

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2008.04.07

Sheila Dillon, *Ancient Greek Portrait Sculpture. Context, Subjects, and Styles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. 217; figs. 171. ISBN 0-521-85498-9. \$90.00.

Reviewed by Peter Schultz, Concordia College (schultz@cord.edu)

Word count: 1541 words

Let's say that you wanted to run a graduate, or an advanced undergraduate, seminar on Greek and Roman portraiture at an American or British university. In addition to your usual packet of articles including your own personal favorites, which books would you use? Richter (*The Portraits of the Greeks*, 1965) and Fittschen (*Griechische Porträts*, 1988) would both be on library reserve, to be sure. Then you'd be certain to have four or five copies of the essential texts available for everyone to take home and read from cover to cover: Hallett's *The Roman Nude*, Smith's *Hellenistic Royal Portraits*, Stewart's *Faces of Power*, and Zanker's *The Mask of Socrates*. To this list, you would now want to add Sheila Dillon's superb *Ancient Greek Portrait Sculpture. Context, Subjects, and Styles*. It is a great book. And it is hard to do justice to the many issues that it raises. All the more reason, I think, to use the volume in your next seminar on Greek and Roman portraiture.

Dillon divides her text into three sections. She begins with an introductory chapter, ("Facing up to Anonymity"), in which she outlines her method and the problems that she hopes to tackle. She follows this chapter with two larger sections ("Facing the Past: Greek Portraits in Roman Contexts" and "Facing the Subject: Interpreting Identity in Greek Portraiture") in which she engages the aforementioned methodological and material challenges head-on.

The first part of Dillon's book, "Facing the Past: Greek Portraits in Roman Contexts," is divided into two chapters. In the first chapter, "Making Portraits of the Greeks," Dillon shows how important (and complex) the processes were by which Roman "copies of Greek portraits" were made. She also shows that a wide range of representational agendas was at work in the Roman contexts, workshops and markets; there can be no doubt that all these agendas left their stamp on the material evidence. At the same time, however, Dillon employs a kind of traditional *Kopienkritik* throughout. I say "kind of" here because Dillon does not really dwell on reconstructing possible "Greek originals." Rather, her underlying move is to subtly re-demonstrate what seems to have been forgotten by some recent students of Greek and Roman portraiture. Namely, that Roman portraits of Greeks, or Greek-like Roman portraits of Greek subjects, were products of craftsmen, artisans, artists and patrons who were fascinated by, and who sometimes cherished aspects of, a specifically *Greek* visual tradition. That this tradition was modified or adjusted as needed by Roman artists or patrons is, of course, undeniable. At the same time, however, Dillon shows that this fact does not (and cannot) diminish the impact of Greek visual culture on Roman period portraiture of Greeks. The two

phenomena are intertwined. Indeed, Dillon reveals that ignoring this reality does needless harm to the evidence.

The second chapter of Part One, "Displaying Portraits of the Greeks," treats Roman portrait galleries that contained images of Greek culture heroes. Here Dillon beautifully blends reception theory with close readings of the physical evidence. The result is an insightful and flexible model for looking at the Romanization of Greek culture within specific architectural contexts. The original processes of organizing and interpreting these galleries -- which involved various decisions regarding style, placement, theme and more -- are seen by Dillon as culturally situated activities with great expressive potential in both intellectual and political terms. And again, in the end, it is the specific and advertised *Greekness* of these spaces and the images that they contained which allowed patrons to claim authority and literal ownership over the Hellenic cultural canon. That Dillon acknowledges the possible *failure* of this aim when these galleries were experienced by certain individuals only renders her overall reading more persuasive. While it may have been nice to examine more deeply the tradition of this kind of architectural/sculptural display (there are numerous examples beyond the famous Hellenistic examples that Dillon gives), there can be little doubt that this chapter will become a classic model of contextual art history.

The second part of the book "Facing the Subject: Interpreting Identity in Greek Portraiture," is also divided into two chapters. In the first chapter, "The Appearance of Greek Portraits," Dillon draws on a large body of Greek and Roman material to reconstruct how Greek portraits functioned in visual terms. (With regard to the organization of her book, Dillon's earlier insistence on the importance of Roman-period portraits of Greeks becomes clear. Indeed, it would have been otherwise difficult to accept some of the arguments Dillon makes in this chapter had she not so carefully laid the groundwork for her analysis in the previous two chapters.) Critical to Dillon's analysis is the connection between fourth and third century grave reliefs and traditional portrait types. While she sees a deep connection between the two genres, she is also careful to point out the existence of many small deviations from and within such types. More important here is her conclusion that many of the typological and stylistic options available to sculptors which have traditionally been called "Hellenistic" seem to be quite firmly rooted in the fourth century B.C. This important conclusion now seems very difficult to refute.

In the second chapter of Part Two, "Greek Portraits in Practice," Dillon aims to place her previous work within a specific set of historical and political contexts: early Hellenistic Athens. Influenced by, and to some extent, moving against Smith and Zanker (much more the later than the former), Dillon suggests that role-portraits and other common, modern categories of Greek portraiture might not be as firm (or as useful) as they seem. The idea here is that a fourth-century portrait could say quite a bit about any given individual and need not dwell only on a single facet of his personality. For Dillon (and others before her), one of the most important characteristics for any given "sitter" was his role as a "good citizen." Dillon shows how this role was communicated across a wide variety of types well into the Hellenistic period. (That this move seems to reaffirm the usefulness of some traditional portrait types deserves further thought.) One point that may have been nice to bring back into the discussion here is the possible significance of "likeness" in fourth- and third-century Athens and how this concept may have factored into the blending of types that Dillon discusses. To be sure, for example, Theophrastus was a philosopher and his portrait's age, short hair and short beard do all point to a "man of action" type, but this need not be paradox (or even be that complicated) if one of the sculptor's agendas was to capture some aspect of the thinker's "actual" appearance.

The book ends with a short conclusion and two appendices. The first is a Museum Index; the second is a Portrait Catalogue. The short subject index at the end of the book is perfunctory.

There are two points regarding Dillon's method that are worth pointing out by way of conclusion. First, one of Dillon's primary objectives is to examine portraits for which we have no clear identification and to study this "anonymous" sculpture with as much care and nuance as we might find in the study of portraits of Homer, Euripides or Demosthenes, for example. The result of this decision is to bring the locus of analysis back to the objects themselves, to emphasize the complexity of the traditions within which they rest and to allow lesser known "anonymous" portraits to play a more prominent role in the material history of Greek and Roman portraiture. (The "anonymous" is in quotes throughout here since *our* inability to identify some of these images should, naturally, not be confused with their original status as named and/or recognizable portraits.) This is a welcome strategy, specifically because it allows students of Greek portraiture a much more complicated picture of the field. And complexity is what we want. While there is no doubt that the traditional portrait-types and categories remain useful tools, it is refreshing to see the (sometimes hyper-intellectualized) structures upon which they are built poked and prodded a bit.

Second, Dillon insists on the importance of the *Roman* context within which many of her objects were originally situated. This, by itself, is hardly revolutionary. Indeed, this kind of move has been something of a leitmotif in scholarship treating Greek and Roman sculpture for the last two decades. What is exciting about Dillon's approach is that this real concern with the Roman contexts is paired and juxtaposed with her belief that these objects can still tell us something about *Greek* art. Now this traditional position has fallen (somewhat needlessly) out of favor in recent years. Dillon's work, however, calls this specific trend and its underlying methodological assumption into question. Indeed, one of the great pleasures in reading this book involves Dillon's careful and systematic deconstruction of the limp (and fundamentally *boring*) neo-positivist arguments that have been floating around some American studies of Greek sculpture since at least the 1970s. Dillon shows that a robust, complex and imaginative history of Greek sculpture can and should include possible Roman reflections of Greek visual traditions by way of careful analysis and close contextual readings of the evidence. She also shows that such a history of Greek sculpture is possible.

[Read Latest](#)[Index for 2008](#)[Change Greek Display](#)[Archives](#)[BMCR Home](#)

HTML generated at 12:09:46, Thursday, 03 April 2008