

Hellenistic Portraits Between the Ideal and the Real

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Abstract

Hellenistic portraiture comprises many visual expressions ranging from the ideal to the real. Several factors play a part in the shaping of this diverse portrait art. From the 4th century BC onwards, there was a growing interest in the study of physiognomics, the art of judging character from facial and bodily characteristics. Knowledge of anatomy and physiology also advanced resulting in an increased awareness of how an individual's disposition could lead to permanent markings on the face. Drawing on ancient physiognomic and modern neurophysiological studies, this chapter analyses the interplay of the real and the ideal in Hellenistic portraiture. I argue that whether the representational mode is realistic or idealised, the portraits tend to exaggerate the most salient features of the subject. This is in keeping with the claim by the neuroscientist Vilayanur Ramachandran that exaggeration is an important stimulus that serves to capture the essence of the representation. In contrast to the classical *meden hyper agan*—nothing in excess—ideal, I therefore submit exaggeration as a main characteristic of Hellenistic portraiture.

The Hellenistic period was one of many faces. The cosmopolitan outlook affected the visual culture and resulted in the creation of new art forms and new expressions; in short, giving rise to an artistic vocabulary far beyond that of the Classical age. Due to the rise of the individual and the growing importance of ruler images, portraiture flourished. In the centuries after Alexander the Great, artists created portraits not only of rulers but also of people from all walks of life.

Several factors unfortunately hamper the study of Hellenistic portraiture: for one, the chronology of the sculpture is notoriously difficult, as artists and styles transgressed geographical boundaries and retrospective trends were common throughout the period. Scholars therefore often disagree vehemently on the dating of individual works. Moreover, a large part of extant 'Hellenistic' portraits consists of Roman copies and variations, thus adding yet another layer to an already complex stratigraphy. An obvious further drawback is that the inter-

pretation of a given work can be fraught with problems: for instance, the ‘Terme Ruler’ (to be discussed below) has been identified with half a dozen different Hellenistic and Roman rulers, as well as interpreted as a mythological figure. With the exception of numismatic and glyptic images, Greek portraits normally comprised the whole body; the meaning of the representation should therefore be understood in combination with body type, posture, gesture and attire. Given the problems of interpreting fully preserved statues, such as the ‘Terme Ruler’, it is therefore hardly surprising that when only fragments remain, the portrait becomes easy prey to misunderstanding.

When the body is missing, it is often difficult to tell—from the head alone—what kind of person the image is intended to portray. An example is provided by a slightly over life-size bronze head discovered in 2004 near Kazanlak in Bulgaria (Sofia Archaeological Museum).¹ The head is characterised by long hair, a long, full beard and a full, drooping moustache. The inlaid eyes in brown stone and the prominent nose give the portrait a very distinctive and idiosyncratic appearance, while the abundant growth of hair and beard brings to mind the various types of images that are generally classified as ‘philosophers’. For instance, in the ‘Antikythera Philosopher’, plausibly of late 3rd century BC date, the hair and beard are similarly rendered in an imposing, if slightly dishevelled, manner.² However, in the case of the Kazanlak portrait, the visual clues furnished by hair and beard do not indicate a philosopher. The head was found four metres below the ground at the entrance to a burial mound; from the find circumstances the man can be identified as the Thracian king Seuthes III (ruled c. 330-295 BC). If this splendid representation of a Hellenized Thracian had not been found in an archaeological context but in a shipwreck or during roadworks, interpretation would have proved far more difficult.

The study of Hellenistic portraits thus presents many challenges. A further problem is whether a given representation can be classified as a true portrait in the sense of a depiction of a specific, actual individual or whether it should be categorized as a generic image or a character study. It is, for instance, open

¹ Lehmann 2006; Saladino 2012-2013.

² Athens, National Museum inv. no. 10. 13400; Kaltsas 2002, cat. no. 575; Vlachogianni 2012, 62-63, 82-86; cat. no. 24a-g. Since body parts that can be ascribed to this figure included sandaled feet, an arm with the hand in a rhetorical gesture and part of a garment, the philosopher interpretation is reasonable, although other possibilities cannot be excluded. For various attempts to identify the Antikythera bronze with specific *sophoi*, see Vlachogianni 2012, 82.

to discussion whether the ‘Drunken Old Woman’ and the ‘Fisherman’, both preserved in many versions, predominantly of Roman imperial date, should be regarded as portraits or as genre images.³ Problems of genre also pertain to the two famous ‘Terme Bronzes’ excavated on the Quirinal hill in Rome in 1885.

The ‘Terme Boxer’ and the ‘Terme Ruler’

A prime example of so-called Hellenistic realism, in the sense of real or pretended verisimilitude or true-to-life representation, is the seated bronze statue known as the ‘Terme Boxer’.⁴ The body is strong and muscular, but because of the seated posture, it assumes a somewhat heavy appearance, suggesting that the portrayal is that of a man who is beyond his first youth (Fig. 1). In this work, the artist has exploited the bronze to the full in order to display scarred cauliflower ears, a broken nose, swollen lips and a scarred face. The cuts and scars are inlaid with copper, while a *haematoma* under the right eye is indicated by use of an alloy in a darker colour. Thus, considering the impact of colour, when newly made, the image would have been even more suggestive.⁵ One can even imagine the no-longer-extant eyes to have been blood-shot. The hollow eye-sockets make the portrait slightly disturbing, intensifying the notion of physical distress. However, while the ‘Boxer’s’ face is scarred, it is worth noting the carefully groomed beard and hair—including body hair engraved on the chest and under the arms—and the moustache, which is stylised in a non-naturalistic fashion. Indeed, neither the hair nor the beard conveys a ‘realistic’ image of a man who has just been engaged in a potentially deadly match (Fig. 2). (See also, Fig. 5, below.)

While the profusion of details serves to illustrate the negative consequences of the boxer’s profession, the exact meaning of the sculpture is open to a number of interpretations. Is the work a so-called generic image—a genre which may indeed be a modern invention—or does the bronze statue represent a particular, probably famous, boxer? Could it be a portrayal of a mythological fig-

³ For the ‘Drunken Old Woman’, see Sande, this volume; Masségliia 2012; 2015, ch. 4; Zanker 1989. Fisherman: Laubscher 1982.

⁴ Rome, Museo Nazionale Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, inv. no. 1055; Himmelmann 1989, 150-174, with excellent colour photos, 165-171, and an extensive bibliography. The bronze is also presented in Daehner and Lapatin 2015, cat. no. 18.

⁵ For a recent experimental reconstruction showing the strong impact of the polychromatic and polymaterial features, see Brinkmann and Koch-Brinkmann 2018, fig. 79 and figs. 106-114. I am grateful to the authors for sending me a copy of the article.



Fig. 1. 'Terme Boxer'. Bronze, height 120 cm. Rome, Museo Nazionale Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, inv. no. 1055. Photograph: © Bente Kiilerich.

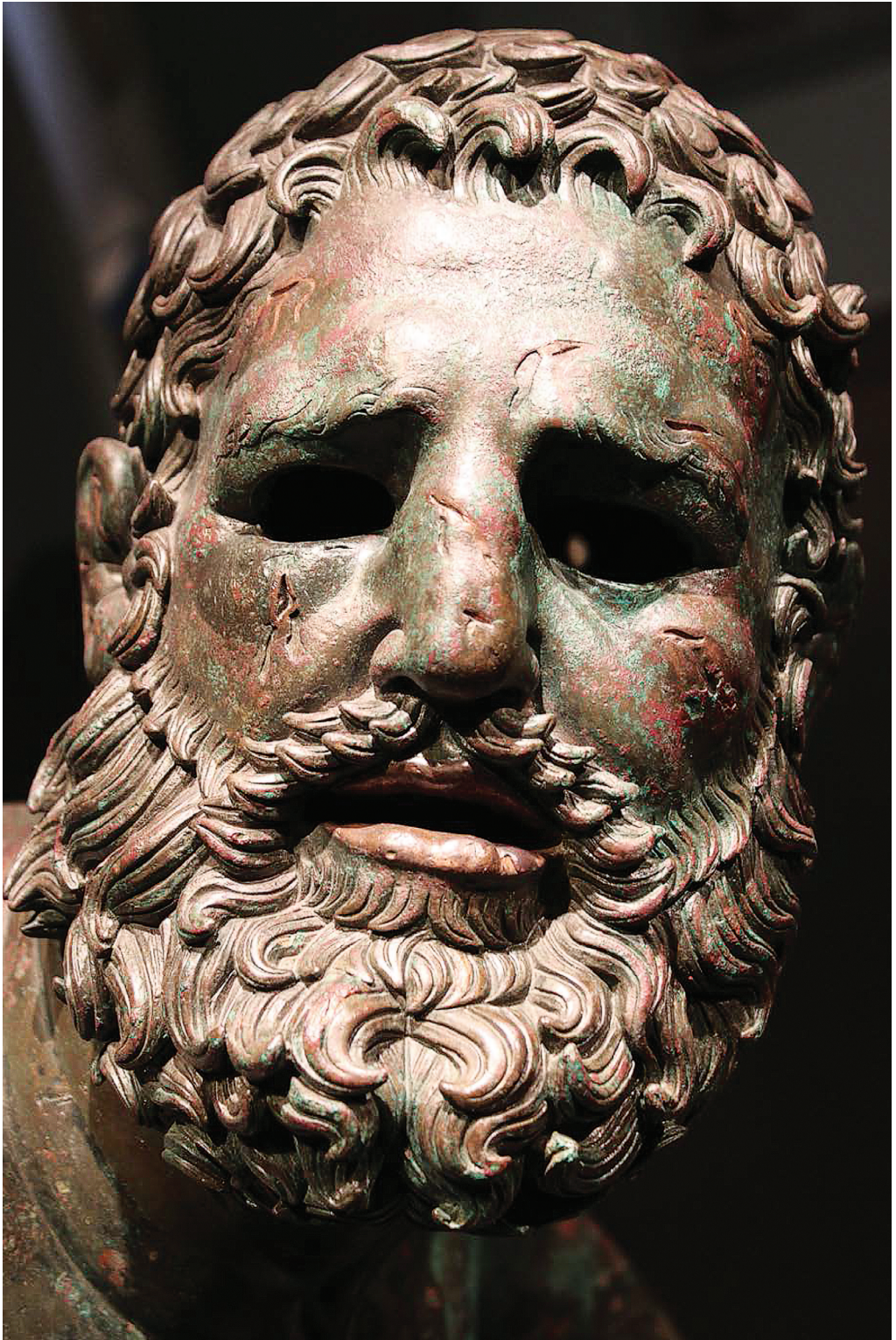


Fig. 2. 'Terme Boxer'. Head. Rome, Museo Nazionale Palazzo Massimo alle Terme no. 1055. Photograph: © Bente Kiilerich.

ure? The reading of the 'Boxer' further depends on whether or not he is to be associated with the 'Terme Ruler' in a two- or multi-figure group. The fact that both were discovered in the ruins of an ancient building on the south slope of the Quirinal hill suggests a connection. Unfortunately, the find context provides no archaeological criteria for dating and the chronology of the 'Boxer and the Ruler' remains uncertain. Proposed dates for the 'Boxer' are based mainly on stylistic criteria, while the date of the 'Ruler' depends on stylistic evaluation and on attempts to identify his facial features through comparison with portraits of historical persons.⁶

The over life-sized (2.10 m plus raised arm) bronze statue known as the 'Terme Ruler' depicts a standing male in 'heroic nudity', a lance in his left hand, the right hand resting behind his back.⁷ The most eye-catching feature of the representation is the bodybuilder-like physique, in which the swelling muscles contrast with the disproportionally small head (Fig. 3). This muscular body type is quite different from that of, for instance, (the copies of) Polykleitos' *Doryphoros*.

The swag, the hand on hip or behind the back and the raised arm held in the spear-holding position, recalling the 'Alexander with the Lance', are important signs of a person in power.⁸ Initially, it therefore seems reasonable to interpret the statue as a representation of a ruler. Alas, it has proved highly difficult to identify him with a specific historical person. Among the proposed candidates, regarding the identity of the 'Terme Ruler', are Antiochus II of Syria (r. 261-246 BC); Philip V of Macedon (r. 221-179 BC); Demetrius I of Syria (r. 162-150 BC), Attalos II of Pergamon (r. 159-138 BC), and the Romans Quinctius Flamininus (228-174 BC) and Sulla (138-79 BC).⁹ The face displays idiosyn-

⁶ While I formerly placed the two bronzes around the middle of the 1st century BC, Kiilerich 2007, 204-208, an earlier date cannot be excluded. Pollitt 1986, 147, for instance, writes of the Boxer: 'That he is to be dated somewhere between the beginning of the second century BC and the middle of the first seems reasonably certain...', while Smith 1991, 62, suggests 3rd to 2nd century BC, and Daehner and Lapatin 2015, cat. 18, advocate a 3rd century BC dating. The bronze alloys hardly help narrow the date: the Terme Ruler is 89 % copper, 8 % tin, 3 % lead; the Boxer is 80 % copper, 10 % tin, 10 % lead, according to Colacicchi and Ferretti 2018, 109, 106.

⁷ Rome, Museo Nazionale Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, inv. no. 1049; Himmelmann 1989, 126-149 with bibliography and detailed colour photos; Queyrel 2003, 200-234.

⁸ For the 'Alexander with the lance', Stewart 1993, 163-171.

⁹ Himmelmann 1989, 143-147. Among more recent studies, Queyrel 2003, 200-234, argues for Attalos II.



Fig. 3. 'Terme Ruler'. Bronze, height 209 cm (to top of head). Rome, Museo Nazionale Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, inv. no. 1049. Photograph: Marie-Lan Nguyen for Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 4. ‘Terme Ruler’. Head. Rome, Museo Nazionale Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, inv. no. 1049. Photograph: Marie-Lan Nguyen for Wikimedia Commons.

cratic features: small, close-set eyes (the sockets are now unfortunately empty), a slightly aquiline nose, full lips and a stubble beard (Fig. 4). The meaning of these features must be deciphered differently according to whether the statue is that of a ruler, an athlete or a mythological figure.¹⁰ It is difficult to associate the ‘Terme Ruler’ with an historical figure; since he is not wearing a diadem, and since he was probably grouped together with the ‘Boxer’, the muscular nude is perhaps most likely to represent an athlete (presumably a spear-thrower) striking a heroic pose.

¹⁰ A mythological reading, Amykos (the ‘Terme Boxer’) and the Dioskuroi (with the ‘Terme Ruler’ interpreted as Polydeukes) was proposed by Lehmann 1945, who based her interpretation on iconographic parallels on the Ficorini cista. Most recently this interpretation is also argued by Brinkmann and Koch-Brinkmann 2018. They compare the Boxer’s face with Theokritos’ description of Amykos’ wounds from the blows he received from Polydeukes.



Fig. 5. 'Terme Boxer'. Detail of hair. Rome, Museo Nazionale Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, inv. no. 1055. Photograph: © Bente Kiilerich.

While the faces of the 'Ruler' and the 'Boxer' appear idiosyncratic, the back views of their heads present a very different image, with hair finely delineated and arranged in a star-shape at the top of the head (Fig. 5).¹¹ Thus, both statues combine apparently realistic physiognomies with standardised, well-groomed hairstyles. Indeed, the Hellenistic hair design differs only slightly from that of the *Doryphoros*' classical style. For the two bronzes, the classical/idealising mode is applied to 'realistic' figures in such a way that there seems to be a split between the 'real' face and the ideal' hair. It can thus be called into question whether the two works should be considered realistic in terms of style. At any rate, they provide evidence of the heterogeneous nature of Hellenistic realism.¹²

¹¹ For the hair-star (*komes* means both hair and star) and its divine derivation, see Kiilerich 2002.

¹² I prefer to use the generally accepted term realism rather than naturalism, as advocated by von

The 'Pseudo-Athlete' from Delos

Delos was an important centre of commerce in the Late Hellenistic period and many portraits of both male and female subjects were displayed on the island. These sculptures, mainly in marble but with a few surviving in bronze, are datable on historical grounds to after 166 BC, when Delos was handed over to Athens, and before 88 BC, when it was sacked by Mithridates. At the very least, they must pre-date the final sack of the island by pirates in 69 BC.¹³

The 'Pseudo-Athlete' is an impressive marble statue of a now anonymous man depicted in heroic nudity (Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 1828).¹⁴ The impact made by the work is due in part to its impressive scale of 2.25 m, slightly larger than the 'Terme Ruler' (Fig. 6). The marble was one of several unfinished sculptures excavated in 1894 in the 'House of the Diadoumenos', a large building which probably functioned as the seat of an official body rather than as a private domicile.¹⁵ The 'Pseudo-Athlete' is generally hailed as an example of an ideal body combined with a realistic face, in the sense that the head is supposed to bear close resemblance to the individual portrayed. However, baldness and prominent ears do not necessarily reflect either the original appearance of the man himself or the original appearance of his sculpted representation. Perhaps a separately made hairpiece could originally have covered the top of the head.¹⁶ An example of a related practice is the colossal portrait head from Pergamon generally interpreted as Attalos I (height

den Hoff 2007, 51, 54. One could argue that realism is a question of subject matter and naturalism a question of style; still, whether we speak of realism or naturalism, we are in any event precluded from knowing if there is any resemblance between a given image and the person portrayed.

¹³ The Delian sculpture was published by Michalowski 1932 in the *Exploration Archéologique de Delos* series.

¹⁴ Michalowski 1932, 17-22, pl. 14-18, suggested a surprisingly late date, about 50 BC, 22; Kaltsas 2002, cat. no. 623; Romiopoulou 1997, cat. no. 1.

¹⁵ The name of the building derives from the Polykleitan, originally gilded, *Diadoumenos* that was found there; Athens National Museum inv. no. 1826; Bourgeois and Jockey 2004-2005, 335-339.

¹⁶ Although Michalowski 1932, judges that '*la partie supérieure du crâne est rapportée*' ('the upper part of the head is attached'), and suggests that the head might have been '*complété par un morceau ajouté*' ('completed by a separate piece') (n. 2), he does not entertain the idea of a wig, but holds that the portrait was meant to be bald (translation mine).



Fig. 6. 'Pseudo-Athlete' from the House of the Diadoumenos, Delos. Marble, height 225 cm. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 1828. Photograph: © Bente Kiilerich.



Fig. 7. ‘Pseudo-Athlete’. Hypothetical sketch of head with added hair and polychromy. Photograph and reconstruction: © Bente Kiilerich.

0.395 m.).¹⁷ The Pergamene head shows two potential working phases—with and without hair—that are difficult to distinguish chronologically.¹⁸ Without the wig and with merely sketchily indicated hair, the Berlin Pergamon head looks unfinished. Rather than being the result of consecutive phases or a consequence of a change in plan during the execution of the work, a luxurious head of hair was probably planned from the start. The practice of adding hair separately is seen in other Pergamene works.¹⁹ If the ‘Pseudo-Athlete’ was meant to have an

¹⁷ Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung, inv. no. P130

¹⁸ Pictures of the Berlin head with and without added wreath of locks, e.g., L’Orange 1947, 41, fig. 19; Smith 1991, fig. 180.1-2. Smith holds that the portrait was made c. 240 BC and shows Attalos as a dynast with the hair added for Attalos as king in the 230s BC. For the problems of identity, see, most recently, Romeo 2017, 260-262, who argues for Seleucus I (325-281).

¹⁹ Himmelmann 1989, 210, with reference to a head of a youth with parts of the hair added separately.

attached hairpiece, it could have been fashioned in marble, like that of Attalos, or made of a differently coloured stone. Following the Alexandrian tradition, it could also have been completed in stucco. Although it remains purely hypothetical: when hair is added to the head, the ears become less prominent and the man gains a younger look. Originally, the statue, which lacks the final surface treatment, was, undoubtedly, intended to be painted. When the figure is imagined in a complete polychrome state, the initially experienced dichotomy between the ideal body and the real head vanishes (Fig. 7).²⁰

The ‘Worried Man’ from Delos

A bronze head of an ‘Anonymous man from Delos’ has been nicknamed the ‘Worried Man’.²¹ It is one of the most important Hellenistic portraits, generally acclaimed for its high quality.²² Like the marble statue of the ‘Pseudo-Athlete’, the bronze must date between 166 and 88/69 BC. The slightly above life-size head (total preserved height: 0.32 m; height of head 0.27 m) was found in the area of the Palaestra. Since the mature features do not strike one as those of a young athlete, the portrait is perhaps more likely to represent a magistrate or a particularly successful businessman (Fig. 8). The head is inclined slightly to the man’s left. This posture should obviously be seen in connection with the no-longer-extant body and with the original display of the statue, as both might have furnished some clues to his identity. Taken on its own, the inclination of the head could be a *semeion* mimicking the head posture of Alexander the Great.²³ The hair locks are short yet rather full and rendered in stylized, almost abstract formations; they provide a vigorous note that is somewhat at odds with the face that, especially in left profile view, appears somewhat heavy. An interesting facial feature is the slightly undulating eyebrows. This too could be a *semeion* intended to communicate some character trait of the portrait subject.

²⁰ According to Bourgeois and Jockey 2004-2005, 335-339, the *Diadoumenos* was originally totally covered in gold-leaf, including the tree trunk. One might therefore speculate whether the *Pseudo-Athlete* could similarly have been (partly) gilded.

²¹ Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 10. 14612; Michalowski 1932, 1-5, pl. 1-6: ‘*portrait pathétique*’, c. 200-150 BC, a Greek or an Oriental; Kaltsas 2002, cat. no. 654.

²² Stewart 1990, 228: ‘perhaps the greatest masterpiece of Hellenistic portraiture extant’.

²³ For head inclination and its various interpretations, see Kiilerich 2017a. Many of the heads found on Delos show an inclination are inclined, see, e.g., Stewart 1979, pls. 18b, 18c, 19b, 19d.



Fig. 8. The 'Worried Man' from Delos. Bronze, presumed height 32.5 cm. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 10.14612. Photograph: © Bente Kiilerich.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle notes that ‘pictures cannot imitate character (*ethos*), but they can give signs (*semeia*) showing the character’ (Arist. *Poet.* 1340a, 35). Strangely, Aristotle’s pupil Theophrastus, in his *Charakteres*, scarcely mentions physical signs that might reflect inner qualities.²⁴ Such *semeia*, however, are explicitly described in the pseudo-Aristotelean *Physiognomonica*, a compilation of two different treatises written by authors in the Aristotelean tradition around the 3rd century BC.²⁵ According to the physiognomists, the most favourable part for examination is the region around the eyes, forehead, head and face (814b, 4-5). Hair colour, the shape of the nose and the number of wrinkles on the brow are signs that disclose specific character traits. In the Delos bronze, the slightly flabby facial skin and lined forehead might, when viewed on a superficial level, suggest mature age. However, according to the *Physiognomonica*, a forehead neither too smooth nor too wrinkled is the most harmonious (*euarmostos*) (812a, 2-3). Moreover, it is explicitly noted that a courageous man can be recognized from a ‘square forehead, rather hollow from the centre, overhanging towards the brow and nostril like a cloud’ (809b, 21-24), a trait that does appear in muted form in the Delos head’s slightly bulging brow. So, is the man virtuous or worried?

Casimir Michalowski, who published the head, interpreted the looks as melancholic, but somewhat at odds with melancholy, he also judged the man as being of vigorous temperament and energetic character.²⁶ Andrew Stewart goes even further. Based on the facial features, he judges that the impression of ‘contingency, instability, and impermanence’ invites us to see the sitter as ‘uncertain, stressed out, and acutely self-aware – even haunted by doubt.’²⁷ These readings show how we tend to project qualities onto a portrait while dis-

²⁴ Theophrastus is mainly interested in behaviour and tends to concentrate on negative traits, such as greed, squalor, etc. The few times he mentions appearances, he addresses grooming. What he finds unappealing is dishevelled hair, black teeth and long fingernails (n.19: *duschereias*, squalor). The authoritarian (n. 26, *oligarchia*) has ‘hair cut to a moderate length and fingernails trimmed’. Theophrastus Characters, ed. and transl. by Jeffrey Rusten, 190.225, 1993².

²⁵ Förster 1893; Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonica*, trans. W.S. Hett, in Aristotle Minor Works (LCL), 1936, 81-137; Evans 1969, 7-9 for the 3rd-century BC dating; further Kiilerich 1988, 51-53.

²⁶ Michalowski 1932, 5. In marble, the closest comparison to ‘a worried look’ is probably Athens NM 320, see Stewart 1979, 112 and pl. 25b.

²⁷ Stewart 2014, 153.

regarding whether these qualities are an inherent part of the portrait or not.²⁸ A person who commissions, or is presented with, an expensive honorary portrait statue in bronze is unlikely to have wanted to be portrayed in a manner that conveyed negative associations, for example, as worried or anxious.

Seen from different viewpoints, different aspects of the face come into focus. When seen from below, rather than straight on, the face assumes a stronger and more demanding presence.²⁹ The context in which the statue originally appeared, its garments, its general comportment, the base and the accompanying inscription would all have guided the viewers' perception of the work. It seems reasonable to assume that the portrait-mode reflected cultural values and that the various *semeia* were intended to signify positive traits. In spite of some mixed messages, that may be due to a clash between the ideal and the real—the person portrayed in bronze on Delos should also be recognizable as an individual—the physiognomic features and facial expression possibly indicate *areté* combined with notions of seriousness. It thus presents an ideal that suggests professional competence.³⁰

Physiology, anatomy and expression

The Delos bronze depicts the portrait subject in a physiologically convincing manner with accurate rendering of the flesh and muscles that overlie the bone structure. This indicates that the artist had considerable anatomical knowledge. For the rendering of the 'Terme Boxer's' haematoma, anatomical knowledge was similarly required. The study of physiology and anatomy developed over time to reach a high point in the Hellenistic period when Alexandria was a leading centre for anatomical studies.³¹ As Iain McGilchrist explains, the expressiveness of Hellenistic portraiture, 'required an awareness of the huge complexity of independently innervated muscle fibre groups, particularly in the upper

²⁸ Brilliant 1991, 38: 'Failure to recognize the many physiognomic indicators compromises the viewer's response'.

²⁹ In 2018, the Delos bronze was one of the objects chosen for the temporary 'The Countless Aspects of Beauty' exhibition at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens; being set on a pillar with a running film screen as a dramatic backdrop, the impression is different from when the head is viewed in its usual museum display.

³⁰ For the *gravitas* ideal in late Republican portraiture, see Dasen 2007, esp. 19.

³¹ Anatomy was studied especially at Alexandria, where doctors are known to have performed dissection in the 3rd century BC, Kudlien 1979.

half of the face around the eyes—and that simply takes time'.³² The interest in the natural sciences certainly influenced the execution of Hellenistic portraits. Given that artists were now technically capable of depicting physiological features accurately, they must have taken pride in displaying their excellence in this field. The more accomplished artists accordingly represented heads with realistically rendered physical features and varied expressions.³³

Genuine expressions stem from the inner workings of the body and brain. Facial expressions are caused by the enervation of a network of nerves linked to a group of facial muscles, also known as the mimetic muscles, via the upper motor neurons (and the facial nerve).³⁴ The physical signs may be caused by temporary emotions, like anger, joy or sadness, but a person's general disposition, such as, for example, melancholic or cheerful will inevitably leave marks on the face.³⁵ Faces, including sculpted and painted portraits, are primarily processed in an area dedicated to perceiving faces, known as the fusiform face area (located in the *fusiform gyrus* in the *occipitotemporal cortex*). However, other brain areas are also involved when viewing faces. The superior temporal *sulcus* at the top of the temporal lobe interprets expression and head- and gaze orientation. In fact, different neurons fire in response to a frontal face and a profile face. Different cells are also involved in registering direct and indirect gazes.³⁶ From the visual areas, stimuli go to the limbic system where the *amygdala* is located. The *amygdala* is, among other things, the seat of emotions. Being responsible for processing our own emotions as well as necessary for reading the emotions of others, the *amygdala* is activated when reading a face, irrespective of whether the face is that of an actual person or a portrait.³⁷

The human capacity for grasping faces is innate. Yet, as the 'Worried Man' from Delos shows, in spite of our finely tuned capacity for reading faces and expressions, facial features can be quite difficult to decode. Moreover, apparently realistic features need not necessarily be peculiar to the sitter but may have been chosen in order to achieve a particular effect: whereas a bland face may seem

³² McGilchrist 2009, 284.

³³ Amberger-Lahrman 1996 uses the Pergamon altar to illustrate Hellenistic artists' proficiency in the fields of anatomy and physiognomy.

³⁴ Rinn 1984.

³⁵ Emotions in ancient art has been explored in many recent publications of which only a few can be mentioned here, e.g., Chaniotis 2012; Chaniotis and Ducrey 2014; Mylonopoulos 2017.

³⁶ Calder et al. 2007.

³⁷ Whalen et al. 2013.

impersonal, distinct traits convey the impression of being ‘real’ in the sense of reflecting some specific features of the sitter.³⁸ In such instances, the realism is a pseudo- or quasi-realism. Because of the seemingly idiosyncratic traits, the viewer is led into believing that this is what the person portrayed actually looks (or looked) like. In fact, the expressions visualized by artists are often conventional and conditioned by social expectations. For instance, a calm, dignified appearance required a face without much expression.³⁹ This applied especially to ruler iconography, where (with some exceptions) expressive and realistic features in the sense of true likeness, resemblance and verisimilitude were usually tempered and the royal subject depicted in idealized and symbolic guise.

From the real to the ideal

The fusion of realistic and idealistic traits is evidenced in numismatic images of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Ptolemy I Soter (r. 323-285 BC) assumed the title of king in 304 BC, at the age of about 60 years. The profile image of a coin type struck around 295/290 BC, when the king was in his 70s, seems to reflect traits peculiar to this particular man as well as betray his advanced age: deep-set, slightly hooded eyes, prominent nose and protruding chin.⁴⁰ His hair, however, arranged in elegant locks with a conventional star shape at the top of the skull, is youthfully full in the style of Alexander-Ammon. The dichotomy of face and hair, which is characteristic also of the ‘Terme bronzes’, can be demonstrated when—for the sake of illustration—we separate the coin portraits in terms of hair and face. While the hair is in the idealistic style, the face is apparently realistic. Still, it is possible to distinguish a shift in emphasis from the Ptolemy I coins issued around 295/290 BC, where we get an impression of seeing the true features, to the posthumous issues struck by his son Ptolemy II Philadelphos (r.

³⁸ For the idea of resemblance as an effect, see Zerner 1993. Von den Hoff 2007, 54, 56 and 58 addresses the concept of ‘reality effect’ as a formal means to produce authenticity. Further discussion in Kovacs 2018, esp. 40-45.

³⁹ Masségliia 2014. In connection with Roman art, Lindstrøm 2008, 92 points out that the Roman ideal of control and self-composure required serene and dignified expressions and that a smiling or emotionally charged face might have been taken as a sign of inferiority, even imbecility. She also notes that while the male face was expressionless, the female one opened for more emotiveness. It is of interest that in late antiquity, the female face has become the blank one and the male face the more expressive and ‘realistic’ one, Kiilerich 2011.

⁴⁰ Svoronos 1904, pl. 3, e.g. n. 17, 24, 25; variants of the type: pls. 7-9; Lorber 2012, pl. 1-3.



Fig. 9. Tetradrachm of Ptolemy I. Gold. London, British Museum. Photograph: PHGCOM /Public domain by way of Wikimedia Commons. Edited by Håkon Roland.

284-246 BC), when Ptolemy I's face gradually acquires a smoother and overall ideal look.⁴¹ Indeed, in the final step, the 'Ptolemy' features give way to 'Alexander' features, the images of the two rulers becoming almost interchangeable (Fig. 9). Like Alexander's profile portrait, that of Ptolemy shows a marked forehead, deep-set eyes, strong, slightly aquiline nose, full lips and strong chin. In the earlier coins, it is only the proportions and the specific combination of the features that distinguish the portrait of Ptolemy from that of Alexander. In fact, a closer look discloses that Ptolemy's image is basically composed of standard features derived from the same physiognomic mould as Alexander's image: brow overhanging like a cloud, deep-set eyes, aquiline nose, full lips and protruding chin—the very signs of manliness and courage according to the physiognomic handbooks (Ps.-Arist. *Phys.* 809).

A striking feature in the posthumous numismatic images of Ptolemy I and of his son is the tendency to depict extremely large eyes. Thus, twin portrayals on gold octadrachms (*mnaieia*) of Ptolemy I and his wife Berenike I with portrait busts of Ptolemy II (deified around 272 BC) and his wife/sister Arsinoë II on the obverse are conspicuous for the enormous profile eyes (Fig. 10). The formula is identical, only the face of the younger man is smoother and his hair-

⁴¹ Svoronos 1904, pl. 12; Grimm 1998, fig. 34, fig. 56a; Pfrommer 1999, fig. 84 (colour): posthumous Ptolemy I with aegis; fig. 105a: 'haggard-faced' Ptolemy I, c. 295/90; Kakavas 2016 for further examples.



Fig. 10. Octadrachm, with Ptolemy I and Berenike I (reverse); Ptolemy II and Arsinoë II (obverse). Gold. 283-246 BC. Alexandria, Greco-Roman Museum, inv. no. 25018. Photograph: Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. by way of Wikimedia Commons.

style shorter. Wide-eyed, all four *theoi adelphoi*, sibling gods, stare hypnotically into space. This iconography undoubtedly reflects large-scale representations.⁴²

Super-large irises are also rendered in mosaics. Two mosaics from Thmuis in the Egyptian delta, southeast of Alexandria, depict a female bust with ship-prow headdress. The work, signed by Sophilos ($\Sigma\Omega\Phi\text{ΙΛΙΟΣ ΕΠΙΟΙΕΙ}$), an artist not attested elsewhere, is laid out as a carpet with fringes along the edges of the panel. The female bust is set in a square panel enclosed within an intricate three-dimensional meander.⁴³ The second mosaic image is framed by a scale pattern, bringing to mind designs that display a gorgoneion on a scale-patterned shield.⁴⁴ Like the meander, the scale-pattern is an apotropaic motif. Another potential apotropaic element is the mesmerising, green-brown irises, the most prominent feature of the two female faces.⁴⁵ While the representations could be

⁴² Svoronos 1904, pl. 28, 1-2: Ptolemy I and II with wives. See also Grimm 1998, figs. 104 e, f; Pfrommer 1999, figs. 30a, b; Richter and Smith 1984, fig. 198 and 200. For the iconography of Ptolemy II in sculpture, see Queyrel 2009.

⁴³ Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum, inv. no. 21739.

⁴⁴ Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum, inv. no. 21736; Daszewski 1985, 146-158, n. 38, 39. Andreae 2003, 33-38 with colour photos: fig. 6, 28, 33-35 (mosaic signed by Sophilos): fig. 26 and 37 (mosaic in round frame).

⁴⁵ The impact of the eyes has also been pointed out by Plantzos 1999-2000, 80-83.

personifications, perhaps of Alexandria, the idea that the busts portray the Ptolemaic queen Berenike II (270-221 BC), the wife of Ptolemy III (r. 246-221), as proposed by Wiktor Daszewski, is attractive. The thesis is strengthened by the wide-eye-iconography attested on Ptolemaic coins and in other media. The question may of course be legitimately raised as to whether these representations in the new sophisticated medium of *opus tessellatum* are true portraits. They are perhaps better understood as emblematic crypto-portraits mating a royal stereotype with a conventional formula for female personifications.

A prominent instance of an emphatic gaze is the image of Alexander the Great in the famous Battle mosaic from Pompeii, similarly a work in the Alexandrian tradition.⁴⁶ While many figures in the mosaic, such as king Darius, have large eyes, the depiction of Alexander stands out. With its large diluted black pupil that almost fills the amber-coloured iris, the out-of-proportion eye is the most salient feature of the mask-like portrayal.⁴⁷ The expanded pupil may be an indication of the Macedonian's agitated state of mind in the heat of the battle, caught in the act of impaling a high-ranking Persian with his lance. It is noticeable that although Alexander's head is rendered in strict profile, the circular iris is shown in frontal view and the gaze is simultaneously directed at the enemy and at the viewer. Modern studies have found a profile view looking at the viewer to be the most scaring, a fact the ancient artist may already have been aware of.⁴⁸ In a different vein, the emphasis on the eye could reflect the renowned melting and liquid eyes (*diachysis, hygrotos*), that was hailed as a main *semeion* of Alexander's iconography (Plut. *Alex.* 4; Plut. *De Alex. virtu.* 2.2). According to the physiognomic handbooks, bright and shiny eyes were a sign of a brave and upright character (Ps.-Aris. *Phys.* 807b, 809b, 812b).⁴⁹ In

⁴⁶ Given that many of the mosaics in the House of the Faun at Pompeii, where the Alexander mosaic was found, depict Egyptianizing themes, it is reasonable to assume an Egyptian (Alexandrian) prototype for the battle mosaic. The painter Helena from Egypt is known to have painted the Battle of Issos; Säflund 1990 argues that the Alexander mosaic derives from this painting. Other possibilities remain, thus Moreno 2000, ascribes the prototype to Apelles, while still others associate it with the painting made by Philoxenos of Eretria (cf. Plin. *NH.* 35. 110).

⁴⁷ Excellent colour photos in Moreno 2000, see especially pl. 8 for a close-up of Alexander's head; also, Andrae 2001, 62-77 with close-up on 67.

⁴⁸ Calder et al. 2007. Cf. also Plantzos 1999-2000, 74: 'we can be certain that Alexander's portrait used the unsettling effect of the single, powerful eye to impress its viewer'.

⁴⁹ For references, see Kiilerich 1988, 59-60.

any event, like a luxurious growth of hair, enlarged eyes serve to underline the divine nature of the ruler. In this formula, the ideal overrules the real.

Exaggeration, amplification and super-stimuli

On the scale between the opposite poles of the real and the ideal, it is important to note that in Hellenistic art both representational modes—idealism and realism—tend to move towards the same end: *exaggeration*. In the idealised images of Alexander and the Ptolemaic rulers, eyes, hair and pathos formula are intensified. In the realistic features of the ‘Terme Boxer’, the bloody cuts and other physical particulars are amplified. In sum, one may claim that the portraits respectively display *exaggerated idealism* and *exaggerated realism*. Thus, without implying that this principle pertains to all Hellenistic portraits, I propose exaggeration as a main characteristic of Hellenistic portraiture.

Of interest in this connection is the research of the neurobiologist Vilayanur Ramachandran and the philosopher William Hirstein.⁵⁰ Ramachandran has formulated what he calls eight laws of aesthetics, one of which is exaggeration, also known as the peak shift principle.⁵¹ Ramachandran claims that art is nearly always an exaggeration of reality. According to him, art is not meant to convey realism, but to capture the essence of something, in India known as the *rasa*. This can be done by amplifying significant characteristics, as witnessed at its most extreme in caricature, where emphasis is put on the person’s most salient features, for example, a big nose. Since the nervous system is activated by images that intensify the essence of the object, exaggeration makes it easier to grasp and process the visual information.⁵² With a strong visual stimulus such as, for instance, a distorted form, unusual colour combination or enlarged size, the artist achieves an emotional reaction and thereby engenders empathic response in the viewers. The stimulus becomes a super-stimulus.

⁵⁰ Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999, esp. 16-21.

⁵¹ Peak shift: when asking for food, a seagull chick pecks at a red spot on the mother’s beak. In experiments with pseudo-beaks in the form of sticks, it was found that the chicks reacted more strongly to a stick with two or three red spots than to a stick with a single red spot, and most surprisingly, pecked more vigorously at the stick with three red stripes – the super-stimulus – than at the real beak, Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999, 19-20.

⁵² Duarte and Stefanakis 2015, 517-518; Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999.

In portraiture and in sculpted representations in general, as well as in other media, Hellenistic artists explored the potentials of super-stimuli to the full:

1) *Scale, size*

Exaggeration of size is an important stimulus in the ‘Terme Ruler’ and the ‘Pseudo-Athlete’, the over-life size making their presences and ‘heroic nudity’ more imposing. Still, they are not represented on a gigantic scale. The most megalomaniac project, that was however never realised, was Deinokrates’ ambition of carving a gigantic sculpture of Alexander the Great in the hillside of Mount Athos: in one hand, he was to hold a town, while the other should contain a spring with running water (Vitruv. 2 *prae*f. 2). Another instance of Hellenistic megalomania, which was actually executed, was the ‘Colossus of Rhodes’, the precise appearance of which is somewhat uncertain (Plin. *NH*. 34.41).⁵³ Although not a portrait in the strictest sense, except that it possibly had some Alexander-like features, the ‘Colossus’ illustrates the Hellenistic tendency to think big.

At the other extreme, the ‘Artemision Jockey and Horse’ presents an instructive example of how, by manipulating the small size of the jockey and the large size of the animal, the composition acquires a dynamic quality (Athens, National archaeological museum inv. no. 10. 15177).⁵⁴ It has been speculated whether the boy, whose coarse features are also grossly exaggerated, actually belongs together with the horse. Still, while the pair may appear incongruous, the combination of disparate elements is an artistic means that serves to underline the essence of the motif: the strength and swiftness of the horse. This effect could not as easily have been achieved had the two parts of the composition been rendered in identical true-to-life scale.

2) *Bodily characteristics, physique*

The ‘Terme Ruler’ follows in the main line the Alexander with the lance type. But in contrast to the late 4th-century-BC body-type—as represented, for instance, by the copy of Lysippos’ *Apoxyomenos*—his physique displays the swelling muscles of a bodybuilder; in combination with a disproportionally small head, the body appears even larger. The dichotomy between head and body entices the

⁵³ See, e.g., Hoepfner 2000.

⁵⁴ For the group, see Hemingway 2014.

viewer's gaze to shift from the one to the other and back again. This tension is a strong visual stimulus. With reference to Ramachandran's claim that the essence of a representation is captured by amplifying significant clues, the essence of the bronze statue can be defined as physical strength; this lends support to the interpretation of the figure as an athlete rather than a ruler. The facial features, dominated by small close-set eyes, are very far from the ruler iconography that puts emphasis on the eyes; this may also speak against interpreting the statue as a ruler.

3) '*Realistic*' facial features

In the portrayal of the 'Terme Boxer' the elaboration of the physical scars is a means of characterisation. Not only is the nose broken, the face is loaded with particulars: numerous old scars and new cuts, a *haematoma*, blood and perhaps bloodshot eyes vie for the viewer's attention. While a few of these signs would have been sufficient to present the general idea, the artist overloads the image, as if to ensure that the message gets across. The most distinctive visual features are exaggerated.⁵⁵ This type of realism is 'realism for effect' rather than the outcome of mimetic representation. In fact, the physical scars are not so much realistic as they are intensifications that function as clues of attention intended to engage the viewer.

4) '*Ideal*' facial features

Exaggeration of traits with positive connotation is a significant factor in the public image of Alexander the Great. In order to convey the strength and near-divine, eternal youthfulness of the ruler, the artists make use of some easily identifiable clues: the full hair with the *anastole*, the liquid eyes (rendered in paint or by inset eyes in bronzes) and the vigorous head turn.⁵⁶ After Alexander's death, Hellenistic and Roman artists tended to blow these essential traits out of proportion: the full hair grew even fuller and the turn of the neck became sharper.⁵⁷ As evidenced in sculpture and especially in numismatic images, the

⁵⁵ In the suggested reconstruction of the 'Boxer' by Brinkmann and Koch-Brinkmann 2018, the result is close to caricature. The overall impact of the statue would have depended on several factors including viewing distance.

⁵⁶ Kiilerich 1988; 1993; 2017a; 2017b.

⁵⁷ Hence the torticollis, wry neck, diagnosis, first launched by the physician A. Dechambre in the mid-19th century, and still upheld in many recent medical publications, see Kiilerich 2017a, 8-11.

official portraiture of Ptolemaic rulers similarly emphasized hair and eyes, the most salient feature of the face. Since we respond more strongly to exaggerated features this also makes sense from a propagandistic point of view.

5) *Emotion, engagement and empathic response*

In contrast to the classical ‘nothing in excess’ (*meden hyper agan*) ideal and the almost expressionless face of the Classical age, as represented by the *Doryphoros* and the human figures depicted on the Parthenon frieze, in Hellenistic sculpture emotions and expressions are, when appropriate to the subject, often intensified. Heightened emotional content is especially strong in the mythological realm, the prime example being the ‘Laocoön group’, in which the priest’s facial features and suffering expression must be categorized as highly exaggerated.⁵⁸ But emotion is also featured in the rendering of presumably real persons. Here we may return to the notorious ‘Drunken Old Woman’, an enigmatic work that exemplifies the complexity of Hellenistic art.

What could be the essence, *rasa*, of the ‘Drunken Old Woman’? When characterising some of his bad characters, Theophrastus mentions immodest consummation of undiluted wine resulting in drunkenness.⁵⁹ Still, I doubt that the purpose of the ‘Drunken Old Woman’ was to moralise. There is more to the image than a warning of the consequences of having too much to drink. Among preserved versions of the sculpture, the Roman copy in Munich is one of the best, presumably reflecting the main characteristics of the original.⁶⁰ At first, we see a drunken old woman. But perhaps the ‘realism’ of the sculpture tricks us into seeing only this one aspect of it. A closer look reveals a discordant note in the representation. The sculpture is strangely paradoxical, inasmuch as the lower half could be that of a young woman, while from the waist up, the young woman’s torso turns into an emaciated, elderly version of herself. The woman has well-toned arms and slender hands contrasting with the sagging breasts. In sum, within the same representation it is possible to see both a young and an old woman. The sculpture thus captures more than a single moment in time.

⁵⁸ In an interesting paper, Queyrel 2002, proposes that the cause of Laocoön’s pain could have been a sudden loss of vision, a condition that would have been easier for the viewer to perceive when the sculpture’s original polychromy was still intact.

⁵⁹ Theophrast, *Characters*, n. 4: Boorishness: he drinks his wine too strong (*zoroteron*). Theophrastus also wrote a no-longer-extant treatise *On Drunkenness* (fr. 574).

⁶⁰ Munich, Glyptothek inv. no. 437; Zanker 1989, Munich version figs. 1, 29 and plates at the back; other versions of the sculpture are also addressed; Masséglià 2012.

Another factor of importance for evaluating the sculpture is its multisensory aspect. With her wide-open mouth, the woman seems to be talking or singing: we can almost hear her uttering some inarticulate sounds. In effect, the image addresses multiple senses: in addition to the visual and the aural, the fine texture and originally vivid colour of her garments suggest tactility and invites touch. Finally, the large *lagynos* with its ivy-leaf and flower decoration (in the Munich version) references the taste and smell of wine. Thus, although the ‘Drunken Old Woman’ escapes a definite interpretation, it may be tentatively suggested that the essence of the object is not a realistic representation of a woman of a certain age and in a certain state (of drunkenness).⁶¹ The importance of the sculpture lies primarily in the artist’s ability to create an image that engages the viewers beyond the apparent banality of the motif, in other words an image that engenders empathic response.⁶² In the ‘Drunken Old Woman’ realism goes far beyond simple verisimilitude.

In sum, to a much larger extent than earlier sculptors, Hellenistic artists explored the potentials for engaging the viewers by visual means. Emotional impact, paradoxical content, exaggeration of bodily features and manipulation of scale were among the stimuli used. Whether the physical features were rendered in a realistic or in an idealized manner, the ‘ideal’ and the ‘real’ were means to an end, rather than an end in itself.

Conclusion

We have argued that even the most apparently realistic Hellenistic portraits (for instance the ‘Worried Man’ from Delos) tend to include ideal elements. The notion of ‘true realism’ in Hellenistic art is therefore illusive. The best artists displayed anatomical and physiological knowledge along with technical skill and artistic virtuosity and they were fully capable of rendering realistic traits. However, true-to-life rendering or verisimilitude was hardly their primary aim. Indeed, although a realistic representation may impress by its mimetic qualities, realism as such easily becomes bland and boring. In order to make a work interesting, there needs to be something that transcends the real. Moreover, realistic or ‘quasi-realistic’ features, such as a lightly wrinkled brow, could serve other

⁶¹ Zanker 1989, 39 calls the woman ‘abstossend hässlich’ (disgustingly ugly), but this certainly misses the point of the sculpture.

⁶² For the importance of empathy, see, e.g., Freedberg 2014; Freedberg and Gallese 2007.

purposes than recording an actual appearance: they could communicate specific character traits and qualities, as explained in the physiognomical handbooks. On the scale between the opposite poles of the real and the ideal, in Hellenistic art both representational modes tend towards *exaggeration*. Because whether the chosen modus was predominantly 'real' or 'ideal', the artists consistently exaggerated salient features and expressions, driving home their point by use of visual super-stimuli. Hellenistic realism is actually quite unrealistic.

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