

Pliny the Elder (Roman. 23 AD – 79 AD)

The Natural History. 77 AD

Selection from Chapter 36: The story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius

The gates of art being now thrown open by Apollodorus, Zeuxis of Heraclea entered upon the scene, in the fourth year of the ninety-fifth Olympiad, destined to lead the pencil—for it is of the pencil that we are still speaking—a pencil for which there was nothing too arduous, to a very high pitch of glory. By some writers he is erroneously placed in the eighty-ninth Olympiad, a date that must of necessity be reserved for Demophilus of Himera and Neseus of Thasos, of one of whom, it is uncertain which, Zeuxis was the pupil. It was in reference to him that Apollodorus, above-mentioned, wrote a verse to the effect, that Zeuxis had stolen the art from others and had taken it all to himself. Zeuxis also acquired such a vast amount of wealth, that, in a spirit of ostentation, he went so far as to parade himself at Olympia with his name embroidered on the checked pattern of his garments in letters of gold. At a later period, he came to the determination to give away his works, there being no price high enough to pay for them, he said. Thus, for instance, he gave an Alcmena to the people of Agrigentum, and a Pan to Archelaüs.⁶ He also painted a Penelope, in which the peculiar character of that matron appears to be delineated to the very life; and a figure of an athlete, with which he was so highly pleased, that he wrote beneath it the line which has since become so famous, to the effect that it would be easier to find fault with him than to imitate him. His Jupiter seated on the throne, with the other Deities standing around him, is a magnificent production: the same, too, with his Infant Hercules strangling the Dragons, in presence of Amphitryon and his mother Alcmena, who is struck with horror. Still, however, Zeuxis is generally censured for making the heads and articulations of his figures out of proportion. And yet, so scrupulously careful was he, that on one occasion, when he was about to execute a painting for the people of Agrigentum, to be consecrated in the Temple of the Lacinian Juno there, he had the young maidens of the place stripped for examination, and selected five of them, in order to adopt in his picture the most commendable points in the form of each. He also painted some monochromes in white.⁹

The contemporaries and rivals of Zeuxis were Timanthes, Androcydes, Eupompus, and Parrhasius. This last, it is said, entered into a pictorial contest with Zeuxis, who represented some grapes, painted so naturally that the birds flew towards the spot where the picture was exhibited. Parrhasius, on the other hand, exhibited a curtain, drawn with such singular truthfulness, that Zeuxis, elated with the judgment which had been passed upon his work by the birds, haughtily demanded that the curtain should be drawn aside to let the picture be seen. Upon finding his

mistake, with a great degree of ingenuous candour he admitted that he had been surpassed, for that whereas he himself had only deceived the birds, Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist.

There is a story, too, that at a later period, Zeuxis having painted a child carrying grapes, the birds came to peck at them; upon which, with a similar degree of candour, he expressed himself vexed with his work, and exclaimed—"I have surely painted the grapes better than the child, for if I had fully succeeded in the last, the birds would have been in fear of it." Zeuxis executed some figures also in clay, the only works of art that were left behind at Ambracia, when Fulvius Nobilior transported the Muses from that city to Rome. There is at Rome a Helena by Zeuxis, in the Porticos of Philippus, and a Marsyas Bound, in the Temple of Concord there.

Parrhasius of Ephesus also contributed greatly to the progress of painting, being the first to give symmetry to his figures, the first to give play and expression to the features, elegance to the hair, and gracefulness to the mouth: indeed, for contour, it is universally admitted by artists that he bore away the palm. This, in painting, is the very highest point of skill. To paint substantial bodies and the interior of objects is a great thing, no doubt, but at the same time it is a point in which many have excelled: but to make the extreme outline of the figure, to give the finishing touches to the painting in rounding off the contour, this is a point of success in the art which is but rarely attained. For the extreme outline, to be properly executed, requires to be nicely rounded, and so to terminate as to prove the existence of something more behind it, and thereby disclose that which it also serves to hide.