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BOOK REVIEW

The Cambridge History of Painting in the Classical World

Edited by J.J. Pollitt. Pp. xxii + 477, figs. 237, color pls. 140, maps 6, CD-ROM 1. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014. \$250. ISBN 978-0-521-86591-3 (cloth).

Reviewed by [Eric M. Moormann](#)

The editor, Jerome Pollitt, hardly needs to justify the issuing of this splendidly formatted book: there simply is no overview of ancient “mural and panel painting” (ix) that encompasses the entire Mediterranean world of antiquity—that is, from the Minoan palaces in Crete, via archaic and classical painting (very scanty remains) toward Hellenistic painting in Greece and Italy. The Roman era is well represented also, and the volume finishes with some examples of Early Christian paintings. The discussed sites are situated around the Mediterranean but also in the northern and eastern provinces of the empire.

Chapin opens the work with a chapter on Minoan and Mycenaean painting, which is often studied separately from Graeco-Roman material. There are considerable problems concerning chronology, including the question of a painting's durability. The fancy of many reconstructions is demonstrated by the “saffron gatherer” who became a monkey accompanied by other apes, and the “priest-king” who turned out to contain fragments of at least two different female (or yet male?) figures. Overly enthusiastic iconographical readings of natural motifs have led to religious interpretations, but Chapin makes it clear that we should look at the original setting, which often has no religious connotation at all. However, she contradicts herself in the discussion of murals from Aya Triada, Room 14: on the one hand, they might be “luxurious bedroom decoration”; on the other hand, she sees a “strong religious symbolism” (18). The Akrotiri frescoes were freshly made when the volcano erupted in the late 17th or late 16th century B.C.E. The marine scenes from West

House, Room 5, are tentatively connected with scenes in Homer's epics (22), an attractive yet unlikely hypothesis, since narrative representation should not always be connected with literature. Chapin includes material from other islands and from Tell el-Dab'a in Egypt; these paintings could have been made by itinerant Aegean artists (27–8). A peculiarity very rarely found in later painting is the figural painted decoration of floors, of which some remains are known in various places. Chapin concludes with pointing to the naturalism of Aegean painting and the wide array of themes, which, she argues, should all be seen as the foundation of Greek painting (60).

Since there are very few paintings from the subsequent period, Hurwit devotes chapter 2 to the "lost" art of 760–480 B.C.E. Yet some traces of colorful wall decorations, including figural scenes as well as the Thermon plaques, convey an idea of Early Archaic decoration of religious buildings. Nothing is known from public or private contexts. Hurwit tries to visualize the lost art of wall painting through vases that show the same flattish figures as the Thermon plaques and wall paintings in Lydia, Lycia, and Etruria, where Greek artists may have been active as well. One fascinating complex to be mentioned is the fifth-century wooden tomb from Tatarlı near Afyon (see L. Summerer et al., *Tatarlı: renklerin dönüşü / The Return of Colours / Rückkehr der Farben* [Istanbul 2010]). Hurwit stresses the modest quality of archaic painting in which the painters worked with line drawings rather than brushstrokes (89).

Steingraber discusses painting in Italy between 700 and 400 B.C.E. (ch. 3), mainly Etruscan and South Italian tomb decorations. The Italian dossier is large, but it lacks house and temple decorations. The oldest Etruscan tombs could give an idea of the lost Greek murals and panels; since Etruscan tombs were conceived as houses of the dead, they may provide some insight into that lost private decor. Despite the difficult chronology, Steingraber distinguishes six phases between 700 and 200 B.C.E. In the earliest centuries, the relationship between mural and vase painting is narrow, both iconographically and stylistically. He observes an Ionic koine in the late sixth century because of strong correspondences with art from that area. In the fifth century, Attica would prevail as a source of inspiration. In all phases, workshops are distinguished on the basis of style and motifs, but Steingraber does not discuss in detail how these distinctions are made. His section on southern Italy is brief, but this topic is covered extensively in chapter 6 by Rouveret. Steingraber is not exhaustive in his references and notes and often refers to his own (splendid) corpus of Etruscan paintings. Regarding the Tomb of the Diver in Paestum, he should have mentioned more recent studies than Napoli's 1970 publication (*La tomba del tuffatore* [Bari]).

Ceramics receive the lion's share of consideration in Stansbury-O'Donnell's chapter 4 on fifth- and fourth-century B.C.E. painting in the Greek world, from which we have little evidence of mural decorations. It would have been fascinating material, considering the changes we observe in other forms of art after the Persian Wars. Stansbury-O'Donnell focuses on Attic and South Italian vases as well as the so-called Kertscher Vasen, which like white lekythoi show polychrome elements. The author compares trends in vase painting with tendencies described by Pliny and others and notes a greater attention to psychology, pathos (e.g., the Kleophrades painter at the beginning of the fifth century), movement, and spatial composition (e.g., Polygnotos; see the author's fine reconstructions of the Lesche of the Knidians in Delphi in figs. 4.3–4.4). Human figures are rendered to convey *enargeia*, vividness, and strength, as well as movement, so that they seem really living creatures. Terms like *skenographia* and *skiagraphia* determine developments toward a still more naturalistic rendering of figures within space at the beginning of the fourth century. The pastel colors of some Kertsch vases might be an echo of Pliny's *colores floridi* and *splendor*.

Miller discusses painting in the eastern half of the Mediterranean: few houses, many tombs, and some painted stelae. Funerary monuments sometimes suffer from too far-reaching interpretations of the scenes in a symbolic or mystic vein, for example the tendency of Balkan scholars to connect the tomb images with Orphism (173). Miller elaborates issues such as gender, funerary rituals, and myth, and observes popular themes such as Hades-Persephone-underworld, battles, and hunt scenes as expressions of arete, banqueting as means of (male) bonding, and household scenes and Aphrodite as expressions of (female) *aidos* and *sophrosyne*.

Two small points. The symposium scene at Aghios Athanassios (pl. 5.8) is well analyzed, but Miller does not point out the black background: are we assisting at a nocturnal banquet? Or should we see here a reflection of the colored Kertsch vases (e.g., pl. 5.13), as might be also the case for contemporary mosaics? As to the hunt of the Alexandrovo tomb (pl. 5.11), Miller observes the nudity of one man and wonders about his identity. Since he is pedestrian, like three other men who wear lower-class *exomides* or short tunics, we may see them as “low” people, possibly slaves who assist the totally clothed elite horsemen during their hunt; the difference and/or lack of clothing does not necessarily define Greek pederast nudity (195) but illustrates social differences.

As to houses, we have much less material, but Miller’s considerations are highly informative. The splendid wall in Pella (pl. 5.19) has a counterpart in the recently restored parallel in House Z in Pergamon dating to the second century B.C.E. and precedes those in Delos and the West. I wonder why Miller sees no continuity between this material and the First Style in Roman wall painting (172). In fact, we find the same systems in Carthage before its destruction in 146 B.C.E. and on Monte Iato (H. Brem, *Das Peristylhaus 1 von Iaitas*. *Studia letina* VII [Lausanne 2000] esp. 116–21). Miller devotes two appendices to attributions to artists and to techniques (fresco, tempera, encaustics, pigments). She also pays attention to the difficult but extremely important topic of conservation and musealization. Most of these reflections are relevant for the other chapters as well.

Rouveret brings us to Italy in the same period (400–200 B.C.E.). As to Etruria, she does not discuss public and domestic contexts but observes that the tombs’ interiors might show decors similar to those in houses (239). Departing from the (plausible) thesis that the decorations discussed were made for local elites, Rouveret questions their relationship with an increasingly powerful Rome and, in retrospect, with classical Greek art. There is an increasing use of Greek myth, while banquet scenes remain important. Inscriptions contain the names of the deceased and eulogies, thanks to which we know something about the tomb owners. Rouveret follows Massa-Pairault in seeing messages of politics and eschatology (245), which escape me, since the images do not convey specific messages of the kind. The comparison between two household slaves in the Golini Tomb I (figs. 6.4–6.5) has no foundation: the cook, seen in three-quarter view, has the same expression as the cup bearer (who is not nude, but wears a tunic [245]). The crudely painted portraits of the deceased and their ancestors in the Tomb of the Shield might give us a glimpse into the custom of ancestor portrayal, which would become so important in the Roman world, yet not as *ius imaginum* (248), which is a scientific “phantom” (see H. Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* [Oxford 1999]).

The second half of Rouveret’s contribution is devoted to tomb paintings in southern Italy, among which the Lucanian graves in Paestum stand out for their quantity and rich iconography. Their chronology is established thanks to the gifts accompanying the deceased. The painting of stock figures occurred at the moment the dead body was to be put into the grave, apparently as part of the funerary ritual. Rouveret sees three phases: geometric patterns and spare figures from the late fifth century; scenes of hunt, war, return of warrior, and banquet following Attic schemes after ca. 370; and myth, theater, processions, and funerary deities such as Dionysos after the middle of the fourth century.

Pollitt analyzes ancient texts as sources of critical assessments of painting. Although we have no treatises and only, mostly anecdotal, references, Pollitt distinguishes three traditions, those of truth to life (*trompe l’oeil*), didactic utility (Plato vs. Aristotle on trustworthiness of images), and technical and aesthetic connoisseurship. The last item, discussed at greater length, includes art criticism and comments on the technique and style of specific painters. Regarding colors, one misses references to Cleland et al. (eds.), *Colour in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Oxford 2004), and Bradley, *Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge 2009).

Bragantini’s chapter covers the epoch of Roman painting between ca. 200 B.C.E. and 100 C.E. She is brief on second-century relief stucco painting. As to the Late Republican material, she observes the rather shaky chronology of the relevant instances between ca. 100 or 90/80 B.C.E. (House of the Griffins on the Palatine) and the Augustan era. These

high-quality paintings were no recreations of reality but conveyed “figural languages” (315) of the elite and created living and working spaces apt to their demands. Unfortunately, Esposito’s study on Herculaneum (*La pittura di Ercolano* [Rome 2014]) could not be taken into account in Bragantini’s comparison of Pompeian and Herculanean paintings. She explains the (generally) higher quality of the latter material as a result of the higher status of the buildings they were found in. At the end of her rich essay, she turns to Mau’s four styles and shows how they still are valuable notions, fitting well into the (modern) connection of the paintings’ development with that of the contemporary culture (on Mau’s work, see H. Eristov and F. Monier, eds., *L’héritage germanique dans l’approche du décor antique. Actes de la table ronde organisée à l’École normale supérieure le 23 novembre 2012* [Bordeaux 2014]).

Ling observes a strong deterioration of painting quality after the “extinction” of the Fourth Style, in his chapter on mural paintings from the late Flavian period onward, which he defines as the result of “a certain decline in momentum” (371). Therefore, he pays much attention to stucco, mosaic, and *opus sectile* as substitutes for or embellishments of the paintings. The discussed material mainly comes from Italy; the provinces are much less represented, although the author could have taken into account a large amount of material, partly available in published corpora (e.g., France: A. Barbet, *La peinture murale en Gaule romaine* [Paris 2008]; Tunisia: A. Barbet, *Peintures romaines de Tunisie* [Paris 2013]; Germany: R. Goggräfe, *Die römischen Wand- und Deckenmalereien im nördlichen Obergermanien* [Neustadt an der Weinstrasse 1999]; Cologne: R. Thomas, *Römische Wandmalerei in Köln* [Mainz 1993]; Zeugma: A. Barbet, *Zeugma 2. Peintures murales romaines* [Istanbul 2005]). Ostia follows Rome and provides most examples outside the *urbs*. In the east, we have the large complex of houses in Ephesos (Ling ignores those from Zeugma). In the second century C.E., there is a continuation of architectural forms and the articulation of panels of the previous period. The Antonine period has decorations with heavy forms and large human figures, and in Ostia the juxtaposition of yellow and red panels dominates. The “logical” wall articulation vanishes in the late second century. Ling observes innovations in the decorations of vaults and ceilings, many of which are known from this era, mainly in tombs. Regarding iconography, there is much more than mythology only, which formerly was the dominating genre.

Interesting sections are devoted to painting on wood (mainly funerary portraits from Egypt), book illustrations, and to ekphrases in Philostratus. I am hesitant to follow Ling in seeing Philostratus’ 64 paintings as real ones but rather tend to interpret them as the result of a virtuoso rhetorical exercise. The *Eikones* belong to a genre of painting descriptions published in the Roman empire, including Lucianus’ *Eikones*, the *Tabula Ceбетis*, and sections in Longus and Apuleius, all of which constitute descriptions of fictitious paintings or a mix of real and fanciful ones (like those in Perec’s *Un cabinet d’amateur*).

The volume includes a glossary, a long and up-to-date bibliography, and a good general index. A CD-ROM contains a set of images, also available via the Internet. In sum, this reviewer attests to the high quality and importance of this book that will be a standard work for many years.

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