

Mark D. Stansbury-O'Donnell, *Looking at Greek Art*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xi, 253. ISBN: 978-0-521-12557-4. Paperback \$27.99.

This book is not another handbook on the development of Greek Art. Rather, it is a valuable introduction to the sorts of questions asked about ancient art, and an overview of the different theoretical approaches and analytical tools developed to answer these questions and formalise the study of ancient objects. These approaches are relevant to the study of visual culture from every period, but an introduction to them is rarely attempted.

In Chapter 1, Stansbury-O'Donnell (henceforth S.) introduces his work and identifies his intended reader: "a student in a class on Greek art history or archaeology who may have to study actual objects as part of a research project or essay....[or]...a visitor or traveller interested...in any collection of Greek art."(7–8). Using two examples, descriptions of art by ancient authors and arrangements of ancient objects in modern museum display, S. demonstrates how interactive viewing can be. Choices made by others colour the viewer's encounter with an object, while at the same time the viewer himself defines what is of interest and the questions he will ask. In order to treat these questions, the rest of the book is divided into four chapters covering "style, meaning, context and identity"(16).

Chapter 2 begins by considering how the analysis of style can identify the ancient creator (through details of rendering and the composition of scene), which in turn provides clues as to the area of production and the date the object. This chapter sets the tone for the whole book. A theoretical approach is introduced and illustrated using examples of ancient objects from a wide chronological range and different media. Problems with each approach are highlighted; for instance, the Aegina pediments and the Sperlonga sculpture are used to show that stylistic development is often not straightforwardly chronological. The chapter closes with S. introducing some individually named 'artists', which introduces the issue of the role of the ancient creator/craftsman. It also shows the way in which the preoccupations of scholars today have shaped the classification of ancient material, and so affected our own experience of it.

The third chapter is a well-illustrated demonstration of the different theoretical models used (consciously or less so) to identify subjects and construct the meaning of scenes. S. discusses how iconographic devices distinguish characters and scenes, before considering interpretations of narrative devices, which too often use images purely as illustrations of ancient literature. Theoretical models borrowed from other disciplines, such as semiotics and structuralism from linguistic theory and hermeneutics from religious studies, offer different models of interpretation. These allow that the scenes could hold a multiplicity of meanings even for the ancient craftsmen and viewers, and that their meaning might depend on the viewing context. The decisions taken by the

ancient craftsman in representing the scenes could resonate with particular viewers; for instance, the duplication of a particular arrangement of figures might indicate intentional parody (repetition theory). But the particular knowledge and cultural and historical background of any viewer would also shape their understanding of the subject and their use of the object (poststructuralism).

When discussing context in Chapter 4, S. begins to think of 'art' as a functional object, moving from visual to socio-economic analysis as he discusses how 'art' was produced and used. Using this socio-economic approach to material culture, which he labels 'Marxist' theory, S. considers general possibilities for the production and distribution of ancient objects, before concentrating on specific case studies, such as the Parthenon building accounts. His examples show that this approach both requires, and can provide, a wealth of background historical and economic information. The way in which political factors and religious practices might affect the production and consumption of images are discussed, before S. uses case studies to broadly review the different types of context in which 'art' can be found: Civic, Votive, Grave and Domestic. His (unusual) categorisation of sanctuary buildings as a civic, rather than a votive, context emphasises the complex interaction between individual viewers and society as a whole within the different context-types. S. then moves on to the theoretical models most associated with production and consumption: agency theory, ritual analysis, cultural poetics and object biography. Up to this point S. has prioritised the identification and classification of particular theoretical approaches over using a combination of approaches to fully reveal the meaning of an ancient object. This allows him to explain the different theories, while also revealing their limitations. His criticism of agency theory "that it is too inflexible and one-dimensional" (154) could be applied to any one approach used in isolation. However, in the rest of the book, his treatment of broader analytical categories demonstrates what can be learnt by combining a variety of context-based and audience-aware approaches.

In the final chapter, S. considers art as a marker of identity, using a broad range of the methodologies already discussed. He examines some different formulations of identity (gender, class, civic, ethnic), discussing how theoretical approaches such as feminism and postcolonialism have been used. This chapter deals rather too summarily with the issues it explores, raising more questions than answers and doing something of a disservice to the theoretical approaches. S. applies the different models of viewing that he has expounded in earlier chapters, but so briefly that they sometimes become inflexible and simplistic, missing the multiple levels of interpretation and nuanced understanding that have been a hallmark of earlier chapters. Thus, in using a feminist approach to examine a kylix showing komasts on the exterior and two clothed women on the interior (184–188), one of his conclusions is that the women depicted are not hetairai, but 'respectable' women working wool. That one of them also reveals a bare leg would simply provide titillation to a man using the cup at a symposium. He does not push this interpretation further and admit to the inbuilt ambiguity of the image. Some viewers might see that these are respectable women, but others would surely see them as

hetairai on their ‘time off’, when they perform the same chores as ‘respectable’ wives and so blur the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. In failing to acknowledge this interpretation, S. misses the sort of nuanced reading that he earlier promotes.

The book concludes with a rather unexpected case study focussing on Pausanias’ ekphrasis on the now lost chest of Kypselus from the temple of Hera at Olympia (Pausanias 5.17.55.19.10). Pausanias’ description does epitomise many of the approaches and questions that modern critical theory (and S. in this book) engages with, but the choice is interesting, since the chest itself does not survive. Without the object in front of us, we, the readers, cannot practice our newly acquired skills of visual analysis, but can only assess the piece through Pausanias’ eyes (and inherent preoccupations). This perhaps reveals a personal preference for decoding iconography, rather than thinking about visual and artistic effect, suggested in S.’s reconstruction of the lost Polygnotan paintings the *Nekyia* and *Iliupersis* from the descriptions in Pausanias and extant vase fragments (‘Polygnotos’s *Iliupersis*: a New Reconstruction’ *American Journal of Archaeology* 93 (1989) 203–15, ‘Polygnotos’s *Nekyia*: A Reconstruction and Analysis’ *American Journal of Archaeology* 94 (1990) 213–35). It also highlights one of the problems I have with this book. Although it defines itself as a way of looking at Greek art, this is not a book about the objects themselves, but about words and concepts used to describe and evaluate them. The conclusion of chapter 2 does emphasise the importance of studying the actual objects (54), and because the examples are drawn from major museum collections, they are arguably fairly accessible. But the majority of the discussion and the poor quality of the illustrations seem to move away from the object in favour of critiquing other people’s understanding of art. This perhaps demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of any theoretical model for viewing and understanding ancient objects, which can provide a framework for thinking about art but should not replace looking at the object itself.

My second problem concerns the suitability of the book for its intended readers: students conducting individual research, or interested museum visitors. On the one hand, this is an extremely valuable introduction to a range of visual art theory, explained in a clear and accessible manner and well-pitched for the student/amateur audience. There is a representative bibliography in the brief ‘Further Reading’ at the end of each chapter, and the ‘Glossary’ caters to students encountering unfamiliar terminology (although it raises more questions than answers, and crucially lacks page references to relevant discussion). On the other hand, it assumes too much prior knowledge of ancient art and history to be used as a stand-alone text by that same audience. The examples S. uses are scattered throughout eight centuries of Greek art, and the limited amount of background information provided for each object is likewise often scattered throughout the book. For example, the Tyrannicides are introduced to illustrate a point about absolute dating (40) with no background information on their form, function or context. They appear again in discussion about semiotics (78), but their full story is only finally revealed on page 134. In order to understand the theoretical points being explained the reader would also need a detailed knowledge of the ancient objects. The illustrations are

also problematic for the target audience. The small, grey-scale figures are only good enough to give a general impression of the object, without showing the finer detail to which S. refers in the text. For instance, it is impossible to discern the important muscle definition carved into a gem because of the grainy reproduction of Figure 20.

In my opinion, S's target audiences might have difficulty in using this book, but other audiences would find its wealth of information and lucid summary invaluable. Its true potential could best be realised if it was used as a textbook to accompany a well-illustrated lecture course on Greek art, art history or archaeology.

C. L. COOPER
THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE