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**Deborah Tarn Steiner: Images in Mind**

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## Preface

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I SET OUT to write a book about how archaic and classical Greek poets, philosophers, dramatists, and historians introduce statues as cognitive and hermeneutic devices in their texts, using the artifacts as objects “good to think with.” But the more I looked at the written sources, the more I was directed back to the statues themselves: it proved impossible to understand why an author inserted a work of art at a particular point in his composition without knowing something of the nature of contemporary images, what they looked like, how they functioned, what they were credited with doing. The result is a book that aims to tell two stories, one about objects, the other about texts, and to show how each proves crucial to the other.

First the objects, and the huge gaps in the material record. For all Greece’s assumed influence on later western art, the images that stand at the head of that tradition are largely lost to us, or are extant only in the form of fragments or Roman copies of variable accuracy and quality. While some of the architectural and funerary works still remain, all but a handful of the bronze statues that later ancient viewers particularly prized and chose to copy in marble form have long since disappeared (many melted down, or still buried somewhere in the Mediterranean seabed). So, too, while art historians and aestheticians from the Renaissance on have drawn on the accounts of ancient images given by authors of the imperial age, no extant archaic or classical author includes a direct or unmediated description of a contemporary work of art, or straightforwardly documents an individual or collective response.

But if the vast majority of statues are lost to us, plentiful evidence of another kind remains. As traces in the ground, inscriptions on bases, sacred laws, and the many literary pointers to the ritual practices and events surrounding images amply attest, the objects were deeply embedded in the social, political, and religious fabric of archaic and classical Greece. In fifth-century Athens, a citizen might go from the agora, which had at its center images emblemizing the ten Kleisthenic tribes, through the city streets where herms occupied the crossroads, and into his workshop where a depiction of Hephaistos presided over his kiln; a contestant at the Olympic games could wander through the sacred precinct of the Altis, where statues of former winning athletes stood, wonder at the vast image of Nike, which the Messenians had set up to mark their victory in battle, and be cautioned by an array of bronze effigies of Zeus, figures fashioned from the fines inflicted on those who

had deliberately broken the rules of the competitions. More generally, parents mourning the death of a child might set a carved image or stele at his grave, and a fisherman celebrating a successful haul might dedicate a *korē* to commemorate his luck and guarantee that divine favors would continue in future times. As key artifacts in this cultural landscape, images also evolved along with shifts and developments in time and place: modes of commemoration appropriate during the reign of sixth-century tyrants were deemed unacceptable under the radical Athenian democracy, while fresh attitudes toward eros and its legitimate objects could generate new modes of depicting the male and female form.

Setting images within this broader context also allows us to recover many of the attitudes and beliefs surrounding them and some of the responses that they would have garnered. As the examples already cited suggest, no sculpture was erected without a function to perform. Whether apotropaic, talismanic, monitory, consolatory, votive, or commemorative in intent, statues were first and foremost regarded not as representational or aesthetic objects (although their beauty and highly crafted quality were often crucial to their fulfillment of their designated role), but as performative and efficacious agents, able to interact in a variety of ways with those who commissioned, venerated, and even on occasion defaced them. Proof of their dynamic and responsive properties comes from many different domains; inscriptions record that statues were fashioned in order to drive off a havoc-wreaking ghost or hostile spirit sent by an enemy, and in Attic comedy and on painted pots at least, herms react and reply to those who address them with petitions and prayers. Additional evidence belongs to the myths and episodes that archaic, classical, and later authors narrate, some charting the objects' miraculous provenance, discovery, and checkered histories, others imagining their startling displays of potency: statues turn their heads to deny a prayer or register divine displeasure, come possessed with the capacity for speech and song, and disappear from the pedestals where they are placed. No less remarkable is the impact that sculpture may have on the viewer, and the affective properties that it regularly manifests. The artifacts are quite literally transfixing, able to paralyze and madden those who engage with them and to provoke emotions that can run the gamut from erotic delight to despair.

For the recovery of these actions and beliefs, we are chiefly dependent on the literary sources, which introduce statues into their works in a large variety of contexts, sometimes just glancing toward them, sometimes integrating them more centrally into a text. But when an archaic or classical author notes the activities surrounding an ancient image and alerts us to the ways in which his fellow Greeks approached, viewed, and handled the object, he generally does so as the chance by-product

of a more self-interested enterprise. As the second story included in this study looks to demonstrate, the real and much more frequently notional images that appear in works of poetry and prose are above all rhetorical and illustrative devices, designed to cohere with the themes and arguments of the surrounding piece.

As vehicles for the exploration of the author's or speaker's prime concerns, images prove endlessly versatile. When the drunken Alcibiades wants to describe that most curious of individuals, Socrates, to his fellow guests, he likens him to a statue of the misshapen and lascivious Silenus, which, when opened up, reveals exquisite divine images concealed behind its crude exterior (Pl. *Symp.* 215a–b). Where Alcibiades deploys statues to figure the split between external appearance and internal reality, other speakers use them to articulate and explore relations between representations—whether artistic, verbal, or dramatic—and originals, the problem of nomination, the possibility of accurate perception through the senses. In search of the properties that distinguish the living from the dead, a writer may cite a statue by way of simile or foil; seeking to evoke the vain nature of the lover's quest, he imagines the beloved in the form of a plastic image; and eager to declare the enduring and highly crafted quality of his own composition, a poet describes his song in the terms that the artifact supplies. In each of its five central chapters, this book treats one of these and the related notions that the sources most frequently address by means of statuary, and traces how the art of the age affects the literary and philosophical imagination.

The innovations in sculptural style and technique that marked the late archaic and classical ages and that constitute the more properly “art historical” dimension that my discussion seeks to incorporate feed directly into the questions sounded by the texts, and prove critical to deciphering their tropes and conceits. Even as sculptors create more naturalistic accounts of their subjects and devise ways of giving their works a heightened emotive and persuasive appeal, poets, dramatists, sophists, and philosophers look to statues when they wonder about the proper use and ethical charge of *apatē*, which all works of mimesis involve, and when they question whether physiognomy and outward demeanor can reflect the inner person. Fainter, but no less suggestive overlaps indicate other crosscurrents. Might the young, graceful, and even seductive victor statues now appearing at Olympia and elsewhere cohere with Pindar's contemporary accounts of the athlete as an *erōmenos* and object of desire, and do the *trompe l'oeil* works fashioned by the artists of the late fifth and early fourth century inform Plato's strictures against representations and his preoccupation with achieving the correct vantage point, which frees the viewer from the distortions that the senses impose?

As this brief overview makes clear, texts are necessary to images be-

cause only the contemporary literary sources allow us to apprehend how the Greeks of the archaic and classical ages conceptualized sculpture; and images are necessary to texts, because without them we cannot understand the role of sculpture—both as a class of objects and in particular instances—as a literary device used in poetry, rhetoric, and philosophy. But the exchanges also go beyond this obvious form of reciprocity, and the presence of a statue informs the nature of the surrounding literary construct in more subtle fashion, too, as it imports into the text all the powers, properties, and associations that it possesses in the lives of the audiences. And although some of these same arguments could be made for painting, sculpture stands very much in a class of its own; the image's three-dimensionality, its frequent occupation of the same real space that the viewer inhabits, and its central place within the social, political, religious, and magical practices of the age endow it with facets unique to itself.

A word about organization, methodology, and my use of sources. The book does not aim to provide a comprehensive treatment of archaic and classical statuary, nor a documentation of every instance in which an ancient author cites an image. Instead, its chapters are designed as selective treatments of some of the questions that the objects generated, and as discussions of the preoccupations that sculpture helped contemporary artists, writers, and viewers to articulate. For some readers, my use of both the visual and the textual evidence may seem idiosyncratic. Although the book restricts its scope to the archaic and classical periods, I have on occasion included material from much later authors, who not only describe works no longer extant, but also supply much of our information concerning the ritual practices and anecdotal traditions surrounding the earlier images. I have tried to use this additional evidence only where it supplements or fills out suggestions and implications in the earlier sources, and to bear in mind the very different mentalities and agendas shaping the later texts. So, too, Roman copies of lost Greek originals figure in the argument, but once again come surrounded with the necessary caveats. While the thinking about images set out above informs all the chapters, the discussions can also be read as free-standing essays grouped around a central theme, and each may appeal to a different audience. But if the book aims to accommodate a selective reading, it is also my hope that the overlaps and connections between its several parts will encourage a more comprehensive approach, and that the whole will generate a fuller, more cohesive account of the role of statues in the daily lives, thoughts, and practices of ancient viewers.