

Im letzten Kapitel, bei der Behandlung des Parthenon-Ostfrieses (Abb. 71), verwendet die Verf. mit großem Erfolg ihre kunsthistorische Methode, ähnlich wie schon vorher bei einem anderen hervorragenden Werk, dem (allerdings nicht attischen) Thron Ludovisi (77f Abb. 64 a–c). Es ist ihr gelungen, die große Bedeutung des A.-Kultes für das klassische Athen mit klaren Argumenten und durch gelungene Interpretationen wichtiger Kunstwerke herauszuarbeiten.

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Since a generation of German archeologists in the 1960s initiated the critical discussion of 'Meisterforschung' and 'Kopienkritik', there have been significant attempts to reinvigorate the study of the ancient masters which had seemed stuck in sterile attributionism. (See O. Palagia & J. J. Pollitt, Personal Styles in Greek Sculptures, 1996.) Studies on the 'masters' of sculpture or vase painting are not lacking, although in the latter it may not really be possible to speak of 'masters' at all; but they remain limited while the main of art history trends in the last twenty years has opened to anthropological inquiry. Ranuccio Bianchi-Bandinelli’s reflections on artistic personalities laid the foundations on which historians of ancient art of the last forty years based their investigations of works of art and artists understood within their social contexts. Given these foregoing conditions of the current state of scholarship, a new monograph on Praxiteles would be a book that should elicit high expectations, be it for its intrinsic content or the potential responses to questions that the ancient artist continues to pose for our cultural environment. An exhaustive study of the great artist of the 4th century was not available: Klein (1893) has not been useable for some time as it was written at a time of scanty knowledge on Praxiteles; Rizzo (1932) is endowed with intuition and a fresh narrative but is too succinct, as it was written with a popular audience in mind. Therefore, a comprehensive study is auspicious and also a challenge in the panorama of current research.
This book is the partial result of a much larger and ambitious undertaking of which the author has already published three monographic studies (Prassitele: Fonti epigrafiche e letterarie, Vita e opere, in 3 vols., 1988, 1990, 1991) and a considerable quantity of articles, collecting the literary and epigraphic sources on Praxiteles from the 4th century B.C.E. to the 13th century C.E. In this volume, despite its hefty number of pages, only the early activity of the artist is covered; so one may assume the publication of two more.

The author enters immediately in medias res, dispensing with any introduction or assertion of intention, which may not always be necessary in the writing of a history of ancient art; but in this case, in my opinion, it is indispensable. Publishing a study with a deliberately conservative outlook, as we shall see, without the slightest methodological justification leaves the reader disconcerted and under the suspicion that either the author deems superfluous any need to determine his own position in relation to or, worse, is ignorant of on-going crucial debates. It supposes a hermeneutic practice that certainly does not carry the authority it once did, and furthermore whose use necessitates a taking of a specific theoretical stand.

The book is subdivided into four chapters according to the tradition of artist biographies: chapter one, on sculpture tradition from Myron from which Praxiteles emerged and found thematic and stylistic inspiration; two, despite its brevity of five pages, on the birth and education of the artist; three, the formation of Praxiteles in the workshop of Cephisodotos the Elder; and four, the early works from the moment he takes over his father’s workshop up to the encounter with Phryne.

In tracing a potential continuity of tradition from Myron to Cephisodotos, the author takes as firm the now widely-held assumption of Praxiteles’ parentage from the latter (112). Myron, who died perhaps in 420, is supposed to have bequeathed an artistic inheritance defined by the author as ‘a pictorial and stage-like conception of images, included into frames as pictures; a defined style: based on a light-and-shade rendering; strong ties with political and cultic centres...’ (39). These characteristics could, in truth, be adapted to more than one artist of the 5th century. What may be perplexing in this definition of the Myronian style is that it is based as well on attributions of bronzes including the ‘Drunken Old Woman’ on the authority of a literal reading of Pliny (32, 36), contrary to evidence of surviving copies that allow the consideration of the work as one originating from Asia Minor of the mid-5th century B.C.E.

In this regard, it needs to be said that the author’s use of the ancient sources, Pliny in particular, tends on one hand to an excessive faith and on the other to off-handedness. For example, the case of ‘Myron Thebaios’, as recorded in an inscription from Pergamon (Löwy, I.G.B., 154), is identified with the Eleutheraen artist (27, n. 38) on the basis of the fact that in underlining his Boethian origins the principal city of the region is referred to; on the other hand, when the son of Myron, Lykios, describes himself he does so as ‘Eleutheræus’ because, according to the author, he ‘found it superfluous to specify his Athenian origin’ (45, n. 74).

The author’s attempt to reconstruct the Athenian artistic environment around the names of Styppax, Philiscos, Lykios and Strongylion (40 ff) may also seem iffy, even if the echoes of Styppax’s Splanchnoptes can be traced in the vase Attic painting tradition after 430, the evidence we have on the other sculptors is too scarce to begin to determine their artistic profiles. On Lykios we have a few precise chronological elements, and as far as the youth mentioned by Pausanias made for the Brauronion of Athens, the idea of identifying it with the piece in the Antiquarium Comunale on the Caelian in Rome (46) has little foundation, and the arguments advanced are unconvincing. Analogous objections can be made against the hypothesis of seeing the Amazon from Herculaneum, now in the Na-
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tional Museum in Naples, as an echo of Nero's beloved Eucnemon Amazon. (62) Finally, treating Cephisodotos the Elder, fortunately there are more firm points. Eirene, known in many fine Roman-era reproductions and from indirect evidence such as stele and reliefs of the period, is placed in a reasonable relation to the peace of July 374 between Athens and Sparta, a notion on which the majority of scholars have come to agree. As far as the attribution of the Hermes holding the infant Dionysius, the hypothesis of recognizing the iconography in the noted fragment from the Agora of Athens is suggestive, while we may rely little however on the Hermes of the Prado which has many restored elements including the arms. It should not be forgotten that we do not know where the work was displayed and that the motif of a standing figure with an infant in arms was widely adaptable to a variety of related mythical iconographies.

The resemblance of the Athena from Pyreus to Cephisodotos’ work has already been suggested, however without wide consensus. Greater caution should also be taken in the attempt to identify some of the muses of the famous group by Cephisodotos for the sanctuary on Mount Helicon around the first decade of the 4th century, or the triad in the temple of Zeus Soter at Megalopolis, with works in collaboration with the Athenian Senophont, whose reconstruction is based on imperial coins of a much later date (99).

Among the few pages dedicated to the life of Praxiteles, the author does not renounce his compunction for precision. He posits Praxiteles’ date of birth to exactly 395, in consideration of the fact that his activity began in 375. However, even given the date indicated by Pliny for the akmé of the artist from around 364 to 361 that might refer to the apex of the career of the sculptor, we can only venture that Praxiteles could have been born approximately between the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth century B.C.E.

The brief chapter on the private life of Praxiteles is an indication how scarce the evidence is even for one of the most famous artists of antiquity. Nonetheless, in order to substantiate Pliny’s idea of the akmé of Cephisodotos between 372 and 369 which is quite close to that of his son, the author maintains that Cephisodotos found acclaim only in the last two decades of his life, while Praxiteles’ creativity blossomed in his youth. Then, perhaps an explanation of the Aphrodite of Knidos as a work of negligible creativity is in order, which seems dubious as it represents the first instance of a divinity shown in three-dimensional image almost entirely in the nude: an original invention worthy of the great artistic personality.

In the affirmation that Praxiteles forsook his own patrimony because he «was regarded a solitary genius» (112), the author seems to apply to the ancient world a Kantian aesthetic category while overlooking that in the 4th century B.C.E., even as artists had achieved a certain level of fame and economic security, it seems unlikely that they had emancipated themselves also from the manual labor of the artisan. Their work continued to be strictly tied to a system of patronage focused on the workshop. This situation would persist in the history of artistic production essentially and uninterruptedly to the 15th century despite a privileged status acquired since the Renaissance. However, one searches here in vain for information on the organization of the work of the artist’s studio, on the role of patronage, although cited many times en passant, on the relationship between the works and their context in social, religious, or political spheres that generated the works themselves.

The author focuses, instead, on the wider comprehension of the corpus of Praxiteles’ art and on the analysis of copies. He examines Praxiteles’ work in the context of his father’s workshop, and adding to the Base of Mantinea, considered however a workshop product not by the master’s hand, and the debated Hermes of Olympia, he seems to relocate for the history of ancient art an original Praxitelian work: the acanthus column surmounted by the ‘Dancers’ found at Delfi. In reality, the hypothesis of Praxitelian authorship for this work suggested by Homolle (RA, 1927, 39) and taken up with vigor by Vatin (CRAI, 1983, 26-40), sought to read Praxiteles’ name on the base of the monument. Only Vatin and a few others, the author included, have managed to decipher the inscription, which remains invisible to others and to photographic record.

Likewise, one needs to be wary of Pliny’s attribution of the Tyrannicides group (34.70), given the fact that elsewhere he ascribes Antignotos (34.86) demonstrating either false information or a corrupted text, as has been many times suggested. But it would be difficult,
I fear, to infringe on the faith the author holds in Pliny, whom he considers «a very competent expert on visual arts» (131). I would recall in this regard, mutatis mutandis, that whoever might seek to write a history of Renaissance art on the basis of Vasari’s Lives, granted even that this author was a contemporary of many of the artists he treats, one would certainly often fall in error, and would raise questions of reconstructing a history of art on sources reliant on second hand information on artists who died centuries earlier. One must ask how many artists do we know from the epigraphic sources who are not recorded in written texts? How many times does Pliny confuse sculptors of the same name, who lived in distant centuries one from the other, seeing as he does not furnish their patronymic? Neither does Pliny mention the Eirene with Ploutos from which we can deduce that what is for us a masterpiece of Attic sculpture of the 4th century was not so for the ancient authors on whom we imagine he relied.

In the fourth chapter the author treats Praxiteles’ activity in the moment he takes over his father’s workshop to the beginning of his relation with Phryne, despite the fact that one does not really know in which year she became Praxiteles’ lover, and, in consequence, not even the chronology of the works offered to her by him. Eighteen works are listed which forms a corpus that critical review has, with a few variations, already accepted. Nonetheless, the author provides an abundant documentation from which it is not easy to derive concrete historical data. For example, the author dwells on many anecdotes about Phryne’s relationship to Praxiteles, recalling the literary documentation that refers to the famous Triad dedicated in Thespiae; but apart from the doubtful reliability of anecdotes in the ancient artistic literature, as has been understood for some time (Brün-schweiler-Mooser 1968), it would not have been useless to rely on concrete issues, seeing as Thespiae was destroyed in 372 and not reconstructed until 338 B.C.E. Given that the latter date would be too late for the dedication of the Triad, when then was it dedicated? And where? Perhaps in a sanctuary that still remained active while the city lay in ruins.

This is possible but it is not argued. Rather, all attention is concentrated on the identification of three celebrated sculptures of Thespiae known to us through Roman copies. This the author carries out with sobriety, basing himself here, as elsewhere, for example in the cases of the Eleusinian triad or the Pouring Satyr and the other works of Praxiteles youth, on results largely accepted in the ambit of ‘Kopienkritik’.

We have today the good fortune to work from archeological bases, the collection of corpora, in large part accomplished by preceding generations, and we can dedicate ourselves instead to reconstructing the ancient world from an anthropological perspective. Monographs on the Greek masters written since the end of the 19th century carried a very positivistic or excessively idealistic mark. By now it is necessary to find an alternative model: sober studies, without useless gigan-tism, in which it would be possible to comprehend the social and economic contexts in which the artists lived and worked, organizational systems of which they were an integral part and to whose rules they needed to abide. Without this, the arguments on style, on attributions, on the workshop, on iconographic traditions, etc. – all of which are necessary – remain here mere displays of erudite virtuosity. And not least, moreover, a book on the ancient master should assist us in comprehending the problem of artistic creativity which was so important for the Greeks, the latitude for individuality and other such questions relevant to us today.

It is implicit that the author has chosen another route, even though he has the advantage of having collected all the relevant sources on Praxiteles (a work of merit that can be utilized by anyone for the study of reception); he could therefore have reconstructed the wider context around the sculptor, then drawing him out from the context and focusing on his real contribution to ancient art. The
book has no lack of sporadic historical references, but these are lost in an incessant stylistic narration that is nothing less than a running commentary on the sources. This adds up to a vision of the arc of stylistic development from Myron to Praxiteles as a succession of masters’ works and schools’ productions without making reference to the complex historical and artistic context to which these works and these masters are tied. One wonders why the author felt the need to pack the book with complete transcriptions of passages from the sources when he had already dedicated three volumes to them; while, precisely where some text for justification was needed in order to follow his argument, he sends us to secondary literature.

And another comment on stylistic analysis. The style of Cephisodotos the Elder the author describes as «as oval faces, triangular foreheads, with curved upper borders, elongated eyes, prominent noses, short mouths with lips outwards, contrasts between smooth skin and hair and also beard» (90). A Praxitelian figure is characterized, on the other hand, as having a «triangular forehead with curved eyebrows, a strong nose, an oval face, small mouth and the slightly protuberant chin». One has to observe that features supposedly specific to one or the other artist may not guarantee an attribution. These kinds of Morelian attributions, which tend to identify hands on the basis of details observed on Roman copies in marble of earlier originals in bronze, run the risk of ascribing to the master aspects that may rightly be the hand of the copyist, that carries over only a widely diffused stylistic language, a sort of koiné.

In conclusion, this volume is the result of protracted and profound research, and one admires the author’s erudition, his vast knowledge of the written sources, and the accuracy of his comments and discussion of the entire oeuvre of Praxiteles known through Roman copies or merely indicated in the sources. For the breadth of the accumulated material and numerous hypotheses around Praxiteles’ ergon, this book will be a reference point for the argument, even if – despite the needlessly and irritatingly high cost of this book – we will have to return to Rizzo’s excellent photographs for a repertory of high quality images.

The question remains if a biography of an ancient artist written in this manner is an adequate cultural product of our era.

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