexander's portraiture.

An introductory chapter in which Trofimova concisely defines the outlines of her book is followed by a rough sketch of her approach to Alexander's portraiture (and ancient portraiture in general) as well as her notion of "the subject of imitations"(ibid. 1-15). The core of the book consists of six chapters that explore the influence of Alexander's portraits on the Hellenistic iconography of Achilles, Herakles, Dionysos, Helios, Apollo, the Dioskuroi, Giants, and Water Deities (ibid. Chapters III–VIII). A "Conclusion", an up to date "Bibliography" and a useful "Index" complete the book.

The legacy of scholarship on Alexander's portraiture is a heavy burden. Mainly because over the decades it has become an axiom that most scholars believe to be true, that Alexander's portraits highly influenced works of Hellenistic and Roman Art. Stewart himself, in the "Foreword" to Trofimova's book, calls it "a cliché" (ibid. VII). But clichés and axioms are often misleading and untrue: Both consist of notions – mere impressions actually – that have *not* been validated empirically, or been deduced from the material with a consistent methodology. The first step, then, should be to deconstruct this axiomatic edifice erected over the years and deduce what is possible (and what is not) from the material with a rigorous methodology. Trofimova, conversely, mobilizes an abundant array of images that attest to the preconceived notion that "today it is evident that these works include not only portraits but also imitations, […], images of ideal personages executed under the influence of the king" (ibid. XI). Until now, I would argue, what exists is an overwhelming quantity of images that look alike and scholarly clichés to contextualize them – but we still do not know if a system of deliberate visual references existed or how it worked.

Relying heavily on Ernst Gombrich's idea, "that art is a chain of experiments, a continuous reaction of one work to another", Trofimova assembles a respectable corpus of works of Hellenistic Art that have "a clear connection to Alexander's portraits" with the intention to define the role of the "'Alexander' component" in each of the respective iconographic traditions (ibid. XII). However, this notion of "art as a chain of

experiments" (ibid.) is not specified any further and sounds suspiciously like the postulate of a linear interpretative scheme in which everything after Alexander necessarily reacts to him, and to him only.

This linear interpretative scheme is in full effect in the six chapters devoted to Achilles, Herakles, Helios, etc. Accordingly, Trofimova's conclusions are surprisingly modest. Here is the quintessence:

> Alexander's iconography can be detected in a considerable volume of material in terms of quantity, quality and geographical spread […]. This indicates that the phenomenon is not local, but general in character and belongs among the category of regular patterns in the […] artistic development of the Ancient World […]. The Imitatio Alexandri in the iconography of gods and heroes reflects a change in conceptions of these personnages [...] and brought individuality into the iconography of heroes and gods. […] The image of Alexander had a substantial and unprecedented influence on the Hellenistic era. (ibid. XV; 141–145 passim)

It is undisputable that Trofimova's book is a highly relevant contribution and provides much new food for thought for the study of the impact of his portraiture on Greek and Roman Art. Nevertheless, the discipline still lacks a consistent method that allows to describe and understand the *imitatio Alexandri* in the visual arts. Peter Green, in an essay published in 1978, has shown that the modi of the political references to Alexander as well as the precision and semantic content of these *imitationes* vary considerably (Green 1-26). This, I think, applies for the visual arts as well. Most likely in an even more multifaceted way. What we need to unravel, consequently, is a highly complex system of visual references.

Bibliography

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