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The literary existence of Polygnotus of Thasos
and its problematic utilization in painted pottery studies

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Introduction

The critic is he who can translate
into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.
The highest, as the lowest, form of criticism is a mode of autobiography.
Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray
by Oscar Wilde.

The creative or inventive character of art critics is widely recognized. There is little doubt that a critical or epidictic text concerning a picture or a statue is unable to inform us directly about this object because the text informs us about the point of view of the author; it is a report that is partial and inseparable from phantasia. Even though they attempt to be ‘descriptive’, texts concerning images are always determined by their authors’ judgments. Every writer chooses what to describe, ordering the presentation of the images, showing what is more important or beautiful and what is secondary or inferior. Among many theories that recognize the active posture of the observer can be found, for instance, the connoisseurship of Friedländer (1969), who suggested that the observation of a painting is necessarily intermediated by the temperament of he who observes it and that a painted picture is a fragment of nature seen through the artist’s temperament. Another example is the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1984), who recognized that there is no causality or a filial sense between a painting and its interpretations, and, as he affirmed:

All the modern history of the painting (...) has a metaphysical meaning’ and ‘in fact, there is no recipe for the visible
(Merleau-Ponty 1984, IV).

Many unknown factors interfere in the process of formation of speech. These factors are by and large peculiarities of the public and private contexts in which the text was produced, in other words, peculiarities of the author’s life. Since it does not seem possible to separate ‘autobiographical’ aspects from the ‘purely descriptive’, and thus to constitute an imponderable ‘ideal description’, for all practical purposes, we can not treat the written word as a simple, unmediated copy of an image, nor can we elevate textual documents to the status of image. Perhaps because of the disappearance of the Greek major wall- or panel-paintings of the century V BC, still during Antiquity, or perhaps because of the primacy that texts were given over images in the tradition of the Classical Studies (Dugas 1960, 59-72; Sarian 1999), a close relationship between unseen mural paintings and material remains was established by the classical archeologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries AD. This relationship evidently depends on a great valorization of the ‘art critics’ that bloomed before the total material disappearance of those monumental paintings.

Owing to their authors’ having hypothetically been in front of the images, such texts came to play the part of ‘written sources for Greek art’. The ‘written sources’ certainly indicate the doctrines of the arts in Greco-Roman Antiquity, but they do not necessarily present secure knowledge of the paintings. Some of the ancient texts that now are recognized as ‘varieties of art criticism’ (Pollit 1990), or simply as ‘literary criticism’ (Rouveret 1989, 8; Boardman 2001, 190), preserve reasonably detailed descriptions of great paintings. Frequently, these images are attributed to famous artists considered innovators, responsible for ‘significant changes in painting’. Polygnotus of Thasos is one of these famous names and it would not be an exaggeration to say that, in the last 125 years of studies, the ‘great paintings’ of Polygnotus came to represent the most important model for the interpretation of another figurative format that is greatly different from the extensive panels: the Attic red-figured pottery.

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1 Not exactly ‘mental image’ as the concept of phantasia was presented by Aristotle (Treatise of the Soul: 427 b 15 apud Rouveret 1989, 386), but ‘almost-presence’ or ‘imminent visibility’ that resulted in the current concept of imaginary (Merleau-Ponty 1984, ch. II).

2 The original publication appeared in 1946.

3 The original publication appeared in 1963.
The choice of the vases

The vases that are most closely related to Polygnotus are apparently dated from the period in which he would have been active in the Hellenic World. Politically, this period corresponds to the government of Kimon of Athens, a kind of patron of Polygnotus and of other panel painters8, according to the literature. For the modern history of the figurative styles, this period was conventionally called early-classical (Pfuhl 1955, 54; Beazley 1963, 483-984; Pollitt 1976, 49-54, among others). Approximately dated from 479 to 450 BC, the early-classical period is interpreted as one of ‘formation of the classical style’ (Villard 1969, 229) and would have found in Polygnotus of Thasos its ‘dominant personality’ (Dugas 1930, 7).

In general, the vases related to Polygnotus are Kraters and Cups, among which are some with paintings of ‘Greeks fighting Amazons’8, ‘Greeks against Centaurus’9, and even less frequent scenes such as ‘the Dioskouroi carry off the daughters of Leukippos’10. These scenes were privileged for their iconographies ‘coinciding with those that the ancient literature attributed to the paintings of Polygnotus and to his colleagues in the Athenian buildings11.

However, the theme is not a decisive criterion to associate the descriptions of paintings on walls or panels with the vase-paintings. Among the vases more frequently associated with Polygnotus is the famous Niobid Krater of Louvre (inventory: G341) whose iconography in much of its figures creates doubt and does not correspond precisely to any of the descriptions of murals (McNiven 1989, 192). At least three well-based hypotheses for the same group of figures persist to this day (Denoyelle 1997). In spite of the doubt regarding iconography, the Niobid Krater resulted in a great number of publications that, with greater or lesser enthusiasm, introduce it as a pioneer and exceptional example of the connection with the painted walls. This connection was considered undeniable (Simon 1963) or just a possibility (Boardman 1993), but, effectively, it was constantly reaffirmed since the discovery of this krater in 1880 (Denoyelle 1997).

A ‘Polygnotan style’

What seems to matter in determining that a vase like this one is considered a ‘reflex’ of the wall painting or believed to represent the ‘influence’12 of this other art is a certain notion of style. Sometimes, the ‘style’ is understood in a quite wide sense, as a pictorial expression of the ‘Greek spirit’ (Devambez 1944, 104-105); at other times, it is specifically defined as what was ‘peculiar to an individual painter’ (Beazley 1956, apud Whitley 1997, 40). In all cases, the term ‘style’, as well as the terms ‘reflex’ and ‘influence’, does not seem to correspond to any of the categories in which the painting is thought in the ancient texts: those terms are a convention of the modern historiography of art and archaeology.

However, what was attributed to the name Polygnotus of Thasos in the ancient literature seems to help the specialists not only to justify uncommon cases, such as the Niobid Krater or the Penthesilea’s Cup of Antiker Kleinkunst Museum of Munich (inventory: 2688)13, another recurring example, but also to document an individual origin of the rupture with the old mode to figure scenes. Dugas, when affirming the figurative changes of the second quarter of the fifth century BC, recognizes that ‘without a doubt the free-style that breaks out abruptly in the images of the ceramic is originating from the Polygnotan painting’ (Dugas 196014, 52).

Just as a ‘Polygnotan painting’ reappears discursively in modern studies, so too appears a ‘Polygnotan style’ (Buschor 1925, 179-213; Arias 1970-1971, 293-6) that determines said kind of painting. The ‘Polygnotan style’ is developed entirely by modern specialists to accomplish the function of ‘delimiting a unit’ of style among the others in successive periods of time15. The precepts of this ‘Polygnotan style’, however, could only be learned in the ‘textual sources’, properly chosen and interpreted, given that the pictorial works were not preserved. The writings came in first plane; the vases would help in understanding the writings and to accomplish the general objective of ‘supplying a more real image of the great pictorial compositions of the second quarter of the V century [BC]’ (Villard 1969, 240).

1 According to Prost (1997, 28-29), Kimon was not associated with architects and sculptors in the same way that he was associated with the painters.
12 The most frequently-used term by modern authors to define such a relationship is influence (French) in Villard (1969) and Prost (1997); influence (English) in Arias 1962 and Robertson 1992. The term reflect (reflet in French) is present in Pottier (1923?), Baron (1972) and Robertson (1992). Villard also presents the notion of ‘echo of the great painting’ (‘un écho de la grande peinture’). In no case does it seem to correspond to any ancient terminology.
13 Francis Prost (1997) synthesizes clearly enough the importance of the anonymous painters to who these vases are attributed (Beazley 1963) to the study of the wall-paintings: ‘Such painters like Penthesilea Painter or Niobid Painter testify this influence of the wall-painting in the way of organizing their battle scenes, of disposing their characters on their mounts, in the overlap or in the daring and suggestive displacements of a general confusion, when creating a pictorial field of many floors that give the impression of successive planes and of depth levels’. The original publication is from 1937.
14 As the function of artistic styles was described and criticized by Kossovitch (2002).
The opposite, although less declared, happened at almost the same time: in the presence of an exceptional vase, appeal to the ‘influence of Polygnotus’ evidently aids the interpretation. In this way, the appearance and the quick disappearance of the technique of polychrome figures on white ground vases could be interpreted as an influence of the mural painting (Arias 1962, 17-18; Boardman 1995, 129-133; Robertson 1959, 127-129 and 1982, 81-82), although the colors of the ground and the figures are insufficient to associate this technique directly with the great mural compositions and the way to compose most of these vases is more committed to the previous tradition than to the ‘changes’. (Robertson 1959, 128).

The emergence of changes in vascular painting just after the Persian Wars is easily observed but does not seem to have happened in abruptly: it was not a complete rupture with the archaic mode of sketching and painting. In the first place, many vases dated from this period only present a few characteristics that can be recognized as having the ‘influence of the great painting’ (Villard 1969, 232). They are vases that came to be classified as ‘mannerists’ in analogy to more recent stylistic periods (Boardman 1975, 179). The figurative differences between ‘free-style vases’ and ‘mannerists vases’ were interpreted by Prost (1997) as resulting from the preference of the person who commissioned the vases: those ‘adapted to the new realities and the acquisitions of the democracy’ acquired the free-style vases, the ‘lovers of the traditions and less inclined to concessions’ preferred a style that cultivated respect for the past and opted for the mannerist vases (Prost 1997, 42).

Secondly, we see the permanence of traditional or ‘archaic’ manners of representing garments, weapons and countless details in the vases engaged in the ‘new style’ (Boardman 1989, 12-14). The Niobid Krater of the Louvre was considered the best example (Boardman 1989, 12; Denoyelle 1997, 4-6) but cannot be considered a copy of wall-paintings specifically because of these ‘archaic’ manners, since the Greek artists seem to have always enjoyed freedom on their models (Pottier 1926, 3; Devambez 1944, 97) or even because the greatness of a mural would never be summarized in the curved surface of a Krater (Villard 1969, 249).17

Many times the specialists do not indicate the written source that preserved this or that characteristic of the mural painting precisely, just as archaeologists often do not formulate their interpretations. In this way, the appearance and the quick disappearance of the technique of polychrome figures on white ground vases could be interpreted as an influence of the mural painting (Arias 1962, 17-18; Boardman 1995, 129-133; Robertson 1959, 127-129 and 1982, 81-82), although the colors of the ground and the figures are insufficient to associate this technique directly with the great mural compositions and the way to compose most of these vases is more committed to the previous tradition than to the ‘changes’. (Robertson 1959, 128).

The works of Xenophon (approximately 430 to 355 BC) and of Aristotle (384 to 322 BC), for instance, are mentioned in the Polygnotan studies to identify the painter of Thasos as a ‘painter of character’ or a ‘painter of éthos’ (τιθογράφος). This ancient adjective presents difficulties because we do not have in modern languages an appropriate word for éthos (Pfuhl 1955, 57). Interpretations thus proliferated: some consider éthos the character in a general sense (Pollitt 1976, 49), others, as a ‘noble character’ or ‘ethical character’ (Pfuhl 1955, 57; Arias 1962, 17; Rouveret 1989, 129-135), and there are those who prefer to designate for this term all and any permanent characteristic of the figured personages (Christos 1957, 205), thus differentiating éthos from pàthos (‘emotion’), other type of attribute of the soul (psykhé).19

Although it derives from late works from a single century (little time if compared to the great majority of the texts about Polygnotus), the concept of ethographia had limited use in the modern interpretations of the Greek painted ceramic of the fifth century BC It simply resulted in a ‘psychological’ reading of some vases performed with ‘greater or lesser lyricism’ by generations of art historians based on details such as ‘the way to figure the eyes’ (Prost 1997, 37). This may be partly due to the absence of references to the painter of Thasos in the text of Xenophon (Memorabilia, III, x, 1-5) and to the brevity of the analogies concerning Polygnotus in the texts of Aristotle (Politics, 1340 to 33; Poetic, 1448 to 1 and 1450 to 23). In fact, to define the painter of Thasos as ethographos it was necessary to associate the two privileged sources: Xenophon brings a clearer notion of ethographia, and Aristotle attributes this quality to the Thacian painter21.

16 According to Villard (1969) and Boardman (1975), among the best examples are a Krater of the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston (inventory: 10.185) and a skýphos of Staatliches Museum of Schwerin (lacking an inventory number).

17 Analogously to the hypothesis of copies in ceramic of reliefs of the Parthenon, John Boardman (2001, 273) concludes: ‘all the evidence is against close copying of major art by vase painters’.

18 The original publication is emerged in 1956.

19 Some studies do not appear to utilize any of these interpretations. Erika Simon (1963), for example, suggested an ingenious association between the éthos of Polygnotus and the descriptions of the paintings of the Delphic ikós on Pausanias (OD, X, 257-309). According to this author, certain figures would form pairs of antithetic character, like of characters of Homer and Aeschylos (Simon 1963, 48).

20 Ufford (1950, 188-189), Pfuhl (1955, 58-61), Richter (1958, 98) and Villard (196, 244) indicated ‘Penethesileia’s cup’ (Munich 2688) and ‘Tityos’ cup’ (Munich 2689) as good examples of this psychological interpretation. Prost (1997, 37) also indicated a fragmented white ground cup of the National Museum of Athens (15.190) and the attic black figure cup of the National Museum of Athens (2.439 and 439).

21 Evidently, this association presents problems. It is not possible to be sure of a correspondence between the éthos of Xenophon and Aristotle’s éthos. In passages of the Poetics (II, 1448 a 1) and of the Politics (1340 a 33), the éthos seems to have a sense of ‘high character’, less inclusive than the general sense of ‘character of the soul’ in Xenophon (Memorabilia, III, x, 1-5).
A ‘portrait’ painter

Beginning with writings of later authors such as Plutarch (approximately AD 46-120), the painter Polygnotus of Thasos is considered the author of figures that are recognizable just by the lines of the face. The Plutarchan example is the description of a figure in the ‘Painted Portico’ (Stoa Poikile) of Athens: the Laodike painted among the prisoners of the Trojan War with the lines of Kimon’s sister (Plutarch, Life of Kimon, 4.5-6).

Aeschines (approximately 390 to 315 BC) and Cornelius Nepos (approximately 100 to 25 BC) had claimed that the figure of Miltiades in the Painted Portico could be recognized without the mark identifying the name (respectively in Against Ctesifon, 186 and Miltiades, 6, 3). According to these sources, the Demos forbade the mark identifying the name of Miltiades in the painting, a reward denied because greater homage would thus be paid to the general than to the city (Prost 1997, 33). However, these passages do not allow us to consider the figure of Miltiades as a recognizable figure by the traces of the face, since that which identifies the general seems to be the place that his figure occupied in the composition:

(...) Who then is the general? To this question you will all answer that is Miltiades. However, his name is not written there. What do you mean? It was not requested them this rewards? Yes, but the people refused it, and instead of his name they permitted that he should be painted in the first plane (protos), exhorting the soldiers. (Against Ctesifon 186).

These passages motivated the interpretation that Polygnotus would have, in some way, also invented the art of the portrait (Robertson 1959, 122). In this point of view, the painter Polygnotus would not be a character painter, nor entirely a painter of physiognomies, but rather a precursor to the painting of physiognomies because he would rarely have created something similar to these figures.

For the case of Plutarch and his portrait of Laodike with the lines of Elpinike (said sister of Kimon), some good reasons exist to doubt that the text has certain value for any type of recognition of lost masterpieces.

In the first place, there is nothing similar to this commentary, late by about five centuries, in other descriptions of the paintings of the Athenian Portico; it is not part of the ‘interpretable tradition’ of these images, as happens with the attribution and iconography of the paintings, repeated to exhaustion in the thousand years that followed the construction of the Portico (textual fonts in Reinach, 1985; on the portico, see Merritt 1970).

Secondly, there is another controversial passage of Plutarch that has not always been well received by modern specialists: the accusation that Phidias would have figured himself and Perikles on Athena Parthenos’s shield (Life of Perikles, 31. 2-5). Because of its unusual character, this comment was treated with suspicion by Pollitt (1990, 54, no. 2) and also by Rocha Pereira (1994, 96-97). The Portuguese researcher questions the validity of the ‘prejudices that Plutarch disseminates’ as a source of knowledge of the classical period (Rocha Pereira 1994, 97).

We can, without great adaptations, direct this same question to the description of the image of Kimon’s sister in the text Kimon’s Life: it does not seem pertinent to authorize a text written centuries later to inform us of the similarity between the painting and the physiognomy of the model. This fact does not reduce the importance of Plutarch’s text, since his interpretation shows the appropriation of these painted scenes by men of other eras as documents for learning about the famous personages of their past, which, by itself, increases the importance of the paintings as textual subject.

The first to contribute many improvements to the art of painting

The most important literary documents to establish the relationship of Polygnotus to the painted vases, judging by the overabundance of modern references, are Naturalis Historia (Natural History) of Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79), and the ‘Ελλάδος Περιηγήσεως (Description of Greece) of Pausanias (approximately AD 170). We should not hide the fact that nearly 70 other textual citations about the painter of Thasos were collected (Reinach 1985 & Pollitt 1990): small histories, anecdotes, εκθεσίαι, small poems and epigrams on the bases of statues. All these sources are short and most appeared centuries after the second quarter of the fifth century. There is a notorious recent effort on the part of some scholars to ‘throw light on the descriptions of Pausanias’ and on other late descriptions through ‘contemporary to Polygnotus’ poetry, as is the case with A. Rouveret (1989), J. P. Barron (1980 apud Rouveret 1989, 150) and D. Castriota (1992, 58-63), who appeal to the poems of Bakilide (odes XVII and XVIII) or to the epigrams of Simonide (Rouveret 1989, chap. III and VI). But these sources, whose legitimacy is in their chronology, do not present, however, the critical and descriptive features that have decisively been recognized in the texts of Pliny and Pausanias.

The Polygnotus of the Natural History is essentially a pioneer. He abandoned the ‘old rigidity’ to paint in a new way, painting translucent garments and half-open mouths (NH, XXXV, 58-9). He also painted using a new technique,
the encaustic (NH, XXXIX, 122), although this indication, which could be interpreted as an approach between the wall-painting and the characteristic shine of the white ground and red figure vases, is frequently ignored by the specialists.

It is not, therefore, a simple biography of the painter but a history of painting as a high genre, where the artist is remembered through his legacy to art: Polygnotus introduced ‘variety to the lines of the face’; Apollodoros, master of Zeuxis, invented the ‘painting of shadows’ (NH, XXXV, 60-1); and Parrhasios was ‘the first to endow the painting of proportions’ (NH, XXXV, 67).

This accumulation of innovations did not necessarily persist in the Roman Imperial period, and Pliny lamented that painting, a formerly illustrious art, was being supplanted by marbles and gold (NH, XXXV, 2-5). The decline of the arts, as well as the decadence of habits, is an important topic of these late texts about the paintings of the V century BC and may have motivated the specialists to believe that the manifested preference for the famous paintings of the past would value the Pliny the Elder’s point of view, in other words, the manifested interest would have made him an attentive observer.

The pompous character of Pliny’s Natural History makes the text valuable also to the researcher who is devoted to establishing a distinction between ‘fine arts’ and ‘crafts.’ Declaredly, part of the classical archeologist’s work, and especially that of the researcher of iconography, seems to consist of establishing this distinction (Robertson 1985, 28-29).

**The place of the paintings**

The similarities between the paintings of Polygnotus described by Pausanias and the painted vases are established in a much more systematic way. One does not find in the Description of Greece a general view of scenes or special peculiarities of a figure, but rather varied aspects of how the scenes seem to be composed, how each figure was placed, and its place in relation to others. Broadly speaking, perhaps it is not inopportune to say that the Polignotus of Thasos of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries AD is, essentially, the artist of the paintings described by Pausanias in six long paragraphs of the description of a small building: the ἕλσκη of Delphi (GD, X, 25-31). All the other texts, besides that of Pliny, operate as complements to this modern tradition of reading the descriptions of Pausanias and as complements to Polygnotus himself, his character.

Evidently, the detail of the descriptions, figure by figure, in the internal walls of the ἕλσκη was decisive, so that the periegesis came to be privileged by specialists, but some details of the text might also have contributed in a decisive way to this choice and, necessarily, to the construction of the image that we have of the painting of the century of Kimon and Perikles.

Pausanias attributed to Polygnotus the painting of scenes inside buildings in Attica (GD, I, 15-22), in Boeotia (GD, IX, 4.1) and, with uncommon detail, in Delphi (GD, X, 25-31). Greek painting subsequent to Polygnotus did not receive Pausanias’ attention and, in general, architecture and sculpture captured his attention more that did painting (Heer 1979, 112).

The topography of Pausanias finds in the monuments of his period some discontinuity with the masterpieces of the past. The arts would have declined since the Macedonian conquest in 338 BC, when the Greeks were subdued by foreigners (Heer 1979, 21-23). Pausanias will be shown as angry, for instance, with the Roman habit of suppressing the names on the bases of Greek statues to reuse them in the new local ruler’s cult (GD, I, 2.4 & 18.3). The decadence of the arts and the option of Pausanias of describing the works of the centuries VI, V and IV seem to have motivated the imputation of an interested gaze or a privileged point of view to this author, like the example of Pliny, although the gaze of Pausanias is centered, evidently, on the monuments of the past and the landscape, not the history of painting and painters.

In the Description of Greece, the presentation of the images that remain of a glorious past is aided by local guides (exegetes) and compared to the literature of this same past25. Similarly, Pausanias is inserted in a literary tradition based certainly in Homer and constituted by numerous texts that were not preserved. Poems called Minyad, The Returns (GD, X, 28) and Little Iliad (GD, X, 26.2) are known only through uncomfortable passages for modern readers, such as:

> On the river is the boat, with the ferryman at the oars. Polygnotus followed, I think, the poem called the Minyad (GD, X, 28, 1-2)26.

The description that Pausanias provides of some figures in uncommon postures, with painful expressions or grief on the faces, allowed the interpretation that there would be a ‘pathetic’ of the images of Polygnotus, somehow coincident with the ‘varied lines of the face’ of Pliny (NH, XXXV, 58) and that it could be found in the exceptional vase paintings. The more evident example is once again that of the Niobid Krater, where a figure of a warrior placed below and to the right of Herakles seems to correspond to the description of Hector’s image in Nékyia of Delphi (GD, X, 31.5). The most frequently mentioned characteristic of the Hellados Periegesis by scholars was not, however, this ‘pathetic’ feature of the figures, but rather indications of the placement of each figure in relation to another figure or a group of figures. Pausanias seems to use the words ‘above’ and ‘below’ (GD, X, 29.9) or phrases such as ‘we see painted in the distance...’ (GD, I, 16.1) to indicate different planes or figurative levels (Arias 1962, 16). Some of Pausanias’ figures seem to be ‘interrupted’ or ‘partially hidden’ in accidents of relief, which can be read more appropriately if compared to a passage of the Proverbs of

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25 In the paragraph 28.7 of the book X (GD), for instance, Pausanias consults exegesis and poems to identify the demon Euryomous. Without success, he described it just as it was painted.

Zenobius (Reinach 1985, 164-165, no. 153), for a scene of the Painted Portico.

The ‘places of the figures’ were interpreted as the best evidence of the abandonment of the hieratic and processional figuration on horizontal lines, in the way of figurate recognized as ‘archaic’ (Arias 1962, 16; Dugas 1930, 20-23; Boardman 2001, 92; Denoyelle 1997, 10-17; Robertson 1982, 79 and 88; Villard 1969, 240 and 246; Pfuhl 1955, 58-60). In some pottery exemplars of the second quarter of the fifth century BC, of which the Niobid Krater\(^{27}\) is once again the best example, the line of the base of the scene, traditionally a straight line that coincided with the inferior limit of the figurative area, was unfolded in irregular curves and planes of several heights (Boardman 2001, 98; Dugas 1930, 20), making possible the association with the mural painting described by Pausanias (Boardman 1989, 14-15; Simon 1963, 52), full of notes about ‘mountainous landscapes’ (Denoyelle 1997, 11) and ‘land indications’ (Bandinelli 1980, 191-192).

This feature of the descriptions received, in certain studies, the interpretation that Polygnotus would have composed his paintings starting from some depth type (Dugas 1930, 20-21; Richter 1958, 90), not easy to determine precisely because the descriptions are not exhaustive. Endowed or not of depth\(^\text{28}\), the painting of elevations and of varied planes of figuration was recognized as an ‘opening of space’, establishing a new ‘game of glances’ (Denoyelle 1997) that would be impossible if all the figures were rested on a horizontal line. This would be a flagrant sign of the ‘great change’ that Greek art would be experiencing (Robertson 1982, 87) and the change could then be understood through other characteristics that appeared in the compositions of the period.

Robertson, for instance, formulated the hypothesis that ‘the taste for static scenes instead of the action ones’ would be linked to the figuration in varied planes. In the scenes where the figures seem to be at repose, the direction of the glances can be shown to be ‘more emphatic’, since the figures are on different planes (Robertson 1982, 88).

The irregular landscape lines were also understood as a distinctive characteristic of the pictorial technique, unlike what occurs with the lines of the face, with the postures and with other characteristics of the figures, also recognized in sculpture (Dugas 1930, 16). Bandinelli (1980) points out precisely the notion that the landscape is essentially painted:

In sculpture, the landscape does not find expression, except through the mediation of the painting; it only appears in the relief, conditioned to be diffused firstly in painting and it is summarized, broadly speaking, in the form of complementary landscape (Bandinelli 1980, 184).

The reconstructions

The figurative modes described in book X of Pausanias produced, especially in the nineteenth century but also recently, a practice that is quite peculiar to the modern project of catching a glimpse of the lost art of Polygnotus: the reconstructions\(^{29}\). The hypothesis presented through reconstructions takes into consideration pottery exemplars in order not to be completely ‘blind’. However, the enormous and insurmountable ignorance of the originals should be enough to condemn these works, as Bandinelli argued convincingly:

To follow the project to which the specialists initially put themselves, to reconstruct in any way the works of the great Greek painters, is considered a poorly put problem and an unattainable result (Bandinelli 1980, 8).

The details of the descriptions of Pausanias must be in the origin of this enthusiasm to reconstruct and did not have important parallels. Pollitt (1990), for instance, presented reconstructions in drawings side by side with translations of Pausanias’ _periegesis_ but did not take the risk of repeating the procedure for the works of Zeuxis or Apeles, painters whom we also know only through ancient texts, where they were very celebrated.

Conclusion

Reduced to a strictly literary existence from approximately the fifth century AD, the ‘great Greek paintings’ did not therefore cease to be taken up repeatedly, nor did their ‘greatness’ cease to be celebrated. The examples of Pliny the Elder were repeated by Leon Battista Alberti (fifteenth century) in his treatise _De Pictura_\(^{30}\); in the eighteenth century, the accumulation of the Greek painters’ inventions was retaken and reconsidered by the philosophers who thus gained a sense of progress (Kossovitch 2002, 309); and in the 1990s, J. J. Pollitt limited the ‘progress’ in Pliny the Elder’s text in ‘stages of perfection’ that came to constitute an ‘evolutionary system’ for the art of painting (Pollitt 1990).

The Polygnotus of Thasos that we knew was adapted to these interpretations of progress or evolution, supposedly based on ancient texts but evidently proceeding from a modern historicist decoupage-like reconstruction. The painter carries out in this interpretative tradition the role of a ‘pioneer’, of ‘celebrity’ and, with greater license, of ‘dominant personality’. Except for some notable comparisons with relief art (Picard 1937; Denoyelle 1997;\(^{31}\) the reconstructions of the work of Polygnotus in the nineteenth century are due, mainly, to the German specialist Carl Robert (1892). _Nekyia_ was ‘reconstituted’ in the volume _Die Nekyia des Polygnot_ of 1892 (Halle A/S Max Niemeyer, Halle) and the reconstruction of _Iliopersis_ was published one year later. Recently, S. Woodford, (1974) and M. D. Stansbury-O’Donnell (1989; 1990) proposed reconstructions.

\(^{27}\) Denoyelle (1997) comments on the specific case of the ‘Niobid Krater’ in both faces. It is necessary to note here that Charles Dugas, almost seventy years earlier, had refuted the possibility that ‘wavy lines’ of the Krater correspond to a mountainous landscape. According this author, the lines ‘indicate, as a type of perspective, the distances between the planes on which are the figures’ (Dugas 1930, 20).

\(^{28}\) In some cases, it is suggested that the painting would have had perspective (Bruno 1977, 64; Dugas 1930, 20).

\(^{29}\) The reconstructions of the work of Polygnotus in the nineteenth century are due, mainly, to the German specialist Carl Robert (1892). _Nekyia_ was ‘reconstituted’ in the volume _Die Nekyia des Polygnot_ of 1892 (Halle A/S Max Niemeyer, Halle) and the reconstruction of _Iliopersis_ was published one year later. Recently, S. Woodford, (1974) and M. D. Stansbury-O’Donnell (1989; 1990) proposed reconstructions.

\(^{30}\) Although Alberti divided the text unlike Pliny did, but ‘like Horacio and the rhetorical treatises’ (Kossovitch 2002, 310).
Boardman 2001), the relationship between the ‘unseen’ mural painting and the preserved vascular painting was not subjected to greater verifications since their initial formulations. This relationship constitutes a one-way street where the vase painters, although they do not copy, are influenced by their great mural models.

We can even think that contingencies might have contributed to the establishment of the hypothesis that the ‘smaller art’ of the ceramic would reflect the ‘larger art’ of the murals. One example is the fact that the excavations of the necropolis of Vulci in 1828 and 1929 unearthed a great number of Greek vases (Rouet 2001, 26-27) exactly at a time in which the texts of Riepenhausen (Peinture de Polignote, 172611) and Goethe (Polignot’s Gemälde in der Lesche zu Delphi, 180312) about Polynotus were still popular among men devoted to classical studies.

However, it was never convenient to suggest that things might have happened contrary to the way it is common to think: that a mural painter, honored for the city with the ‘subsidy of his needs’ (NH, XXXV, 59) and intimate with the ruler’s relatives (Plutarch, Kimon’s Life, 4. 5-6), had been inspired by anonymous and forgotten craft makers who painted small curved clay surfaces. I can see no good reason to think like this. But we can think that the present images and the late descriptions document the same slow process of changes13 and not a ‘revolution in painting’.

The murals of Theseion and Anakheion and the pictures of the Painted Portico and of the art gallery of Propileus must have been seen daily by the inhabitants of the Athens of Kimon and Perikles, but the small paintings on vases would also have been frequently viewed images, not because of any monumentality or of the prominent place that they would occupy in important public buildings, but because of their abundance: the vases were part of nuptials, symposia, funerals, trade and domestic domains, and it does not seem in good judgment to suggest that they had less visibility than the murals. Therefore, the relationships between mural painting and vascular painting can be understood as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

To elevate to a high status the ‘great painting’ of the Kimonian period, convenient sources were selected. Having faith that they were guided by the point of view of Pliny and Pausanias, specialists could see in the past an Art that was not perpetuated but that should be rescued for the values that were attributed to this art, for its importance (whatever this importance might be), which had been the motivation for the critics and descriptions that we know.

The project of ‘glimpsing the lost art’ is frustrated by reading difficulties and by a lack of a common vocabulary with ancient authors. Edmond Pottier is one of the first to boast that, when affirming that ‘[Pausanias] enumerate all of the figures of the two frescos of Polynotus in Delphi (...) [but] the obscurity will not be less deep [than in other sources] regarding the disposition of the figures, their faces, their gestures, the technique of the colors, etc’ (Pottier, 1923?, 7).

The difficult and undisciplined relationship between obscure descriptions and vase paintings also does not take into account that the horizontal line as base for the totality of the figures, a characteristic practically universalized before the Persian Wars, may have had other exceptional origins before the works of Polynotus’ group of wall painters. There are notable Near-Eastern exceptions, among which are the famous stele of Naram-sin, oriental relief of the III millennium BC (Ducray 1987, 205 and 210), and some exceptional Assyrian relieves (Robertson 1975, 240).

The figures of these reliefs are undeniably arranged on different levels, which does not seem enough to propose any relationship between these figures and the lost mural paintings of the fifth century in Athens, except for an undocumented contact with this ‘alternative convention’ through Egyptian and Etruscan paintings, as attests Martin Robertson in a brief comment (Robertson 1975, 240). For all effects, what we see in some vases of free style and what we read in the ancient descriptions of mural painting cannot be considered entirely new.

It seems inappropriate to propose the depreciation of Polynotus of Thasos or of Pliny and Pausanias. Nonetheless, based on the above discussion, we can suggest a new place for the painter as a character in the Natural History and Description of Greece. The modern advent of a ‘Polynotan style’ does not seem really attentive to the dating of the texts that reveal to us his principles or to the fact that the name Polynotus of Thasos must have suffered the ‘effects of time’, as must have the paintings attributed to him (GD, I, 17, 2-4). In contrast to what it does to paintings, time revives the name of the artist, amplifies his or her qualities and perhaps increases the quantity of works attributed to the artist14.

The texts of the first and second centuries AD, from their particular point of view, can tell us not only ‘that which time did not erase’ (GD, I, 22, 6-7) but also that which time allowed to be added.

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11 Quoted by S. Reinach 1907, 93, number 70, 4.
12 Quoted by Charles Dugas (À la lèschè des crêdiens, 1938, in Dugas 1960).
13 We should take into account, for instance, the presence of the names written on the paintings of Polynotus or the Homeric themes of the scenes (GD, X, 25-31), traditional characteristics, and the weapons and garments of Niobid Krater (Boardman 1989), also following the previous tradition.
14 The ‘battle of Oenoe’, which occurred between 395 and 386 BC, is indicated by Pausanias (GD I, 15,1) as one of the great compositions of the Stoï Poikile of Athens, a building painted by Polynotus and two other artists about a century earlier. This problem gained elegant interpretations, among the most notable of which are those of Jeffery (1965) and Francis & Vickers (1985), as well as the earlier Caspari (1911).
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