The human figure is distinctively prominent in the visual arts of the ancient Greek world. The essential route to understanding this material therefore naturally leads through close attention to the body, including its proportions, adornments, postures and relationships with other bodies in representation. The analysis of pose is often particularly illuminating, as many classic publications demonstrate. The curious gesture and stance of a classical Amazon type, for instance, made sense when Evelyn Harrison recognized them as fit for the action of poling a boat (‘Two Pheidian Heads: Nike and Amazon’, in D. Kurtz and B. Sparkes, eds., ‘The Eye of Greece: Studies in the Art of Athens’, Cambridge 1982, 53–88).

Jane Masségila’s recent book extends this tradition of scholarship by attending to the body’s communicative potential in a manner borrowed from the fields of anthropology and psychology. M.’s monograph sets out to augment art historical methods with language and ideas derived from research in non-verbal communication (‘NVC’). According to this work, the body’s attitudes often convey meanings different or in addition to those that come across in overt means like speech; studying the body language of living persons can catch them unawares or probe their hidden turns of mind. When applied to a work of Hellenistic art, this approach yields, for instance, this interpretation of a pose found on a gravestone from Rhenaia (Athens NM 1209, M.’s fig. 2.44): «This closed position, which in the real world is often associated with a (sometimes subconscious) unwillingness to interact, is at odds with the otherwise attentive connotations of the head and legs» (199–200). The finding is beyond dispute, although conventional visual analysis might have reached the same result. The implicit parallel between the sculpted gesture and human behavior of our own time downplays the gravestone’s status as a work of art, obedient to conventions of its own. Visual images of the Hellenistic period typically employ a naturalistic mode of representation, which blurs the divide between art and life, but this instability bears witness to cultural attitudes that are themselves worthy of notice.

M. examines sculptural images of many sorts, including honorific statues, votive reliefs, funerary monuments, and terracotta figurines, with a view to adducing the links between bodily configurations and distinctions of status, gender, context, and function. Since one of her stated aims is to probe «why certain body language traits were deemed so suitable for images of particular social groups» (2), she offers a systematic survey of human types according to social categories such as ruler, citizen, slave, woman, man. She does not discuss depictions of divinities or mythological personages, although they too, of course, appear in human form in art. This omission undermines the project somewhat, since it is hard to conceive that depictions of gods and goddesses, particularly the most prominent and artistically ambitious, did not reflect the ideals of bodily behavior or affect the imagination of individuals in the Hellenistic age.

The first part of the book discusses depictions of ‘Kings and the Civic Elite’, and the second such ‘Lower-Status Groups’ as servants, old men, old women, Africans, and dwarfs. M. treats each of these groups separately, discussing the
appearance of each type in various forms of sculpture. For instance, citizen women are considered as depicted in gravestones and portrait statues, and then as shown in terracotta figurines. A relatively limited number of postures, gestures, and body actions, to use M.’s terminology, are then found to belong to individuals within any one class. Even kings assume a narrow range of attitudes, standing or seated at ease, or in configurations suited to hunting or battle. M. analyzes poses one element at a time as they relate to like examples, such as portraits of intellectuals, seated with legs crossed, seated with legs uncrossed, seated with shoulders rounded, seated with torso upright.

M.’s focus on objects of Hellenistic date usually excludes consideration of a gesture’s prior ancestry in Greek art. In the balanced discussion of the seated figure known as the Drunken Old Woman, M. connects the raised head and open mouth with singing and compares other seated old women, but she does not draw parallels with earlier singing figures. M. concludes that the statue offers «a study in the Hellenistic taboo of uninhibited expression and neglecting one’s social role» (253). But some of the same traits appear in likenesses of ideal figures, like the inspired musician on an amphora attributed to the Berlin Painter (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 56.171.38). Considered within this tradition, the Drunken Old Woman is remarkable less for its moral potential than for the pathos implicit in the contrast between the debased condition of the singer and the elevated claims of song.

M. discerns culturally-conditioned body language in some unusual postures, offering original interpretations. The active stance of the male dwarf from the Mahdia shipwreck, for instance, is identified as belonging to a particular dance, named by M. the «tuck-for-luck» dance, on analogy with similar figures in comparable positions (289–291). Although M. herself acknowledges the cultural specificity of body language, she also discerns gestures that seem to have universal implications. Terracotta images of nurses with young children, for example, frequently display transparent-looking attitudes of affection and concern for their charges. In some cases, the science of body language sheds limited light on a pose more fully explained in terms of craftsmanship and visual impact. The arm placed across the body, for example, may indeed constitute a «barrier signal» when it occurs spontaneously in life (126), but its presence in the so-called ‘pudicitia’ pose, which is found in many female portraits, seems less to do with protection and retreat than with the production of a monument lacking in fragile extensions, relatively easy to carve, and suited to elegant treatment of surface and drapery (154–155).

The final division of M.’s text deduces five general rules of representation from the conclusions reached in the previous chapters. All of these principles align with existing research, which M.’s painstaking survey neatly reinforces. Hellenistic sculpture is found to favor asymmetrical poses and groupings of poses. A taste for «thematic incongruity» sometimes places figures of lowly status in postures associated with higher social standing. A preference for gendered body language distinguishes depictions of men and women. Movement tends to appear exclusively in images of the highest and lowest classes, a forceful, linear motion for rulers and a twisting, dance-like form for persons of humble station. The fifth trend defined is the inclination to conformity in depictions of elite individuals.
and the contrasting diversity of images depicting members of lower social
groups. These findings do not alter the standard view of Hellenistic visual culture
but emphasize the social attitudes the material implies.

Abundant illustrations integrated with the text reinforce M.’s picture of a soci-
ety differentiated by gender, class, and body language. Most of the photographs
derive from standard sources, but a sizeable fraction are M.’s own, and in her
preface she generously grants permission for their reproduction in subsequent
publications (viii). Each illustration in M.’s book carries not only an identifying
caption but also a short commentary highlighting the features examined in the
discussion. The captions often state with authority the conclusions M. reaches
stepwise in nuanced fashion in the body of the argument. The parallel texts com-
plement one another, but sometimes evidence apparent in the photographs goes
without comment. The images of citizen men in funerary art reproduced on
pages 105 to 111, for example, include gesturing servant figures discussed neither
in the captions nor the text, except briefly in the later chapter on postures for
servants (194). The apparent lack of interaction among the figures does not ex-
clude the sense that different sorts of people are juxtaposed here in a way that
supports M.’s argument. On occasion, references to illustrations in the text are
confusing, as on pages 189 and 304, where an alternate system of numbering
seems to be used. Overall, the text suffers from an unfortunate count of typo-
graphical errors.

There is much to recommend M’s reconstruction of the social expectations,
aspirations and prejudices that contributed to Hellenistic art. A particular
strength of her approach is its capacity to encompass artistically accomplished
representations along with products of more modest workmanship. That the
over life-sized bronze known as the Terme Ruler and the statuette of Ptolemy II
in the British Museum (BM1849,0517.1) both have the right arm raised above the
shoulder, the right leg bent, and the hips tilted does suggest this pose has some-
ting to say about how rulers were expected to look in Hellenistic art. It is hard-
er to assess how such conventions in the visual arts might reflect or reinforce
prevailing attitudes in antiquity. M. finds considerable conformity of body lan-
guage within the types that she considers, but this is due in part to her choice of
material and the way she categorizes it. J.J. Pollitt’s comprehensive ‘Art in the
Hellenistic Age’ (Cambridge 1986) devotes chapters to royal imagery, portrai-
ture, and unideal generic types, but he also considers the depiction of divinities,
mythological figures, and historical scenes. The Gauls and other defeated groups
associated with the Attalid dedications display many remarkable poses, as do
Laocoön and his sons in the famous group in the Vatican, the sleeping satyr
known as the Barberini Faun, and the gods and giants doing battle on the Great
Altar of Pergamon. It is astonishing how markedly the staid postures considered
by M. in the images of mortal men and women contrast with the expressive and
dramatic attitudes that superhuman figures assume. Although M. makes no claim
to study every pose in Hellenistic art, it seems significant that the bodies of mor-
tals and immortals behave so differently, the one characterized by tight and con-
servative conventions, the other by degrees of abandon, surprise, and intensity.

One wonders what impact the increase of visible pathos, typically considered a
key innovation in Hellenistic art, might have had on those who looked at sculp-
ture in the Hellenistic age. We usually presume that it is the most vivid images that impress the memory and imagination most, and the ancients may have thought the same, for they recognized enargeia as a rhetorical strategy. The artists responsible for the most ambitious monuments of the Hellenistic period seem to have intended to dazzle viewers by breaking conventions, thwarting expectations, introducing new visions of time-honored subjects. The buyers of gravestones and portraits, however, seem to have felt the opposite impulse, wishing instead to appear just like their peers, memorable as members of a group rather than remarkable in themselves. An abundance of formulaic monuments would only increase the impact of a startling image that departed from convention, and this would have been even more the case in a sanctuary or other display where many images vied for attention. It is tempting to imagine that such a sight struck the Hellenistic viewer with a sense of his or her own remoteness from the realm of myth and heroic activity.

At stake in much of M.’s study is the issue of inclusion in the visual arts and what this says about prevailing attitudes in society. It is widely recognized that the Hellenistic age witnessed a notable expansion of subject matter in sculpture, such that fishermen, children, satyrs, and other types depicted only on a small scale in earlier Greek art now appear in three dimensions in monumentally proportioned works of the finest quality. The new subjects are by and large figures of lowly or peripheral status, and their appearance in sculpture may be understood as a reflection of greater interest in them, even an increase in consideration for them among artists, patrons, and observers. The manner in which the human types among them are depicted, as M. notes, restricts them to a narrow sphere of action and «results from a downward-looking perspective» (312). Humor and superstition may explain some such images and a thirst for novelty may account for others, but the fact remains that the increase of unideal types in monumental sculpture changed the medium itself, altering its relationship to the society it served.

Morristown

Jean Sorabella
