In this book, Sheila Dillon offers the first detailed analysis of the full range of evidence for female portrait statues in Greek art. A major component of Greek sculptural production, particularly in the Hellenistic period, female portrait statues are mostly missing from our histories of Greek portraiture. Whereas male portraits tend to stress their subject’s distinctiveness through physiognomic individuality, portraits of women are more visually homogeneous. In defining their subjects according to normative ideals of beauty rather than notions of corporeal individuality, Dillon argues that Greek portraits of women work differently than those of men and must be approached with different expectations. She examines the historical phenomenon of the commemoration of women in portrait statues from the fourth century to the first century BCE and traces the continued use of the idealizing, “not portrait” style into the Roman period at a select number of sites.

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The

Female Portrait Statue
in the Greek World

SHEILA DILLON
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Do you think that Greek art ever tells us what the Greek people were like? Do you believe that the Athenian women were like the stately dignified figures of the Parthenon frieze, or like those marvelous goddesses who sat in the triangular pediments of the same building? If you judge from the art, they certainly were so. But read an authority, like Aristophanes, for instance. You will find that the Athenian ladies laced tightly, wore high-heeled shoes, dyed their hair yellow, painted and rouged their faces, and were exactly like any silly fashionable or fallen creature of our own day. The fact is that we look back on the ages entirely through the medium of art, and art, very fortunately, has never once told us the truth.

(Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*)

The people of Croton, once upon a time . . . desired to enrich with distinguished paintings the temple of Juno. They therefore paid a large fee to Zeuxis of Herakleia, who was considered at that time to excel all other painters. He said that he wished to paint a picture of Helen so that the portrait though silent and lifeless might embody the surpassing beauty of womanhood. This delighted the people of Croton, who had often heard that he surpassed all others in the portrayal of women. . . . Zeuxis immediately asked them what girls they had of surpassing beauty. They took him directly to a palaestra and showed him many very handsome young men. . . . As he was greatly admiring the handsome bodies, they said, “There are in our city the sisters of these men; you may get an idea of their beauty from these youths.” “Please send me then the most beautiful of these girls, while I am painting the picture that I have promised, so that the true beauty may be transferred from the living model to the mute likeness.” Then the citizens of Croton by a public decree assembled the girls in one place and allowed the painter to choose whom he wished. . . . He chose five because he did not think all the qualities which he sought to combine in a portrayal of beauty could be found in one person.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of journals and standard works follow the format set out in American Journal of Archaeology 104 (2000) 10–24. Abbreviations specific to this work follow.


ABBREVIATIONS


