CHAPTER ONE

RHETORIC, INNOVATION, AND THE COURTS

INTRODUCTION

Today Hellenistic art is celebrated for its innovation. To get a sense of how it differs from the Greek art of previous eras, we only need to compare two well-known artworks that are separated by centuries but united in medium: the Classical frieze from the Parthenon in Athens (Fig. 1.1) and the Hellenistic Telephos Frieze from the Great Altar at Pergamon (Fig. 1.2).  

In their original and complete states, both works were continuous marble friezes that wrapped around their monuments. The Parthenon Frieze encircled the top of the exterior walls of the Parthenon’s cela, visible through the spaces in the building’s colonnade. It depicted the procession of the Panathenaic Festival, which celebrated the goddess Athena’s birthday. The Telephos Frieze ran around the Great Altar’s interior courtyard, and here, too, a colonnade framed viewing. It presented the life story of Telephos, a mythical hero who is associated with Pergamon’s origins. These works constitute an especially helpful comparison: although both were architectural friezes on prominent Greek buildings, they look obviously different, even in their current fragmentary state. Most notably, the Parthenon Frieze illustrates one event—a parade—while the Telephos Frieze narrates an episodic story. Moreover, as we see in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, the Parthenon Frieze has stock figures with placid, neutral facial expressions, yet the Telephos Frieze has characters who exhibit emotion and individuality. The Parthenon Frieze also pays little attention to setting, but
the Telephos Frieze describes a range of landscapes, including the rocky terrain in Figure 1.2.

By comparing these two artworks, we can appreciate some of the great innovations that took place in Greek art between the Classical and Hellenistic periods: dramatic changes in the use of narrative, characterization, and description – or διήγημα (dieγema), προσωποποιία (prosopopoiia), and ἐκφρασις (ekphrasis), to use Greek terminology. What is more, the relative calmness of most of the Telephos Frieze contrasts with the exuberance of the Baroque sculptural frieze on the Great Altar’s exterior (Figs. 1.3 and 2.2). This new possibility of formal choice – especially within one monument – demonstrates additional Hellenistic innovation in the use of style, or λέξις (lexiś). These innovations prompt one basic question: Why did some Greek art in the Hellenistic period look so different from previous Greek art?

Explanations for this transformation often look to such external factors as Alexander the Great’s conquest of the Near East in the 330–320 bce and the continued Greek presence in the resulting Hellenistic kingdoms of his
Successors (Map 1): the Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt, the Antigonid Kingdom in Makedonia, the Attalid Kingdom in Asia Minor, and the Seleukid Kingdom in the Near East. But did this expansion in and of itself really have a profound impact on Greek art?

First of all, it is helpful to keep in mind how modern interpretations of these events have shaped the definitions of what we call the Hellenistic period. Today, as we have seen, Hellenistic art is characterized by its differences from earlier Greek art. One of the greatest challenges with attempting an historical explanation for such innovations, however, is the way in which this art-historical period has been conceived and defined. Lack of ancient documentation, modern
neglect, and application of perhaps ill-fitting terms have all hindered historical explanations for Hellenistic art.

When the Roman encyclopedist Pliny wrote *cessavit deinde ars* (“then art ceased”) in 296–292 BCE, little did he know that he was to influence the way in which Hellenistic art would be received for the next 2,000 years. In this statement, Pliny almost certainly refers to the limited phenomenon of the celebrity sculptor in mainland Greece – and even then assuredly overstates his case. But he does highlight a real, perceptible change that had taken place in Greek visual culture. Like other ancient writers before him, Pliny places the final *floruit* of Greek art with Lysippos, Alexander the Great’s court sculptor in the 330s and 320s. And so, for Pliny, it is with Lysippos’s sons and immediate followers that art supposedly stopped in the 290s, only resuming in the 150s. This apparent lacuna has proved difficult to fill – and to define – in modern times.

For the rediscovery of ancient art in the Renaissance, Pliny provided a framework of Greek and Roman art into which antiquarians and art historians could place old literary references and new finds. Thus when dealing with the art produced after Alexander, Renaissance scholars and their Enlightenment successors maintained Pliny’s silence – or, worse yet, condemned both lost and extant artworks as decadent by adhering to the paradigm of history’s organic nature, with its births, blooms, and decays. In ancient art, such an evolutionary
curve was superimposed on what we now call the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic/Roman periods.

At first, the period of art after Alexander was vaguely defined, as seen in the founding modern handbook of ancient art history, J. J. Winckelmann’s *Geschichte des Kunst des Alterthums* (1764). Although Winckelmann questioned Pliny’s theory of decadence, he nevertheless attributed precious few extant artworks to the time after Alexander, and he even placed two of the symbols of what many scholars now call Hellenistic art, the Laokoön and the Farnese Bull, in the epoch of Lysippos – in other words, the end of the Classical period – owing to their fine execution. Winckelmann filled Pliny’s void with Roman copies, which he believed were imitative and derivative works that mimic the Classical.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the character of the art after Alexander slowly took shape, providing ever more evidence for the drastic change of visual culture that Pliny marked. Works such as the Laokoön were down-dated; excavations at sites such as Alexandria, Delos, and Pergamon yielded provenanced and (roughly) datable material that allowed for the construction of local sculptural schools; such new finds documented the sheer diversity of later Greek art and its contrast with the Classical; and the advent of Hellenistic historical studies gave rise to a causal explanation for this art-historical sea change.

In his monumental *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (1836 and 1843; second edition 1878), the historian Johann Gustav Droysen employed the preexisting term *Hellenismus* to describe the eastern spread of Greek culture following Alexander’s conquest of Asia. For Droysen, *Hellenismus* was the *Verschmelzung* (“fusion”) of Greek and Eastern thought and politics, an intermediary phase of ancient culture that set the stage for Christianity and, eventually, the Lutheranism of his own day. The ramifications of Droysen’s work, though, reached far beyond nineteenth-century ideas about the history of religion. In effect, his use of the term *Hellenismus* created a coherent period of historical study, providing a ready-made label that (among others) art historians and archaeologists could apply to the art after Alexander. The periodization of Greek art was modified accordingly. Owing to their association with Alexander, Lysippos and his followers now marked not the end of the Classical but rather the beginning of the Hellenistic. And, most importantly, Droysen provided an historical cause for the great change in the art after Alexander. So-called Hellenistic art came to be defined as the explosive result of the eastern spread of Greek culture, the dawn of the Hellenistic kingdoms, and Greek–Eastern interactions during the years between Alexander’s death in 323 BCE and the triumph of Rome at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE.

Thus by the time synthetic studies of Hellenistic art began to appear in the twentieth century, the corpus of Hellenistic material had been defined, and an
historical explanation for it had been proposed. Yet there are some often overlooked but inescapable difficulties with this accepted explanation for the appearance of Hellenistic art. First and foremost, Droysen’s conception of fusion as the defining characteristic of Hellenismus – and thus the Hellenistic age – is fundamentally problematic. Although he justifies the modern study of the Hellenistic period, his religious determinism reduces it to a merely transitional time between Alexander and Jesus that is almost entirely devoid of art and literature; he all but overlooks the presence and contributions of Jews and
Judaism; his construction of Alexander’s and the Successors’ power does not allow much if any room for the agency of non-Greeks more generally; and his presentation of ancient historical events often reads like his documented opinions about nineteenth-century politics in Central Europe. Influenced by G. W. F. Hegel and steeped in nineteenth-century ideas about national unity, assimilation, and freedom, his view of Hellenismus is teleological, incomplete, and flawed. Second, although Graeco-Roman elements can be found in Near Eastern art, Hellenistic art rarely—if ever—borrowed elements from other
cultures for works done by Greek artists in the Greek style. And third, while previous scholars have noticed similar innovations in Hellenistic art and literature, they have not determined their origin— in Greek–Eastern fusion or in anything else. We perhaps should question the necessity of emphasizing Greek–Eastern fusion in all our characterizations of the Hellenistic period and its cultural production. We should look instead to instances of cultural interaction in specific historical circumstances both before and after Alexander. And we should investigate other possible factors that helped to generate Hellenistic innovations such as the ones that we noted on the Telephos Frieze.

A question presents itself: If change due to external forces did not prompt the innovations in Hellenistic art, was change from within Greek culture a catalyst?

THE ROLE OF RHETORICAL EDUCATION

Let us think about the Hellenistic innovations that we observed earlier: diegema, or “narrative”; prosopopoiia, or “characterization”; and ekphrasis, or “description.” They all have one thing in common: each is a Greek rhetorical term. It may be useful, then, to probe this apparent link between art and rhetoric in internal Greek cultural production.

For many years, scholars have observed a special relationship between Greek art and rhetoric. Their scholarship has primarily focused on the relationship of art and rhetoric in ancient literature, the resemblance of Asiatic rhetoric and the Baroque sculptural style, and the rhetorical devices of particular Hellenistic artworks. This work is provocative, but no one has explored the fundamental nature of the relationship between Hellenistic art and rhetoric. Many questions, then, remain. We have yet to understand how artists knew rhetorical techniques that were discussed in sophisticated criticism, or why they employed visual analogies to these devices when making different types of art.

Our rhetorical terms—diegema, prosopopoiia, and ekphrasis—are, perhaps, the key. For they were also common rhetorical exercises that ancient youngsters would have learned at school. The advent of rhetorical instruction in Greek education is thus, perhaps, a good place for us to start our investigation of factors that contributed to innovation in Hellenistic art.

Rhetorical training became part of the Greek curriculum when sweeping pedagogical changes were implemented during the Classical period. This educational shift was most apparent in Athens. Throughout most of the sixth and early fifth centuries BCE, Athenian education had emphasized μουσική (mousike, or “oral culture”) and γυμναστική (gymnastike, or “physical training”). These skills had served the aristocratic citizen well, enabling him to recite at symposia and to perform in choruses at religious festivals. But the requirements of good citizenship changed in the later fifth and fourth
centuries: literacy and public speaking became vital for participation in civic politics. Accordingly, three educational changes developed over time. First, the study of γράμματα (grammata, or “letters and literature”) was added to the curriculum. Second, gymnastike was separated from cultural training. And, third, rhetorical instruction became the norm. By the mid-fourth century BCE and the start of the Hellenistic period, the ἐγκώμιον παιδείας (enkyklios paideias) – in other words, a liberal arts package – was entrenched in curricula at Athens and elsewhere in the Greek-speaking world.

These changes prompted Greek education to grow increasingly regulated and specialized. Professional teachers now provided basic instruction, often in formal schools. Specialists, moreover, taught advanced material such as medicine and philosophy. Indeed, by the Hellenistic period, some wealthy students even left home to pursue such advanced study in big cities.

Education also grew more widespread. Philosophers advocated universal education. And Hellenistic monarchs and private citizens often funded it. What is more, both boys and girls were educated (though boys, to be sure, received instruction in far greater numbers).

This educational transformation has been called “the literate revolution.” But more than mere literacy was emphasized: students were also taught how to construct their own essays and speeches. This cultural shift, then, entailed a radical change from passive reception to active production. So rhetoric appears to have played a role, too. This change was due in large part to the practical nature of rhetorical instruction during childhood. Students were taught how to be active cultural producers at a relatively young age, learning such techniques as our diegema, prosopopoeia, and ekphrasis as part of the προγυμνάσματα (progymnasmata, or “preliminary rhetorical exercises”).

Today Greek progymnasmata are preserved in handbooks attributed to four authors who probably range from the first to fourth centuries CE: Aelius Theon, Pseudo–Hermogenes, Aphthonios, and Nikolaos. Model Greek progymnasmata compositions by the fourth-century CE writer and teacher Libanius also come down to us. As preserved in handbooks, the progymnasmata consisted of ten or more exercises that were arranged in order of increasing difficulty, including: μῦθος (mythos, or “fable”); διήγησις (diegema, or “narrative”); χρεία (chreia, or “discussion of sayings and actions of notable people”); γνώμη (gnome, or “maxim”); ἀνασκευή (anaskue, or “refutation”) and κατασκευή (kataskue, or “confirmation”); τόπος κοινός (topos koinos, or “commonplace”); ἐγκώμιον (enkonymion, or “exposition of good qualities of a person or thing”); ψόγος (psogos, or “invective”); σύγκρισις (synkrisis, or “comparison”); ἔθος (ethos) and προσωποποίησις (ethopoiia and prosopopoeia, or “imitation of the character of a person or a thing”); ἔκφρασις (ekphrasis, or “descriptive speech”); θέσις (thesis, or “consideration of a subject”); νόμος (nomos, or “introduction of a law”); ἀνάγνωσις (anagnosis, or “reading aloud”);
ἀκρόασις (akroasis, or “listening”); παράφρασις (paraphrasis, or “paraphrase”); ἐξεργασία (exergasia, or “elaboration”); and ἀντίρρησις (antirrhesis, or “counterstatement”).

Although the earliest surviving handbook likely dates to the first century CE, progymnasmata appear to have been part of educational practice by the very start of the Hellenistic period. Theon himself says that the progymnasmata have a long previous history.23 The earliest appearance of the word προγυμνάσματα or γυμνάσματα (progymnasmata or gymnasmata) is found in the Rhetorica ad Alexandrum, a treatise that was written probably by Anaximenes of Lampsacus in the fourth century BCE.24 Specific exercises can also be dated to the fourth century BCE. Aristotle, for example, is said to have used thesis, and he describes the techniques (that were later called) thesis, mythos, gnome, diegesis, enkomion, ethopoiia/prosopopoiia, and ekphrasis.25 Papyri from Ptolemaic Egypt, moreover, preserve actual school exercises. A papyrus from Arsinoite, dated to the second century BCE, preserves a diegesis about the Labors of Herakles and another text that could be a paraphrasis of an epic poem, a paraphrasis of a drama written for school, or a diegesis of a drama.26 And a second/first-century BCE papyrus fragment from Karanis contains a paraphrasis of an episode from the Iliad.27 Quintilian and Suetonius, moreover, tell us that such exercises had become the backbone of a classical education by the time of Republican and Early Imperial Rome.28

Students practiced the progymnasmata during the intermediary phase of their education, after they had learned to read and write. These exercises served as preparation for more sophisticated declamations in the schools of rhetoric that perhaps twelve- to fifteen-year-old boys attended.29 Although the exercises themselves were standardized, their implementation varied in the Hellenistic and Roman world. For example, both the elementary schools of grammarians and the more advanced schools of rhetors taught the exercises, depending upon educational availability, context, and pedagogy.30 But just about all students would have been exposed to them.

Speechmaking was the most important goal of the progymnasmata. Theon, for example, spelled out their importance for learning how to construct judicial, deliberative, and epideictic rhetoric – and thus speeches for a range of civic and personal needs.31 Indeed, many of these school exercises became the patterns and set pieces that helped to shape adult oratory.32 And the handbooks also recognized their general utility for a literate populace: Theon explicitly said that they were helpful for writers and word-minded people.33 Yet the progymnasmata also served a broader cultural function. As the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued, education is a process of social reproduction.34 Not surprisingly, then, the progymnasmata showed children how to be Greek. Indeed, they even cite ἕλληνισμός (hellenismos, or “Hellenism”) as a virtue of a technique.35 This ancient use of the term is a far cry from Droysen’s