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Rhetoric and Innovation in Hellenistic Art by Kristen Seaman

Évelyne Prioux

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Kristen Seaman, *Rhetoric and Innovation in Hellenistic Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 2020. Pp. xv, 186 + VIII color plates.

In this book, Kristen Seaman offers a study of innovations in Hellenistic art and explains them through the growing impact of rhetorical exercises (*progymnasmata*) in the intellectual training of Greek artists and viewers.

Chapter 1 ('Introduction') reviews some major theories about innovations in Hellenistic art, and criticizes the idea according to which the innovations of Hellenistic art would be the result of cultural hybridization and of the close encounter of Greek artists with Egyptian culture or with cultural productions of the Ancient Near East. Seaman rather believes that the new works art produced in the sophisticated *milieu* of Hellenistic royal courts were deeply marked by the artists' familiarity with rhetorical devices and common rhetorical exercises¹. As she notes, the few informations that we have tend to indicate that several prominent Greek artists came from a wealthy and educated background. The innovations of Hellenistic art can thus possibly be seen as the result of a change within Greek culture, namely the growing importance and spread, during the late fifth century and the fourth century, of rhetoric training. To illustrate this view, the book then proceeds with three case studies focusing on Alexandrian and Pergamene art: in each chapter, a famous Hellenistic work of art is presented as the possible visual equivalent of one of the *progymnasmata*. Of course, these rhetorical exercises are, as far as we know, named, listed and defined by later authors, but it is probable that they were already part of the common training of students in the late classical and early hellenistic period. Chapter 2 studies the Telephos Frieze of the Pergamon Great Altar and proposes to see it as the visual equivalent of a *diegema*, narration; chapter 3 offers a reading of the so-called Apotheosis of Homer by Archelaus of Priene as an *enkomiastion* involving *ethopoia*; chapter 4 studies the connections between Sosos' *Asarotos oikos* and literary *ekphrasis*.

This book is thus a welcome attempt at bridging the gaps between the study of visual art and of literary works. It seems to me that this interdisciplinary approach is especially necessary in the case of Hellenistic art, since Hellenistic courts provided ample possibilities of contact between writers and painters or sculptors. A few monographs have studied similar themes over the past two decades².

Before reviewing in a more detailed manner chapters 2 to 4, it seems to me that a *caueat* is necessary when reading Seaman's rejection of previous theories on hybridization in aulic artworks of the Hellenistic period. Although there is probably no such hybridization in the artworks that she extensively studies (the Telephos Frieze, the 'Apotheosis' of Homer and the *Asarotos oikos*), several important studies have effectively shown that some literary works and visual creations of Hellenistic Alexandria were indeed impacted by the encounter with Egyptian culture and implied a certain number of clever references to Egyptian religion or to Egyptian words³. Although I find

1 On the interactions between rhetoric and the visual arts, also see A. Rouveret, *Histoire et imaginaire de la peinture ancienne (V^e siècle av. J.-C. - I^{er} siècle ap. J.-C.)*, Rome, 1989; M. Cojannot-Le Blanc, C. Pouzadoux, É. Prioux (eds.), *L'Héroïque et le champêtre*, 2 vols., Paris, 2014-2015

2 See especially Graham Zanker, *Modes of Viewing in Hellenistic Poetry and Art*, Madison, 2004; Michael Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2009; Pascale Linant de Bellefonds & Évelyne Prioux, *Voir les Mythes. Poésie hellénistique et arts figurés*, Paris, 2017 (apparently unknown to Seaman).

3 For literary works and especially poems by Callimachus, see e.g. D. Selden, «Alibis», *Classical Antiquity*, 17-2, 1998, pp. 289-412; S. Stephens, *Seeing Double: Intercultural Poetics in Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Berkeley, 2003; L. Llewellyn-Jones & S. Winder, «A Key to Berenike's Lock? The Hathoric Model of Queenship in Early Ptolemaic Egypt», in A. Erskine & L. Llewellyn-Jones (eds.), *Creating a Hellenistic World*, Swansea, 2011, pp. 247-269; Linant de Bellefonds & Prioux, *op. cit.*, chap. 3. Other studies have focused on cultural hybridization or at least clever quotations of Egyptian words and notions in Alexandrian sculpture and painting: see for instance the analysis of the Nile colossus by P. Moreno (*Scultura ellenistica*, vol. 1, Rome, 1994, pp. 326-329), who convincingly shows that the creator of the Hellenistic archetype of this Roman sculpture made a wordplay on the Egyptian word for 'new-born baby', or the reading of the Nilotic mosaic of Palestrina by J. Trinquier («La mosaïque Barberini de Palestrina et l'image de la faune éthiopienne dans l'Égypte lagide», in F.-H. Massa-Pairault & G. Sauron, *Images et modernité hellénistiques : appropriation et représentation du monde d'Alexandre à César*, Rome, 2007, pp. 23-60). Sadly, Seaman fails to cite these recent approaches to cultural hybridization (she does cite Moreno 1994, but not in relation with the Nile colossus).

Seaman's approach to be generally convincing, it seems to me that many varied factors can and should be taken into account when trying to explain the innovations of Hellenistic art, and that hybridization has a rightful place among them (see, *e.g.*, the iconography of the God Sarapis, which is an Alexandrian creation).

Chapter 1 presents a detailed analysis of the Telephos Frieze of Pergamon that was most probably sculpted under the reign of Eumenes II and consisted of 74 sculpted pannels running on four walls. Seaman shrewdly comments on the order of the pannels, reviewing previous hypotheses. She convincingly suggests to attribute pannels 44-46 to the North wall of the portico and inserts them in the episode that deals with Telephus' birth on Mount Parthenion rather than in the Pergamene part of his life. She argues that the Frieze should be understood as a *diegema* (narration) and, more specifically, as a *bios* (life, biography) of Telephus. More surprisingly, Seaman contends that this visual narration was a complete innovation in Greek art and that we know no previous examples of such a visual *diegema* (see, *e.g.*, p. 52: «Earlier Greek monuments had represented the individual deeds of the heroes Herakles and Theseus. As far as we can tell, no previous monument had told the entire life story of its hero. We must ask, then, why the frieze took such an unusual narrative form»). Although Pergamene art certainly brings narration to an entirely new scale and although the Great Altar can be understood as presenting its viewer with visual equivalents of epic poems (the Gigantomachy Frieze, the Telephus Frieze) and creating a striking continuity between scenes by placing two halves of two scenes on the same slab with figures turning their back to each other, I must confess I am not convinced by Seaman's theory on the absence of narratives (or continuous narratives?) in earlier Greek art. She cites and discards the example of the «Theseus Cups», stating that they «do not tell stories (...): they merely depict individual episodes or scenes which are not always placed sequentially». Although it is true that individual episodes are not always placed sequentially on these cups, Greek viewers were familiar with *prolepsis* and *analepsis* in poetic and dramatic works on Theseus (e.g. Theseus' narration of his own adventures on the way to Athens in Sophocles' *Aegeus*), and this could account for the surprising order of some scenes. If a *bios* is normally told in chronological order, a *diegema* allows for a much more complex structure. It also seems to me that the widely accepted reconstruction by Pierre de la Coste-Messelière of the sequence of metopies on the South Side of the Athenian Treasury in Delphi provides us with a striking pre-Hellenistic example of a visual narration: they would indeed represent (1) Theseus and Sinis; (2) Theseus and Procrustes or Sciron; (3) Theseus and Cercyon; (4) Theseus and Sciron or Procrustes; (5) Athena and Theseus; (6) Pallas; (7) Theseus and the bull of Marathon; (8) Theseus and Minotaur; (9) Theseus and Antiope. I would also disagree with the statement (p. 55) that the scenes on the 'Homeric bowl' showing the death of Penelope's suitors⁴ are set in the wrong order. It is true that the drawing of the scenes that Seaman reproduces seems to encourage this conclusion by showing, from left to right, scenes that correspond to: **a.** *Od.* 22.161-162 and 188-189; **b.** *Od.* 22.205-208, 226-227, 233-234; **c.** *Od.* 22, 192-196 and 200. The cup is nevertheless a circular object, intended to be manipulated and turned around in one's hands and, unlike Modern times occidental viewers, Ancient viewers did not always read an image from left to right⁵. I thus believe that the viewer of the 'Homeric bowl' was expected to read the scenes in the order **a.** - **c.** - **b.** and to make the cup turn anticlockwise⁶.

Despite these small shortcomings, I believe that Seaman's first chapter makes a very important point about the political meaning of the Telephus Frieze, when she argues that Eumenes II wanted to promote the figure of Telephus rather than Pergamus as the founding father of his capital city and that Eumenes II wanted to be seen as new and greater Telephus and that the Frieze played on a *synkrisis* between the hero and the Hellenistic ruler. Her explanation of the major role that the

4 Berlin, SMPK, inv. V.I.3161n.

5 See, *e.g.*, the Marlborough gem, a cameo that clearly expects to be read from right to left.

6 On visual narratives, it also seems important to cite R. Brilliant, *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art*, Ithaca-London, 1986; although this book is mainly concerned with Roman art, it provides important insight in Etruscan practices and is thus a very interesting introduction to storytelling in the classical and Hellenistic periods.

Frieze gives to Hiera, one of Telephus' wives, also strikes me as very sensible and useful. According to Seaman, the way in which the Frieze tells the story of Telephus and Hiera illustrates the possibility of bringing together Greek and Mysian identities.

Chapter 2 is, in my view, the most successful and thought-provoking one in this book. It indeed offers a detailed and innovative study of the so-called 'Apotheosis of Homer' discovered in Bovillae in the mid 17th century and now kept in the British Museum. Seaman's analysis focuses on the longstanding hypothesis that *Oikoumene* and *Khronos* (in the lower left angle of the relief) have the facial features of Arsinoe III and Ptolemy IV. In the past, this relief has also been brought in connection with Pergamene scholarship and especially with the theories of Crates of Mallos⁷; Seaman does not really consider this hypothesis, but offers, instead, a technical and stylistical analysis of the relief and argues, convincingly, for the existence of a lost Alexandrian archetype. In her view, the relief in itself would be a Late Hellenistic copy of this lost original. The relief itself was discovered near Bovillae, in the Villa di Tor Ser Paolo, and Seaman posits that «it seems most prudent, then, to assume that the villa was a secondary or even tertiary context for the relief in the Late Antique period, when such caches for sculpture were common» (p. 71). Although this is possible, it should be mentioned that this villa is believed by Granino Cerere to have been the propriety of the Mamurrana family and then an imperial villa belonging to the Emperor Claudius' family. It is thus possible that this relief, as well as the *Tabula Iliaca Capitolina* and a now lost trophic monument showing a portrait of Claudius carried to heaven by an eagle (both discovered in the same context), were part of a private collection owned by members of the imperial family in the 1st century CE.

According to Seaman, the original context of the lost archetype would have been the Alexandrian *Homereion*, a temple decorated by Ptolemy IV. This statement strikes me as very plausible and fits well with the interest of Ptolemy IV and his wife both in Homeric cult and the Thespian sanctuary of the Muses. As Seaman states, the relief is generally believed to be a votive offering by a victorious poet (possibly the anonymous character represented by a statue in the second tier of the relief); instead, she offers a rather compelling hypothesis: the relief is an *enkomion* of Homer and of the Ptolemies who bestow honors on the father of all poets and it possibly reproduces a painting set on order of the king in the *Homereion*.

As she notes, the relief juxtaposes various spaces: a sanctuary of Homer in the lower tier and a zigzagging mountain, probably the Helicon, in the middle and higher tiers. In the higher tier, Zeus is represented as a river god, in company of Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses. The nine Muses and Apollo occupy the middle of the composition and the zigzagging path of the mountainway. Underneath, in the sanctuary, the Alexandrian kings, represented as a personified gods of Space and Time, crown Homer while a procession of further personifications (literary genres, but also moral virtues and the child *Physis* —'Nature') greets the divine poet. I especially find Seaman's comparison of the relief with the composition of the Nilotic mosaic of Palestrina very compelling. Seaman shows the similarities between the relief and Hellenistic poems (especially hymns and *enkomia* by Callimachus and Theocritus, that start from Zeus and question the boundaries between gods, heroes, humans and celebrate the divine nature of a given king, and contain, as does the relief, allusions to Hesiod's *Theogony*).

To account for the higher tiers, Seaman quotes the famous interpretation of Pollitt (1986): «Inspiration springs from Zeus and Memory and is passed from heaven to earth by the Muses. Its foremost recipient was Homer, who is both a patron god and symbolic ancestor of the victorious poet for whom the relief was made. Homer's epics will last for all time and are universal, hence he is crowned by Chronos and Oikoumene; they celebrate both myth and history; they are the fountainhead of the literary genres that came after epic (lyric poetry, tragedy and comedy, arranged in the historical order of their invention); and they have bestowed, like all worthy poetry, essential moral virtues upon human nature.» Seaman completes this compelling reading of the relief by insisting on the fact that Oikoumene and Chronos are also theomorphic portraits of the king and

7 See e.g. Moreno, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 574-579.

queen and that the relief therefore emphasizes the ability of the Ptolemaic couple to crown and honor the divine Homer: the relief would in fact show Ptolemaic mastery over Greek experience. As is noted by Seaman, the meaning of the personified virtues in the lower right angle of the composition is not totally clear: earlier explanations of the relief generally believe that these virtues are the one that the reading of Homer's poetry will develop in a child (here represented by *Physis*, with a reference to the child's pre-educational innate nature)⁸. Seaman's view seems to be a little different since she believes that the relief is conceived as an *enkomion* of Homer and that it recalls «the ongoing debate concerning the extent to which human nature—including Homer's—determines genius and the success of literary production» (p. 98).

This chapter offers new ideas and a fresh look at a very well-known work of art, even if p. 109 seems to go a little to far, when assuming that Ptolemy IV-Khronos could be conflated with Kronos, father of Zeus, or that the relief involves a form of irony (cf. «it ultimately questions how seriously the spectator ought to take the relief's claims that Zeus—or Homer—comes from Ptolemy IV»). I am not entirely convinced, either, by the insistence on the role of *ethopoia* in the relief. Personifications are one of the possible ways of speaking about a character and of naming the qualities of Homer, but we have seen that the personifications in the lower tier of the relief can also be interpreted as an allegory (*pace* Seaman) of the benefits that the reading of Homer bestows on the innate nature of a child. If so, the place of *ethopoia* in the relief would be extremely limited. Seaman's comparison of the relief with an *enkomion* seems to me to be far more convincing than her insistence on *ethopoia*.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Sosos' *Unswept Room* (*asarotos oikos*), a lost masterpiece from Hellenistic Pergamon, that is known thanks to a description in the Elder Pliny (36, 184) and to various copies discovered in Rome, Aquileia, Thysdrus and Uppena. Seaman reviews carefully the differences between the known copies, as well as their reliability (for instance, the Vatican mosaic has undergone heavy restorations). The copies suggest that the original was a pi-shaped pavement adorning a dining room and that it had a central *emblema*. Pliny's text suggests that this *emblema* represented doves drinking from a *cantharus*, a motive that has possibly survived in a 1st century CE wall-painting discovered at Pergamon, in the House of Attalos (pl. VIIIa) and, differently, in the famous mosaic from Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli (Rome, Musei Capitolini, inv. 1256; pl. VIIIb). Strangely, Seaman does not comment on the heavy differences between both images: the wall-painting shows a *cantharus*, but the birds are not drinking from it and don't seem to be pigeons; as for the mosaic, it shows pigeons, but it seems difficult to describe the golden basin from which they drink as a «*cantharus*». As Seaman points out, a plausible location for Sosos' masterpiece would be room I of palace V, a large dining room with space for twenty-two *klinai*; she also believes the commissioner to be Eumenes II, which would set the mosaic in the first half of the 2nd century BCE. Seaman also rightly points out that the entire pavement alludes to the banquet: the *asarotos oikos* shows with exquisite tridimensionality the left-overs of a varied meal which would have mainly taken place in the first part of the banquet, whereas the *cantharus* points to the second part of the banquet and to the consumption of wine. For the viewers, everything appears as if the guests of a previous banquet had left the room and as if servants had not yet cleaned it: doves drink wine or water from an abandoned vessel, while scraps of food still lie everywhere on the ground. In Seaman's view, the illusionistic art of Sosus, with its clever tridimensionality and its attention to the rendering of shades, is the visual equivalent of an *ekphrasis*, a vivid description of objects. Personally, I am not so sure that it is fitting to apply the name of this *progymnasma*: it seems to me that the concepts of *akribeia*, *akribologia* and *enargeia*, which were assuredly part of the critical terminology of Hellenistic times would probably be more appropriate. Seaman nevertheless presents us with very stimulating questions regarding the intentions of Sosus' *trompe-l'œil*. She shows that the scattering of left-overs on the ground was perceived as rude by refined Hellenistic symposiasts and therefore questions the possible irony and humorous intentions of the mosaicist. Was he being irreverent? Seaman rightly concludes that he probably wanted to highlight the contrast

8 See the above quoted study by Pollitt and especially Moreno, 1994, vol. I, p. 576.

between the refined and elegant real dinner parties of the king and the exuberant, and yet fictive past banquet suggested by the mosaic. It seems to me that Seaman here touches a very important aspect of Hellenistic aulic culture: irreverence, and, what is more, a form of irreverence that enjoyed a payroll. It is my belief that Hellenistic kings did encourage and even commission such forms of mildly disturbing poetry and art, possibly with the intent of showing that *parrhesia* («free speech») existed in their courts and kingdoms. This phenomenon was possibly intended to present as liberal and clement a power that was in fact autocratic and exercised a heavy control on all sorts of cultural productions⁹.

Fascinating as this chapter may be, I remain puzzled by the fact that Seaman never questions the problem of the nature of the cup depicted in the bird mosaic from Villa Hadriana: is Pliny just vaguely or mistakenly speaking of a *cantharus* without having a specific shape in mind? Could the name *cantharus* be extended to much larger objects such as the basin shown in this image? Even more puzzling is the fact that Seaman never refers to the allegoric reading of this mosaic that has long been proposed by a wide range of scholars since Klaus Parlasca («Das pergaminische Taubenmosaik und der Sogennante Nestor-Becher», *JdI*, 78, pp. 256-293). Seaman cites Parlasca in her notes as an important study on the bird mosaic, but never refers to his important interpretation of this image as an echo, in Hellenistic Pergamon, to the ongoing debates on the shape and decoration of Nestor's cup (a heavy *depas* that would only be carried with difficulty). In Parlasca's view, the pigeons were indeed intended as a clever allusion to the philologic debate on the aspect of the cup: did it represent the Pleiades (possibly as winged figures such as the one that can be seen under the cup's handle on the mosaic) or *peleiades* ('pigeons')?

If one accepts Parlasca's clever interpretation of Sosus' mosaic, how are we to interpret the interaction between this possible *emblema* and the surrounding *asarotos oikos*? Are there several levels of meaning? Was the mind-boggling *asaratos oikos* the conversational ice-breaker that then allowed for more complex and erudite discussions concerning the central *emblema* and Homeric philology?

In conclusion, Seaman's book presents the reader with three innovative case-studies: each of them presents us with a clear technical analysis of a well-known Hellenistic masterpiece and asks interesting questions about its original context, the intentions of the artist and the commissioner, and offers a refreshing perspective on the refined culture and high standards of education of court painters and sculptors. She thus fights back unfounded prejudices about ancient artists and shows that their art involved as much subtlety and literary culture as contemporary poetry. I am less convinced by the general project of drawing parallels between Hellenistic works of art and rhetorical *progymnasmata*: the theories of Hellenistic artists were at least as much shaped by poetry and philosophy as they were by rhetoric, and I am not sure that the appeal for *trompe-l'œil* in Pergamene culture was ever shaped by the shared practice of *ekphrasis* as a school exercise. Some artists of the classical period appear to have already developed extraordinary skills as masters of illusion, and, at least since Gorgias, entire parts of the rhetorical art had been felt to rely on technics of illusion¹⁰. *Ekphrasis* was only one of the exercises in which precision (*akribeia*) and vividness (*enargeia*) could be deemed necessary, but these qualities were also eagerly sought for by many Hellenistic historians and poets. More importantly, I feel that the book should have been a few pages longer, in order to provide the reader, at least in the footnotes, with more details: several assertions are indeed too quick or questionable, and possibly misleading for younger students. The omission of Parlasca's interpretation of the pigeon mosaic is a revealing example, but there are similar problems concerning the dating of literary works: Lycophron's *Alexandra* is presented as the work of one of Eumenes' contemporaries on p. 60, but this dating is far from certain and has been thoroughly questioned over the three past decades; similarly, on p. 127, Leonidas of Tarentum is

9 See the special issue of *Camena*, 24, 2019 («L'irrévérence dans les arts visuels et les descriptions de monuments»).

10 See, for instance, Plato, *Sophist*, 233d-234b; see also the parallel between the *demegorike lexis* and scenographic painting in Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1414a.

presented as the first author who wrote about Myron's *Cow*, but we know nothing of the relative chronology of his epigram and of Posidippus' poem 66 A.-B. on the same topic. The book is generally well produced, with very few quibbles¹¹; it provides abundant illustrations that will be of considerable help for all readers.

11 λῆγει instead of λέγει (p. 96), «qualitites» for «qualities» and «such the first-century» for «such as the first-century» (p. 97), ἀπο for ἀπό (p. 106), es for ex (p. 126), and the French word *trompe-l'œil* should be written with a hyphen (*passim*).