Excerpts from Pliny the Elder’s Chapters on the History of Art

From the preface to the American edition by Raymond V. Schoder, S.J.

Pliny’s passages on art history are uniquely useful among our varied sources of information. He fills in many gaps, providing our only clues to the existence or the accomplishments of hundreds of ancient artists in bronze, marble, painting, and mosaics. His stories and anecdotes, salvaged for us from Greek treatises now lamentably lost, give human interest and substance to many famous names. He raises problems as well, leading to more vigorous and precise research and still posing many challenges today. Where Pliny is our only basis of information, art history is deeply in his debt. In the case of the few works still extant about which he writes there is the different facet of his interest: a chance to compare his statements and appraisal with the evidence of the art object itself or its surviving copy. It is now possible to illustrate much of what Pliny is talking about, and study of his text should not be in isolation from this evidence. Pliny himself shows little artistic insight or sensitivity — what interests him is mostly a work’s startling realism, or an artist’s originality (ingenium) or distinctive bent (argumentum), and always the money value of the masterpiece in the Rome of his day. He was too busy and hurried to give time to esthetic analysis, even if capable of that, which is doubtful in view of his factual and scientific bent of mind. Primarily, he was curious about art history as a human phenomenon and as a huge mass of material needing classification for better understanding. He knew that that was the interest of most of his Roman readers also and he felt that his combination of facts and anecdotes from many scattered sources would appeal.

On bronze statuary and public honors

The ancients did not make any statues of individuals unless they deserved immortality by some distinction, originally by a victory at some sacred games, especially those of Olympia, where it was the custom to dedicate statues of all those who had conquered, and portrait statues if they had conquered three times. These are called iconic.

The Athenians were, I believe, introducing a new custom when they set up statues at the public expense in honour of Harmodios and Aristogeiton, who killed the tyrants. This occurred in the very year in which the kings were expelled from Rome. A refined ambition led to the universal adoption of the custom, and statues began to adorn the public places of every town; the memories of men were immortalized, and their honours were no longer merely graven on their tombstones, but handed down for posterity to read on the pedestals of statues. Later on the rooms and halls of private houses became so many public places, and clients began to honour their patrons in this way.

Formerly statues were dedicated wearing the toga. Nude statues holding a spear were also in favour, modelled after young men in the gymnasium these were called Achillean. The Greek custom was to leave the body quite nude; but the Roman and military custom was to add a breastplate, while Caesar, when Dictator, allowed a statue of himself wearing a cuirass to be set up in his forum. Statues in the dress of the Lupercals are as recent an innovation as those lately introduced wearing short cloaks. Mancinus set up a statue in his own honour, wearing the dress in which he had been given up to the enemy. I find it mentioned by some authors that Lucius Accius the poet set up in his own honour in the temple of the Camenae a statue, which was of great size, although he was a very small man.
Equestrian statues, which are so common at Rome, were undoubtedly first borrowed from Greece. The Greeks, however, only dedicated equestrian statues of those who had been victors on horseback at the sacred games; later on we find statues of the victors in the two and four-horse chariot races. From this arose our custom of setting up chariots in honour of those who had triumphed. Until recent times this was unknown, and chariots drawn by six horses or by elephants were only introduced by the god Augustus.

The use of the columns was to raise the statues above ordinary men, and this is also the purpose of the arches which have been recently introduced. The Greeks, however, were the first who conferred statues as a mark of honour, and I imagine that no man has had so many statues dedicated to him as Demetrios of Phaleron at Athens, inasmuch as three hundred and sixty were set up at a time when the year only contained that number of days. All these statues were afterwards broken up. At Rome too the tribes put up statues in every street in honour of Gaius Marius Gratidianus, as I have said, and over threw them again when Sulla entered the city.

It is certain that standing statues were customary in Rome at a very early date. Still the first equestrian statues are extremely old, and women shared the honour of them with men when Cloelia, as if it were not enough that she should be represented wearing the toga, was granted such a statue, though none were given to Lucretia and Brutus, and yet they had expelled that royal family for whose interests Cloelia was a hostage. I should readily believe this statue and that of Coecles to be the first dedicated by the state (for it is probably that Tarquinis set up those to Attus and the Sibyl, and that the kings each set up their own), were it not for Piso’s statement that the statue to Cloelia was raised by her fellow-hostages, who were sent back by Porsenna in honour of her. Annius Fetiahs on the other hand says that the equestrian statue which stood opposite the temple of Jupiter the Upholder in the vestibule of the house of Tarquin the Proud was that of Valeria, the daughter of the consul Publicola. She alone, he says, escaped and swam across the Tiber, while the other hostages sent to Porsenna were treacherously killed by Tarquinius.

On the origins of painting

The origin of painting is obscure, and hardly falls within the scope of this work. The claim of the Egyptians to have discovered the art six thousand years before it reached Greece is obviously an idle boast, while among the Greeks some say that it was first discovered at Sikyon, others at Corinth. All, however, agree that painting began with the outlining of a man’s shadow; this was the first stage, in the second a single colour was employed, and after the discovery of more elaborate methods this style, which is still in vogue, received the name of monochrome.

On the inventions of linear drawing

The invention of linear drawing is attributed to Philokles of Egypt, or to Kleanthes of Corinth. The first to practise it were Arideiles of Corinth, and Telephanes of Sikyon, who still used no colour, though they had begun to give the inner markings and from this went on to add the names of the personages they painted. The invention of painting with colour made, it is said, from powdered potsherds, is due to Ekphantos of Corinth. I shall show presently that this Ekphantos is distinct from that namesake of his who, according to Cornelius Nepos, followed Damaratos, the father of Tarquin the Ancient, in his flight to Italy from Corinth to escape the insults of the tyrant Kypselos, for by that time painting in Italy also had already reached high perfection. To this day we may see in the temples of Ardea paintings older than the city of Rome, which I admire beyond any others, for though unprotected by a roof they remain fresh after all these years. At Lanuvium again are two nude figures by the same artist, of Atalanta and Helen, painted side by side. Both are of great beauty, and the one is painted as a virgin; they have sustained no
injury though the temple is in ruins. ‘The Emperor Caligula, who was fired by a passion for these figures, would undoubtedly have removed them if the composition of the stucco had allowed of it. Caere possesses some still more ancient paintings. No one can examine these carefully without confessing that painting reached its full development more rapidly than any other art, since it seems clear that it was not yet in existence in Trojan times.

On the first use of color in painting

When treating of pigments in my account of metals I named the colours used singly by the early painters; paintings in that style are called monochromes. Subsequent innovators, together with the character and date of their inventions, I shall treat of in my account of the artists, since the scheme of my work obliges me first to describe the composition of the pigments employed.

Art at last differentiated itself and discovered light and shade, the several hues being so employed as to enhance one another by contrast. Later on glow—a different thing to light—was introduced. The transition between light and shade they called [        ] but the arrangement of hues and the transition from one colour to another harmonization or [      ].

Four colours only—white from Melos, Attic yellow, red from Sinope on the Black Sea, and the black called ‘atramentum”— were used by Apelles, Action, Melanthios and Nikomachos in their immortal works; illustrious artists, a single one of whose pictures the wealth of a city could hardly suffice to buy, while now that even purple clothes our walls, and India contributes the ooze of her rivers and the blood of dragons and of elephants, no famous picture is painted. We must believe that when the painter’s equipment was less complete, the results were in every respect better, for as I have already said, we are alive only to the worth of the material and not to the genius of the artist.

On the inventors of details of the body

Such, for example, were Hygiainon, Deinias, Charmadas, Eumaros of Athens, who was the first to mark the difference between man and woman in painting, and who ventured to imitate every sort of figure, and Kimon of Kelonai, who developed the inventions of Eumaros. He devised profile drawings, and represented the features in different postures, looking backwards or upwards or downwards. He marked the attachments of the limbs, gave prominence to the veins, and also discovered the wrinkles and the windings of drapery. Yet other painters became famous before the ninetieth Olympiad [ B.C.], as for example Polygnotos of Thasos, who first painted women with transparent garments and gave them headdresses of various colours. This artist made a first serious contribution to the development of painting by opening the mouth, showing the teeth, and varying the stiff archaic set of the features.

On the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasios

The story runs that Parrhasios and Zeuxis entered into competition, Zeuxis exhibiting a picture of some grapes, so true to nature that the birds flew up to the wall of the stage. Parrhasios then displayed a picture of a linen curtain, realistic to such a degree that Zeuxis, elated by the verdict of the birds, cried out that now at last his rival must draw the curtain and show his picture. On discovering his mistake he surrendered the prize to Parrhasios, admitting candidly that he had deceived the birds, while Parrhasios had deluded himself a painter. After this we learn that Zeuxis painted a boy carrying grapes, and when the birds flew down to settle on them, he was vexed with his own work, and came forward saying, with like frankness, ‘I have painted the grapes better than the boy, for had I been perfectly successful with the latter, the birds must have been afraid.’ He also modelled certain terra-cottas which were the only works
of art left in Ambrakia when Fulvius Nobilior brought the statues of the Muses to Rome. The paintings in Rome by the hand of Zeuxis are: the Helen in the gallery of Philip and the bound Marsyas in the temple of Concord.

On painters and their works

Parrhasios, a native of Ephesos, also made great contributions to the progress of art. He first gave painting symmetry, and added vivacity to the features, daintiness to the hair and comeliness to the mouth, while by the verdict of artists he is unrivalled in the rendering of outline. This is the highest subtlety attainable in painting. Merely to paint a figure in relief is no doubt a great achievement, yet many have succeeded thus far. But where an artist is rarely successful is in finding an outline which shall express the contours of the figure. For the contour should appear to fold back, and so enclose the object as to give assurance of the parts behind, thus clearly suggesting even what it conceals. Preeminence in this respect is conceded to Parrhasios by Antigonos and Xenokrates, writers on painting, who indeed not only concede but insist upon it. Many other traces of his draughtsmanship remain, both in pictures and on parchments which are said to be instructive to artists. Still, if tried by his own standard, he fails in modelling. He painted an ingenious personification of the Athenian ‘Demos,’ discovering it as fickle, passionate, unjust, changeable, yet exorable, compassionate and pitiful, boastful, proud and humble, bold and cowardly, in a word, everything at once. He also painted the Theseus formerly in the Capitol at Rome, an admiral in armour, and Meleager, Herakles and Perseus in a picture at Rhodes, where it has thrice been set on fire by lightning without being destroyed, a miracle which increases our wonder. He also painted a priest of Kybele: a picture of which the Emperor Tiberius was enamoured, and which, according to Deculo, although valued at 6,000,000 sesterces (£52,500 circ.), he placed in his private apartments. Furthermore he painted a Thrakian nurse with an infant in her arms; a portrait of Philiskos, Dionysos by the side of Virtue, two boys whose features express the confidence and the simplicity of their age, and a priest with a boy at his side holding a censer and a wreath. Two other pictures by him are most famous, a hoplite in a race who seems to sweat as he runs, and a hoplite laying aside his arms, whose labouring breath we seem to hear. His picture of Aineias, Kastor and Polydeukes is praised, so is his Telephos with Achilles, Agamemnon and Odysseus. He was a prolific artist, but carried his success with an arrogance that none have equalled; he called himself the luxurious and said in another epigram that he was the prince of painting, that he had brought it to the highest point of perfection, and more than all that he was of the seed of Apollo, and had painted the Herakles at Lindos precisely as he had often seen him in sleep.

On Apelles of Kos

Apelles of Kos, however, in the hundred and twelfth Olympiad [332—329 B.C.] excelled all painters who came before or after him. He of himself perhaps contributed more to painting than all the others together; he also wrote treatises on his theory of art. The grace of his genius remained quite unrivalled, although the very greatest painters were living at the time. He would admire their works, praising every beauty and yet observing that they failed in the grace, which was distinctively his own; everything else they had attained, but in this alone none equalled him. He laid claim to another merit: when admiring a work of Protogenes that betrayed immense industry and the most anxious elaboration, he said that, though Protogenes was his equal or even his superior in everything, he yet surpassed that painter in one point—namely in knowing when to take his hand from a picture; a memorable saying, showing that too much care may often be hurtful. His candour was equal to his genius: he acknowledged the superiority of
Melanthios in the distribution of figures, and that of Asklepiodoros in perspective arrangement, that is in giving the accurate distances between different objects.

Apelles further made it an unvarying rule never to spend a day, however busy, without drawing a line by way of practice; hence the proverb. It was also his habit to exhibit his finished works to the passers-by in a balcony, and he would lie concealed behind the picture and listen to the faults that were found with it, regarding the public as more accurate critics than himself. There is a story that when found fault with by a cobbler for putting one loop too few on the inner side of a sandal, he corrected the mistake. Elated by this the cobbler next day proceeded to find fault with the leg, whereupon Apelles thrust out his head in a passion and bade the cobbler 'stick to his last,' a saying which has also passed into a proverb.

The charm of his manner had won him the regard of Alexander the Great, who was a frequent visitor to the studio, for, as we have said, he had issued an edict forbidding any one else to paint his portrait. But when the king happened to discourse at length in the studio upon things he knew nothing about, Apelles would pleasantly advise him to be silent, hinting that the assistants who ground the colours were laughing at him; such power did his personality give him over a king habitually so passionate. Yet Alexander gave him a signal mark of his regard: he commissioned Apelles to paint a nude figure of his favourite mistress Pankaspe, so much did he admire her wondrous form, but perceiving that Apelles had fallen in love with her, with great magnanimity and still greater self-control he gave her to him as a present, winning by the action as great a glory as by any of his victories. He conquered himself and sacrificed to the artist not only his mistress but his love, and was not even restrained by consideration for the woman he loved, who, once a king’s mistress, was now a painter’s. Some believe that she was the model for the Aphrodite rising from the sea….

His portraits were such perfect likenesses that, incredible as it may sound, Apio the grammarian has left it on record that a physiognomist was able to tell from the portraits alone how long the sitter had to live or had already lived. When in Alexander’s train he had been on unfriendly terms with Ptolemy, during whose reign he was once driven into Alexandria by a violent storm. On Apelles appearing at a banquet, to which his rivals had maliciously induced the king’s fool to invite him, Ptolemy flew into a passion, and pointing to his chamberlains bade him say from which of them he had received the invitation, whereupon the painter snatching up a charred stick from the hearth traced on the wall a likeness, in whose first strokes the king at once recognized the face of the fool.

He also painted a portrait of king Antigonos, who was blind of one eye, being the first to devise a means of concealing the infirmity by presenting his profile, so that the absence of the eye would be attributed merely to the position of the sitter, not to a natural defect, for he gave only the part of the face which could be shown uninjured. There are among his works some pictures of dying people, though it were difficult to say which are the best. His Aphrodite rising from the sea was dedicated by the god Augustus in the temple of his father Caesar: like other works of the kind, at once eclipsed yet rendered famous by the Greek epigrams written in her praise. When the lower portion was damaged no one could be found to restore it, and thus the very injury redounded to the glory of the artist. In course of time the panel of the picture fell into decay, and Nero when Emperor substituted for it another picture by the hand of Dorotheos. Apelles had begun another Aphrodite at Kos, intending to surpass even the fame of his earlier achievement, but when only a part was finished envious death interposed, and no one was found to finish the outlines already traced. He also painted in the temple of Artemis at Ephesos a portrait of Alexander holding a thunderbolt for twenty talents (£4,200 circ.): the fingers seem to stand out and the thunderbolt to project from the picture—the reader should remember that all this was done with four colours. For this picture he was paid in gold coins, reckoned not by number but by measure.
On early genre painting

It is well to add an account of the artists who won fame with the brush in painting smaller pictures. Amongst them was Peiraïkos. In mastery of his art but few take rank above him, yet by his choice of a path he has perhaps marred his own success, for he followed a humble line, winning however the highest glory that it had to bring. He painted barbers’ shops, cobblers’ stalls, asses, eatables and similar subjects, earning for himself the name of [Greek name that I don’t have the font for], [of odds and ends]. In these subjects he could give consummate pleasure, selling them for more than other artists received for their large pictures. As a contrast, Varro mentions a picture by Serapion which covered the whole of the balconies by the Old Shops. This Serapion was an excellent scene-painter, but could not paint the figure. Dionysios on the contrary painted figures only, and was called the painter of men. Kallikles also painted small pictures, and so did Kalates who chose comic subjects; while Antiphilos painted in both styles, his being a famous Hesione, and the picture of Alexander and Philip with Athene now to be seen in the ‘schools’ of the gallery of Octavia. In the gallery of Philip are his Dionysos, his young also brought in the fashion of painting seaside towns on the walls of open galleries, producing a delightful effect at a very small cost.

On naturalistic painting

While on the subject of painting I must not omit the well-known story of Lepidus. Once during his triumvirate he had been escorted by the magistrates of a certain town to a lodging in the middle of a wood, and on the next morning complained with threats that the singing of the birds prevented him from sleeping. They painted a snake on an immense strip of parchment and stretched it all round the grove. We are told that by this means they terrified the birds into silence and that this has ever since been a recognized device for quieting them.

On the early use of foreshortening

Pausias, however, also painted large pictures, as for example the famous sacrifice of oxen in the Gallery of Pompeius. He devised an innovation which has often been imitated but never equalled. The most striking instance is that wishing to display an ox’s length of body, he painted a front and not a side view of the animal, and yet contrived to show its size. Again, while all others put in the high lights in white and paint the less salient parts in dark colour, he painted the whole ox black, and gave substance to the shadow out of the shadow itself, showing great art in giving all his figures full relief upon the flat surface, and in indicating their form when foreshortened.

On early women painters

Women too have been painters: Timarete the daughter of Mikon, painted an Artemis at Ephesos in a picture of very archaic style. Eirene, the daughter and pupil of the painter Kratinos, painted a maiden at Eleusis, Kalypso painted portraits of an old man, of the juggler Theodoros, and of the dancer Alkisthenes, Aristarete, the daughter and pupil of Nearchos, painted an Asklepios. Iaia of Kyzikos, who remained single all her life, worked at Rome in the youth of Marcus Varro, both with the brush and with the cestrum on ivory. She painted chiefly portraits of women, and also a large picture of an old woman at Naples, and a portrait of herself executed with the help of a mirror. No artist worked more rapidly than she did, and her pictures had such merit that they sold for higher prices than those of Sopolis and Dionysios, well-known contemporary painters, whose works fill our galleries.