

ANCIENT GREEK PORTRAIT SCULPTURE: CONTEXTS, SUBJECTS, AND STYLES

BY SHEILA DILLON. PP.XX + 217, FIGS. 171. CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE 2006. \$90. ISBN 0-521-85498-9 (CLOTH).

This book is important because it dispels misconceptions about the Greek portrait and offers an alternate account of its development. Conventional thinking has it that Greek portraits only flourished in the Hellenistic period. More recently, images of fourth-century intellectuals and civic leaders ("role portraits") have been neatly categorized as distinct types. How to treat the Late Classical honorific portrait statues crowding the agora and the later works that do not fit into these so-called types? Dillon wields a keen critical sense in her study of Greek portraits from the fifth through the second centuries B.C.E. that defy the current classifications because their subjects cannot be identified among the corps of great thinkers and literati of Hellas. Their status as Roman copies also has relegated them to obscurity despite the recent resurgence of interest in Roman consumers of Greek art. Research on Roman collecting of Greek art has mainly bypassed the marble busts, herms, and figures of anonymous bearded elders that adorned villas and gardens in the empire.

The expanded range of works considered here as portraits is one of the significant contributions of this volume. We are given not only new data but also a theoretical framework to analyze the methods and approaches to the study of portraiture. Few books on the subject question the assumptions of the scholarship: the insistence on the portrait as a historical document that illustrates the biography of its subject, the drive to identify the heads with illustrious personages, and the tendency to match image and text (the sculpture is usually seen to be subordinate to the written sources). Dillon points out that the heads of only 20 individuals are securely identified,

and they represent the leading lights of the Hellenic intellectual pantheon: Homer, Aeschylus, Demosthenes, and so forth (2). The history of Greek portraiture, therefore, has been written on the basis of very few heads. That the evidence entails difficulties—subjects without names, heads without bodies, sculpture without sculptors, and works without dates—has led to their neglect. In a time when the literary canon is suspect, these portraits redolent of the wisdom of the ancients have become unfashionable (although they formed part of the decor of stylish Roman homes). In fact, the identifiable portraits have come to embody authority and have taken on an iconic quality that tends to put off both visual and contextual analysis. In other words, the lofty and otherworldly visage of Homer is thought to have transcended its time (and, in a sense, it has, due to such image's afterlife in numerous reproductions hawking the best of western civilization).

Dillon considers the role of likeness and reasons that, for portraits of long-dead culture heroes, the recognizability, not likeness, of the portrait was at issue. Even if inscriptions or poems praise the likeness of statues of contemporaries, ancient portraits tended to have conventionalized features or appear formulaic. She looks to the reliefs on gravestones for comparanda that suggest "an individual likeness was much less a concern than the visual expression of a person's place within a larger framework based on gender, age, and social status" (8). Thus, a representation of an individual was often cast as a type based on his or her age group or, less frequently, public role. Although attempts have been made to recast portrait typologies into studies of identity,

here the emphasis on social types provides a useful interpretive tool. Portrait features are analyzed as distinct elements of symbolic systems. The styling of hair and beards, for example, is explained as a part of the subject's self-fashioning and grooming that also became part of the sculptor's artistic repertory. For too long scholars have read portrait faces as transcriptions of the subject's physical appearance or as distillations of a personality that could be conjured from the contours of faces. This discussion extends the definition of the portrait by releasing it from the requirements of a likeness. It also demonstrates how a portrait can participate in the construction of a subject's identity without replicating physical features or alluding to biography.

Few portrait studies bridge the cultural divide and cover both Greece and Rome. Chapters treat Greek modes of production and contexts (in Athens, and the figural types of funerary monuments) as well as the reception of Roman copies and their role as guardians of a cultural canon. The catalogue is ample but not overwhelming. Although Dillon makes only modest claims for her contribution to the field, the implications of this exemplary study are far-reaching.

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