

Research Article

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Painting, Interpretation, Education: Tables of Knowledge in the *Imagines* of Philostratus the Athenian

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Abstract: This article shows how the descriptions of paintings (*Imagines*) by the ancient Greek author Philostratus (third century AD) can be viewed as pedagogical tools in the introduction to higher education. Philostratus presented his descriptions in the context of a tour in a picture gallery for young students. In the study presented here, the pedagogical context is taken seriously. With the means of three examples, the study shows how Philostratus uses his descriptions to guide his students into the interpretation of paintings, agriculture, and astronomy. Rather than simply present exemplary rhetorical descriptions of paintings as one would expect a rhetorical teacher to do, Philostratus uses paintings as pedagogical working tables where students can view simplified versions of complex fields of knowledge, an approach that is not unlike the visual presentation of introductory knowledge on old-fashioned cardboard wallcharts in modern schools.

Keywords: Philostratus, ekphrasis, Roman Empire, rhetorical education

The *Imagines* [Images] by Philostratus the Athenian (c. 170–250 AD) is one of the few examples of a text from the Greco-Roman world that is composed almost completely of descriptions of paintings. Previous studies have focused either on its potential value as a source to the reconstruction of the artworks that it describes (Lehmann-Hartleben) or, more recently, on the rhetoric used to convince its readers of the authenticity of those artworks (Anderson; Bryson; Shaffer; Webb, “The *Imagines* as a Fictional Text;” Elsner, *Seeing and Saying*). This rhetorical turn has established a paradigm where Philostratus’s descriptions are regarded more as literary-rhetorical constructions than descriptions of actual material paintings (Bryson; Baumann; Bachmann 49–52; Bates 137–139). Central to this approach is a set of classical rhetorical devices called *ekphrasis*¹ designed to aid the orator in portraying an artwork, a person, or a historical event with clarity (*sapheneia*) and vividness (*enargeia*) for an audience who cannot themselves experience it with their own eyes (Grethlein and Huitink; Squire, “Apparitions Apparent,” 101; Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*).

Like other recent studies, this article also focuses on the middle ground between this ekphrastic rhetoric and material visual artworks (Bachmann; Baumann; Billault; Elsner, *Seeing and saying*; Elsner and Squire; Newby; Primavesi and Giuliani; Shaffer; Small, *The Parallel Worlds*; Squire, *Image and Text*; Webb, “The *Imagines* as a Fictional Text”). In this article, I investigate the role that Philostratus in his philosophy of knowledge and education assigned to the interpretation of paintings (Maffei; Newby; Beckman).

1 All Greek words are transliterated according to Modern English Transcription.

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I adopt a different approach than scholars who see the images of Philostratus as “word-paintings,” rhetorical phantoms with no base in material, or historical reality (Bates 139; Anderson 260; Webb, “The *Imagines* as a Fictional Text”). If we are to take Philostratus’s project on education by means of interpreting paintings seriously, we also need to take the role of material paintings in that form of educational practice seriously. I will not argue like Karl Lehman-Hartleben that Philostratus describes an actual Roman villa decorated with specific paintings, but I believe that the educational practice suggested by Philostratus presupposes an involvement with paintings as historical material culture. To disregard the agency of historical material culture in Philostratus’s *Imagines* is, I believe, an example of what Michael Squire has referred to as the logocentrism of Classical Studies, that always values word over image, literature over painting, and oratory over material culture (Squire, *Image and Text*, 8). That some of Philostratus’s images cannot be documented with material historical remains is not a convincing argument in favour of the fictitious state of the paintings described (Bates 138). We have very few ancient paintings preserved (Ridgeway 16–17), and it should be no surprise to a reader of Philostratus that several of his motives are not documented by archaeologists. Neither should we expect – as was the fallacy of positivist art historical readings of Philostratus like Lehman-Hartleben’s – that we can reconstruct individual ancient paintings, or an entire gallery, from Philostratus’s *ekphraseis* or any other ancient author for that matter. An approach recently adopted by Eric Beckman, that I am sympathetic towards, is that it does not really matter if Philostratus’s images are fictitious or not (30). *Ekphraseis* is used in different contexts in ancient rhetoric, like descriptions of violent crimes in the court to education (Webb, *Imagination and Persuasion*, 13–38). In approaching Philostratus’s rhetorical use of paintings, I suggest that it is time for a new material turn and to regard them as a form of material culture practice. My focus will accordingly be not so much on how Philostratus described visual art, but rather on how he used the material culture of paintings in a specific form of rhetorical-educational practice. Clearly, this will not exhaust the possibility of reading Philostratus’s many-layered text in a number of different ways, but it is an approach that is a relevant corrective to the logocentrism in the study of Philostratus.²

Philostratus the Athenian, Philostratus the Narrator, and Philostratus the Teacher

The biography of the author of *Imagines* is for the most part connected with Athens and Rome (Bowie). His father and also a younger relative were both called Philostratus. This younger Philostratus was the author of another collection of descriptions of paintings (Philostratus the Younger, trans. A. Fairbanks 275–365). In earlier scholarship, there also figured a fourth Philostratus called Ph. of Lemnos. Currently, most scholars agree that the works formerly attributed to Ph. the Athenian and Ph. of Lemnos were written by the same man (Elsner, “A Protean Corpus 4”; Newby 322; Primavesi and Giuliani 27–32).

Philostratus had a literary production that covered a broad range of subjects: intellectual and political biographies, athletics, mythology, interpretation of paintings, and erotica (Elsner, “A Protean Corpus”). He was a writer and a teacher, but also a politician and a civil servant. In Athens, he had served as hoplite general, which during the Roman Empire was really seen more as the head of urban infrastructure than a general leading an army on the battlefield (Bowie 20; Beckman 12). His service as hoplite general would have given him a broad background in technical subjects as well as an understanding of the practical application of geometry and natural history. The *Imagines* was probably written in Rome when he was primarily occupied as a teacher and a writer and was written in Greek in an epoch of the Roman Empire

² Drafts to this article have been presented at workshops organized by the Images of Knowledge research group at the University of Bergen. I am grateful for comments from participants at those workshops as well as from comments from my anonymous reviewers. I am also forever in debt to my Greek teacher and supervisor, the late Professor Tomas Hägg who first introduced me to the topic of *ekphrasis*.

dominated by the culture and language of classical Athens that Philostratus himself had coined “the Second Sophistic” (Anderson; Billault; Eshleman; Bowie).

Whether one identifies the historical person Philostratus the Athenian, whoever he may have been, with the narrative voice of the *Imagines* depends on a number of variables. Even if one considers *Imagines* an instructive rather than a fictitious text, the structure of the text can be approached in many different ways. The path that I have followed here is to approach it as a spatial rather than a temporal narrative, and that is, I believe, Philostratus’s motivation for framing the *Imagines* in the singular architectural space of a villa. The narrative voice of Philostratus in the *Imagines* guides and converses with his students through an architectural space populated by paintings. This literary structure composed of images (*imagines*) distributed in clearly defined architectural spaces (*loci*) clearly mimics the structure of rhetorical mnemotechnics as it is described by Roman authors such as Cicero and Quintilian (Cicero 2.87.357–358, trans. Rackham 468–469; Quintilian 11.2.18–21, trans. Russel 66–69; Small, *Wax Tablets of the Mind* 95–111). A reader with a rhetorical education from the Roman Empire would have recognised this structure. This structure as well as the dialogue between the narrative voice and the young men that participate in the tour of the Neapolitan villa indicates that the text had a didactic purpose. The readers of the *Imagines* were, however, probably not the kind of characters used to frame Philostratus’s image galleries, young men and boys participating in the preparatory stage of higher education, but rather well-educated readers, men of the Roman elite with a background that enabled them to appreciate the educational references in the *Imagines* (Baumann 147–152). Even though the *Imagines* is not exactly a textbook, the individual *ekphraseis* presented were probably at some point in their reception history used as case studies for young men as part of their preparatory rhetorical training. The *Imagines* is not dedicated to a specific person, like an emperor, which is the case with Philostratus’s *Lives of the Sophists* (Schmitz), but there can be little doubt that it was the educated Roman elite that was its intended audience (Primavesi and Giuliani 26–27).

The *Imagines* as tables of knowledge

In my approach to the *Imagines*, I have adopted the term *tables of knowledge* from the French art historian George Didi-Huberman’s discussions of Aby Warburg’s (1866–1929) *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Didi-Huberman). Warburg used his Atlas of images to organise all kinds of cultural historical motifs visually. By juxtaposing motifs from different ages in the form of black and white photographs on wooden panels covered with black cloth, Warburg aimed to map what he referred to as trans-historical *bewegtes Leben* (agency) that link the individual motifs (Lechner and Woldt; Johnson 9). In his interpretation of Warburg’s heuristic method for establishing trans-historical agency, Didi-Huberman regards Warburg’s wooden panels,

not as tableaux, which has first and foremost esthetical and theatrical connotations, but as something associated more with the practical, the simpler but more disparate “table”. A tableau maybe sublime, a “table” will probably never be so. An offering table, a table for cooking, a dissecting table, or a montage table... atlas table or “plate” (*lámina* in Spanish, but the French *planche*, like *Tafel* in German or *tavola* in Italian, has the advantage of suggesting a certain relation with the domestic object as well as with the notion of tableau). (Didi-Huberman 8)

In my approach to Philostratus’s philosophy of knowledge and education, I have found the concept *tables of knowledge* to be an interesting alternative to the paradigm of the disciplines of learning that we know in its most simplistic modern form as the distinction between the sciences and the humanities. A distinction between the liberal arts and the mechanical, lower, or even dirty (*banausai*) arts was already adopted by Aristotle (Aristotle 8.2.1–3; trans. Rackham 637–639). Philostratus’s philosophy of knowledge is more inclusive than the classical notion of the arts (*tekhnai*) that can be found in Aristotle and later authors (Bates 140 and 165; Elsner and Squire 72). In his treatise on gymnastics, Philostratus listed the arts that represent distinctive forms of wisdom (*sophia*), in opposition to the lower, banaustic arts, although he never presented his philosophy of knowledge in a more systematic manner (Philostratus, *Gymnasticus* 1.1; trans. Rusten 399). My hypothesis is that the *Imagines* presents Philostratus’s philosophy of knowledge on a

didactic form as tables of knowledge. His tables are not of the same kind as the tables that Aby Warburg used to show how visual motives were connected across time and space. Instead, Philostratus used his tables as didactical tools to introduce young men to a broad range of knowledge and wisdom. The *periegetic* structure of the *Imagines* where Philostratus takes his students from one table to another without imposing a hierarchic structure on different forms of knowledge is a structure that seems to fit Philostratus's "democratic" philosophy of knowledge and education.

Philostratus was most likely not the only teacher of rhetoric in antiquity who used material images in this way. As it has been pointed out by Aline Rousselle, images were present everywhere in Greco-Roman rhetorical education (Rousselle 377). Other material culture practices that were frequently in use for education and intellectual activities in ancient Greco-Roman culture are those associated with the table. One need only to think about that most famous of the Platonic dialogues, the *Symposium*, which takes place at the dining table of the Athenian tragedian Agathon (trans. Lamb 80–245). Another Second Sophistic author, Athenaeus of Naucratis was also fond of the table as a vehicle of intellectual activity in his *Dinner-table sophists*. This text relates to and recycles much material from Philostratus's own *Lives of the Sophists* (Philostratus, *Lives*; trans. Wright), which is a more conventional form of ancient biography than Athenaeus's work (*The Learned Banqueteers*; trans. Olson; Hägg 93; Paulas). In Philostratus's *Imagines*, the focus is on individual images in his gallery of paintings that Philostratus the teacher can set his tables with mythological motifs and use them to bring to life different forms of knowledge and wisdom for his students. The *bewegtes Leben* (Johnson 9) of knowledge and wisdom that unfolds on Philostratus's tables is played out between the image, the text, the students, and the teacher of rhetoric. Although Philostratus is sometimes precise in rendering visual details, he never adopts the distanced descriptive mode of a modern art historian. He always uses paintings for specific rhetorical-pedagogical purposes, but they are material paintings none the less. The material agency of those paintings resound in Philostratus's ekphrastic lectures, and the material culture practice of his philosophy of knowledge and education depends on their material agency.

Most appropriately Philostratus used a painting of Achilles and the centaur Cheiron to explain this material culture practice of education (Philostratus, *Imagines* 2.2; trans. Fairbanks 133–137). It is no coincidence that Achilles was educated by a creature with the physical strength of a horse, and the potential irrational impulse of a monster. In Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles is not portrayed as a man of learning or with rhetorical skills (Homer 1; trans. Murray 13–59). He is first and foremost portrayed as a warrior with great physical strength and with exceptional skills on the battlefield. He is also portrayed as a man with poetic sensibility, skills in music (Homer 9.185–189; trans. Murray 409), and very much guided by his emotions and physical impulses rather than by reason (Konstan 11–15). By using the Achilles and Cheiron example, Philostratus underlines the physical, emotional living agency of the relationship between teacher and student, as well as the interpretative interaction with the material culture of painting that is situated right in the middle of that relationship.

When we approach Philostratus's material agency of education, it is important to keep in mind that physical education, or athletics, was an integrated element in the ancient education system (Stocking). It is notable that Philostratus took an interest in athletics as a form of *tekhne*, a craft, a form of knowledge (*episteme*), and even as a form of wisdom (*sophia*). It is also in his treatise on athletics that Philostratus reflects on the programme of his philosophy of knowledge (Stocking):

Let us regard as types of *wisdom* [sophian], *on the one hand* [men], things like philosophy and skillful speech and engaging in poetry and music and geometry, and by Zeus astronomy, so long as it is not carried to excess. *On the other hand* [de], the organization of an army is a form of wisdom, and in addition, things like the following: the whole of medicine and painting and modelling, and the various types of sculpting and gem cutting and metal engraving. *As for* [de] *the activities of craftsmen* [banausoī], let us accept that they require *skill* [tekhne], by which tools and equipment can be correctly built, *but* [de] let the label of *wisdom* [sophia] be reserved only for those activities I have mentioned. I exempt the piloting of ships from the category of *craftsmen's activities* [banauson], since it requires understanding of the stars and the winds and concerns itself with things that are not evident to the senses. My reasons for saying all of this will become clear. *As for athletic training*, we assert that it is a form of *wisdom* [sophian], and one that is inferior to none of the other *skills* [tekhnes], which means that it can be summed up in treatise form for the benefit of those who wish to undertake training. (Philostratus, *Imagines* 1.proem.1; trans. Rusten 399; Schönberger and Kalinka 269–270)

Contrary to the Aristotelian degradation of the banaustic arts, Philostratus included painting as well as all other visual arts and modelling technologies in his category wisdom (*sophia*). When he describes to his students the model artist, it is, however, not a painter, but the polytechnic engineer Daedalus that is put on the table as the ultimate role model (Philostratus, *Imagines* 1.16; trans. Fairbanks 65–69; Schönberger and Kalinka 329–331). The oral form of the introduction to the *Gymnasticus* also places it in the didactic workshop rather than in the strictly logical cabinet of the Aristotelian treatise. Even though he provides a list of “on the one hand (*men*)” proper types of wisdom, “things such as (*ta toiauta ... hoion*) philosophy and rhetoric,” he uses the opposing particle *de* three times to modify his initial category of proper forms of wisdom. Also, Philostratus regarded some of the mechanical, banaustic arts that “require skill (*tekhnē*)” as outside the category *sophia*. Unlike in the well-ordered taxonomy of wisdom and banaustic arts presented by classical authors like Plato and Aristotle, there is a certain flexibility in Philostratus’s philosophy of knowledge. Painting, as we shall see, holds a special role in his philosophy of knowledge, but there is also a general flexibility, an almost “democratic” willingness to discuss what mechanical art partakes in *sophia*.

Setting Philostratus’s tables of knowledge

Making lifelike descriptions of places, people, architecture, conflicts, or artworks was a form of rhetorical exercise called *ekphrasis* (Webb, “The *Progymnasmata* as Practice”). In addition to providing a clear (*sapheneia*) description of a place, a person, or an object like a painting, the rhetorical aim of *ekphrasis* was to make the description as lifelike (*mimesis*) and vivid (*enargeia*) as possible (Webb, “The *Progymnasmata* as practice,” 87–107). What Philostratus does, it has been claimed, is that he cultivates the ekphrastic exercise about artworks into a special genre (Webb, “The *Progymnasmata* as practice,” 28–37; Hägg). It is, however, not painting as such that is the focus in Philostratus’s text, but rather his focus is on the rhetorical and specifically rhetorical-pedagogical functions of ekphrastic interpretations of paintings (Beckman).

In the proemium to the *Imagines*, Philostratus discusses the primary aim of his work, which is to elevate the status of painting as a higher form of learning. He uses terms such as *aletheia* [truth]; *sophia* [wisdom]; and *episteme* [knowledge] that all imply the same level of prestige as philosophy, rhetoric, geometry, and strategy (Philostratus, *Imagines* 1.proem.1; trans. Fairbanks 3). He also specifies what he believes to be the pedagogical purpose of using painting in the instruction of the young:

The present discussion, however, is not to deal with painters nor yet with their lives; rather we propose to describe examples of paintings in the form of addresses which we have composed for the young, that by this means they may learn to interpret (*hermenusousi*) paintings and to appreciate what is esteemed in them. (1.proem.3; trans. Fairbanks 5; Schönberger and Kalinka 271)

The functions that Philostratus points out to be the main purpose of his project are interpreting (*hermeneuein*) and understanding the meaning of painting (Bachmann 64–68). He also underlines that he is not interested in the other well-established genre that deals with visual art, namely biography – a genre that Philostratus had demonstrated that he was well versed in with his *Lives of the Sophists* (Philostratus, *Lives*; trans. Wright; Hägg 341–351).

Philostratus was a teacher of rhetoric and he used a traditional rhetorical pedagogy in the *Imagines* when he provides his students with the exemplary *ekphraseis* of paintings. In traditional rhetorical education, paradigmatic examples would be taken from tradition, Homer or other Greek or Latin masters of *ekphrasis* (Webb 40; Elsner and Squire). It was also recommended in rhetorical handbooks like in the first century AD one by Aelius Theon to use examples composed by the teacher himself (Theon, *Progymnasmata*; trans. Patillon and Bolognesi; Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 41; Beckman 23). The collection of *ekphraseis* of paintings that make up the *Imagines* as well as other similar collections such as that by Philostratus the Younger (*Imagines*; trans. Fairbanks 275–365) are probably based on this kind of tailored examples used in rhetorical schools. In the case of our Philostratus, they are, however, more complex in terms of the rhetorical, literary, and philosophical questions that they discuss. They are thus exemplary not

in the sense that they simply make up a compendium of traditional exercises, but rather because they describe in an exemplary manner the material culture practice of interpreting paintings for the purpose of education.

The Artists Table: Pasiphaë in the Workshop of Daedalus

In the introduction to *Imagines*, Philostratus informs his readers that the occasion of the speeches he is about to present is that he has agreed to receive a group of young men from Naples and show them the wall-paintings that decorate the villa outside the city where he is a guest (1.proem.4; trans. Fairbanks 5–7; Schönberger and Kalinka 272–273). The 10-year old son of his host also accompanies the tour (1.proem.4.; trans. Fairbanks 7). This boy plays an important role in Philostratus’s educational practice since the narrative voice frequently asks him questions and includes him in the discussion of individual paintings (1.proem.1, 1.2.5, 1.4.3, 1.6.3, 1.11.2–3, 1.17.2; trans. Fairbanks 7, 11, 17, 25, 47, 69). The boy is thus engaged in the interpretations to remind Philostratus’s readers about the importance of the physical, material agency of his pedagogical project.

When Philostratus invites the boy (*pais*) and young men to his tables, his primary aim is to introduce them to the delight of the skill (*sophisma*) used by the painter (1.4.2; trans. Fairbanks 17; Schönberger and Kalinka 285). Like a teacher of verbal rhetoric, he introduces his students to the language of painting, and as in rhetorical education, his pedagogical method is based on concrete *exempla*, but not of ekphrastic rhetoric, but rather of interpretations of the meaning of painterly rhetoric:

The *clever artifice* [*sophisma*] of the painter is delightful. Encompassing the walls with armed men, he depicts them so that some are seen in full figure, others with the legs hidden, others from the waist up, then only the busts of some, heads only, helmets only, and finally just spear-points. This, my boy, is *perspective* [*analogia*]; since the problem is to deceive the eyes as they travel back along with the proper receding planes of the picture. (1.4.2; trans. Fairbanks 17)

The translator Arthur Fairbanks refers to the concrete pictorial technique that Philostratus explains here as “perspective.” That is an anachronistic term because the optical principle that is known as central perspective in painting was first coined by the Italian fifteenth-century author G. B. Alberti (trans. Grayson; Field). Unlike Alberti, Philostratus is not concerned with the geometrical optics of vision, but rather with how the painter used the pictorial device (*sophisma*) of *analogia*, that more precisely should be translated as “proportional comparison” to convince the guests at his table that the colours that cover its flat surface are, indeed, three-dimensional, living bodies (1.4.2; trans. Fairbanks 17; Schönberger and Kalinka 285). The purpose here is not to describe the perfect geometrical pictorial space painted on the wall, but invite the bodies of the characters in the painting to step out of it and participate on the table of knowledge together with teacher and students.

The main character in the description of the painting of Pasiphaë is the Cretan queen who fell in love with a bull and, who as a result of her fling, ended up giving birth to the half-man half-bull Minotaur. In his interpretation of the painting Philostratus is, however, most interested in presenting the technical skills (*sophismata*) of the man who made the union between the bull and the Cretan queen possible. That man, of course, was Daedalus. Pasiphaë, according to Philostratus, had gone to the workshop of Daedalus and asked him if he could “design some clever device to seduce the bull” [*sophisasthai tina peitho tou theriou*] (1.16.1; trans. Fairbanks 65; Schönberger and Kalinka 329–330). The painting portrays Daedalus’s workshop with the master and his workmen, fittingly featured as cupids (1.16.2; trans. Fairbanks 65) because their task is to facilitate the seduction of the bull into “doing something of Aphrodite” (*hos Aphroditis*) with queen Pasiphaë.

Philostratus is very careful to describe what kind of material; wood and tools; adze, measuring instruments, and saws that Daedalus’s assistants use to manufacture the lifelike cow machine that Pasiphaë can step into (1.16.4; trans. Fairbanks 67; Schönberger and Kalinka 330–331). He describes the tools and their use as detailed as if he was displaying them all out on a table in front of a group of young craftsmen entering

Daedalus's workshop for the first time. As an experienced teacher, Philostratus draws the attention of his students towards the exemplary craftsmen that shape the wooden body of the mechanical cow:

For look! [addressing the boy] The saw has attacked the wood and is already passing through it, and these Cupids keep it going, one on the ground, another on the staging, both straightening up and bending forward in turn. Let us consider this movement to be alternate; one has bent low as if about to rise up, his companion has risen erect as if about to bend over; the one on the ground draws his breath into his chest, and the one who is aloft fills his lungs down to his belly as he presses both hands down on the saw. (1.16.3; trans. Fairbanks 67)

Testimonies from Greco-Roman culture about how craftsmen operate their craft are rare. Here, Philostratus really devotes his rhetorical energy to describe the almost athletic techniques of the two craftsmen who handle a saw on the wooden cow figure. This includes specific breathing techniques as well as instructions about how the two levitating carpenters operate the blade of the saw from the one to the other. Since carpenters are not usually known to levitate, the purpose of this *ekphrasis* is probably to make vivid (*energeia*) the athletic twisting and turning around a complex wooden figure that skilled carpenters were capable of.

Philostratus's *ekphrasis* does not explicate exactly how Daedalus's mechanical cow machine works, but contemporary readers would have known that in order to seduce the bull it would have had to be able to move, produce sounds, and perhaps also the scent of a real cow (Mayor 70). A parallel can be found in the *Anthologia Graeca ekphraseis* of the bronze cow made by the classical Greek sculpture Myron (*The Greek Anthology* 9.713–42, 793–98; trans. Paton 393–404, 429–431). Here, the bronze statue speaks directly to the reader of the epigrams (9.713), it apologises to a calf that it has no milk to feed it with despite its lifelikeness (9.721), and it explains and complains that it is more like a living cow “fixed to a stone base” (9.719) than a work of art (Squire, Making Myron's Cow Moo?). Even more lifelike than Myron's cow on the Athenian Acropolis Daedalus's contraption is not a static sculpture, but a moving bionic machine with lifelike agency enabling it to seduce a bull. That this kind of wooden machinery would have been within the capacity of Daedalus's workshop to produce is actually hinted at by Philostratus because he describes the studio as being filled not with static sculptures, but with three-dimensional figures, some half-finished and others complete, and all with the potential agency of walking around in the workshop:

[...] about it [Daedalus's workshop] are statues, some with forms blocked out, others in a quite complete state in that they are already stepping forward and give promise of walking about. (Philostratus, *Imagines* 1.16.1; trans. Fairbanks 65)

The table set up to show the workshop of Daedalus has a special place in the structure of the *Imagines* as a meta-reflection of the place of mechanical art, not just of painting, but of all the other techniques and crafts that goes into creating lifelike human figures as the bionic robots that can be found walking around in the workshop of Daedalus.

The Table of Agriculture and the Ecology of the City

Agriculture is not one of the arts (*tekhnai*) of wisdom (*sophia*) listed by Philostratus in the introduction to the *Gymnastics*. As a part of “estate management” (*oikonomia*), agriculture was already considered by the classical author Xenophon (430–354 BC) as a form of knowledge (*episteme*) and an art (*tekhnē*) alongside other mechanical arts (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 1.1; trans. Marchant 387). In the *Imagines*, Philostratus devotes his interpretation of “A Marsh” to the introduction of the ecology of the natural landscape that surrounded the city and that it depends on for supply of food, timber, and other products (1.9; trans. Fairbanks 35–41). His approach is not that of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* where Socrates interviews the knowledgeable gentleman farmer Ischomachos (1.1; trans. Marchant 387), nor does he have the botanical approach of Theophrastus's *Historia Planetarum* (trans. Hjort). Philostratus's approach is to introduce the young to the basic knowledge about ecology that precedes involvement with agriculture. He goes about with this introductory lecture not by guiding his students into the fields, nor by instructing them in how to use agricultural tools, but rather by involving them in the interpretation of the material culture of a painting.

The description of the Marsh takes as its starting point the favourable conditions for growth that dominates a well-drained natural wetland. All kinds of botanical species thrive there “unsown and untilled” (1.9.1; trans. Fairbanks 35; Schönberger and Kalinka 305), because the Marsh provides an optimal combination of sediments, water supply, and climate. Philostratus’s agricultural paradigm also includes species and local ecological conditions outside the marsh proper: On the mountain slopes that surround the marsh, Philostratus tells how a cooler climate and different soil types create ideal conditions for different species of trees; pine trees prefer “a light soil,” cypresses prefer “soil of clay,” and fir trees prefer the scanty soil and harsh climate that can be found high up in the mountains (1.9.1; trans. Fairbanks 35–37; Schönberger and Kalinka 305). The visual details of the landscape painting Philostratus describes must have been on the same level as in the Garden fresco in the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta (Figure 1). This level of detail is also an indication that Philostratus does, in fact, refer to the visual culture of landscape paintings from the era of the Roman Empire.

In the final section of this relatively long *ekphrasis*, Philostratus describes how architectural agents in the agricultural landscape are integrated in the natural ecology so as to create ideal conditions for thriving flocks of sheep and goats:



Figure 1: Garden fresco. Roman wall-painting in the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta (30–20 BC). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Behold, a river also issues from the marsh, a broad rippling stream, and goatherds and shepherds are crossing it on a bridge. If you were to praise the painter for his goats, because he has painted them skipping about and prone to mischief, or for his sheep because their gait is leisurely as if their fleeces were a burden, or if we were to dwell on the pipes or on those who play them – the way they blow with puckered lips – we should praise an insignificant feature of the painting and one that has to do solely with *imitation* [eis mimesin]; but we should not be praising its *cleverness* [sophian] or the sense of *fitness* [kairon] it shows, though these, I believe, are the most important elements of *art* [tes tekhnēs]. Wherein, then, lies its *cleverness* [sophia]? The painter has thrown a bridge of date palms across the river, and there is a very pretty reason for this; for knowing that palms are said to be male and female, and having heard about their marriage, that the male trees take their brides by bending over toward the female trees and embracing them with their branches, he has painted a palm of one sex on one bank and one of the other sex on the other bank. Thereupon the male tree falls in love and bends over and stretches out over the river; and since it is unable to reach the female tree, which is still at a distance, it lies prone and renders menial service by bridging the water, and it is a safe bridge for men to cross on because of the roughness of its bark. (1.9.5–6; trans. Fairbanks 39–41; Schönberger and Kalinka 307)

With this interpretation, Philostratus shows how the potential agencies of the natural landscape, its species, landforms, water courses, and sediments can be cultivated with a proper art of wisdom into an effective agricultural landscape. As the former hoplite general of Athens Philostratus knew well how important this knowledge was.

Both Philostratus's way of thinking about the relationship between nature and culture, as well as his terminology in the interpretation of "A Marsh" are adopted from classical rhetoric: In Philostratus's marsh ecology, the natural landscape and biological species are interlaced with the agricultural agency of the same landscape. The bridge where shepherds and goatherds cross a river with their flocks is constructed in symmetrical analogy with the natural agency of procreation between a male and a female date palm. As the first century AD rhetorician Quintilian said about the artificial memory of the orator was that "as usual with art" it was born from experience of natural memory (11.2.17–18; trans. Russell 66). The visual rhetorical cleverness (*sophía*) of the painting that demonstrates this point, according to Philostratus, is exactly that it enables to show rather than say how art is integrated with nature. When Philostratus also says that this can be characterised as "fitting" (*kairon*), he also uses this term in a rhetorical sense as fitting for the circumstances that the argument is presented in (Isocrates, "Against the Sophists," 13; trans. Norlin 171).

What Philostratus means, in other words, is that the connection between the natural landscape and how this landscape can be exploited for agricultural purposes is presented on the table of "A Marsh" in a manner that will appeal to the boy and the young men in his audience as a vivid (*enargeia*) introduction to the basics of good agricultural thinking. Unlike in the interpretation of Daedalus's workshop, the material culture displayed on the table of agriculture is not that of the tools used in agricultural technology, but rather on the living ecological components that is required for the agricultural life of the city.

Atlas on the Table of Astronomy

Philostratus's description of a painting of Atlas in book II of the *Imagines* is an introduction to a field of knowledge (*episteme*) that he lists in the introduction to *Gymnasticus* as a form of wisdom (*sophia*). The titan Atlas's association with astrology is that the punishment that was assigned to him "by Zeus" was to hold the primeval forces of earth (Gaia) and sky (Uranus) apart (Hesiod, *Theogony* 517–520; trans. Most 45). In the first century AD, Diodorus Siculus also credited Atlas with the invention of the theory that the heavenly bodies were distributed in spherical layers around the earth (Diodorus, *Library* 3.60.1–2; trans. Oldfather 279). Philostratus describes Atlas standing together with Heracles as in a metope on the temple of Zeus at Olympia from the classical period (Figure 2). As at Olympia, Philostratus's Heracles is standing in front of Atlas stretching his hands out in a rhetorical gesture, offering to relieve him of his burden. In reality, Philostratus comments, he is just showing off, because he has boasted to Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns who commissioned the 12 labours from Heracles, that he could hold the heavens better than Atlas.

In his interpretation of the painting, Philostratus especially praises the painter for his ability to modulate the crouching figure of Atlas with light and shadow:



Figure 2: Athena, Atlas, and Heracles. Marble relief sculpture from the temple of Zeus at Olympia, ca. 460 BC. Source: Jørgen Bakke, photo.

[...] the shadows on Atlas show a *high degree of skill* [sophias proso]; for the shadows on a crouching figure like his run into one another, and do not darken any of the projecting parts but they produce light on the parts that are hollow and retreating. The belly of Atlas, for instance, one can see although he is bending forward, and one can perceive that he is panting. (2.20.2; trans. Fairbanks 221; Schönberger and Kalinka 441–442)

Not only does the painter's "advanced skill" (*sophias proso*) enable him to portray Atlas as a lifelike figure in real agony over the burden of keeping the earth and sky apart, but Philostratus also underlines that the

painter has portrayed the belly of Atlas with real respiratory agency since “one can perceive that he is panting.” This is very much a textbook example of the rhetorical use of *enargeia* (vividness) in an ekphrastic description.

Astronomical paintings as the one Philostratus refers to probably contained astral constellations as presented by the second century AD astronomer and mathematician Claudius Ptolemy (Evans; Toomer). The second century AD celestial sphere in the marble sculpture known as the Farnese Atlas (Figure 3) depicted some 41 or 42 of those constellations. In his description, Philostratus only mentions “the bull” and “the bear” (2.20.2; trans. Fairbanks 223), but his students would probably have seen something similar to the display on the sphere of the Farnese Atlas. Again, Philostratus uses the material culture of a painting to



Figure 3: Farnese Atlas. Roman marble sculpture, second century AD, National Archaeological Museum, Naples. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

construct a table of knowledge where he can distribute the living bodies (Atlas and Heracles) and material objects (the celestial square) that are required to set the table of astronomy for his students.

Philostratus's table of astronomy is covered by speculative concepts, models, and images of the heavens. It is a condensed version of Ptolemy's *Almagest* that is laid out on Philostratus's table of astronomy. Rather than to provide an exhaustive description of Ptolemy's astronomy, Philostratus leads his students in the direction of the principles that order the astrological agents. As with the interpretation of agriculture in the description of A Marsh, and the interpretation of the polytechnic arts in the painting of Pasiphaë, Philostratus has calibrated his description for the pedagogical context with an emphasis on the material agency (*enargeia*) of learning that the interaction with the table of astronomy has opened up for.

Philostratus's School of Viewing Material Painting

In the discussion about the *Imagines* of Philostratus the Athenian, we have seen how his interpretations of paintings can be regarded as documents of an ancient pedagogical practice. In antiquity, mythological scenes like those described by Philostratus were found in sanctuaries, in cemeteries, in public places, and in the Hellenistic and Roman periods also in private homes. Rhetorical teachers would always have images easily available, and so the functional context of Philostratus's *Imagines* is probably typical, even though we have preserved few other examples of literary compilations of such didactic uses of images in rhetorical schools. For Philostratus, this practice is formed into a school of viewing and interpreting material paintings. It is evident, both from the *Imagines* and in Philostratus's particular elevation of painting as a form of *sophia* in *Gymnasticus*, that material images played an important role in his education programme. Philostratus also considered painters to be educated on the same level as those like himself trained in rhetoric and strategy, but his primary aim in *Imagines* is to use the material culture of painting for the purpose of education. This material culture of painting includes not just the material paintings, but also, as we have seen with the interpretation of Pasiphaë in the workshop of Daedalus (*Imagines* 1.16), the material culture, like the tools of the carpenter, that the skilled rhetorical teacher can pick out of the paintings and display them on a table in front of a group of young students not familiar with them. This approach to painting that Philostratus calls interpretation (*hermeneia*) is clearly not the approach of a modern art historian describing a painting, but of a skilled rhetorical teacher who adopts his interpretations to whatever the situation requires (*kairos*).

The view of *tekhne* and *sophia* that we find in Philostratus as well as other writers of the Second Sophistic is different from that of classical Greek writers such as Aristotle and Plato. No doubt the change in the view of the mechanical arts since the classical period was connected with the rising prestige of the polytechnic arts since the Hellenistic period, first of all because building ballistic weapons and siege craft had become important qualifications for military leaders (Cuomo 67–76). Philostratus had first-hand experience with this new class of military leaders as “hoplite general” in Athens. He did, however, extend his recognition to other mechanical arts. Painting did, however, play a special role in Philostratus's philosophy of knowledge. The *Imagines* can be read as programmatic for his school of viewing and interpreting material visual art. This was not primarily because he considered painting to be the most prominent of the mechanical arts – that position Philostratus had reserved for Daedalic engineering – but rather because it had a special role as a didactic tool in the introduction to higher education. In Philostratus's practical approach to introductory higher education, he saw painting as a visual and material reservoir of introductions to different forms of knowledge. In Philostratus's practical-rhetorical philosophy of knowledge, paintings fulfil a similar function as old-fashioned cardboard wallcharts that illustrated different subjects in an introductory, visualised, and simplified manner. This does not imply, however, that the intellectual complexity of the *Imagines* can be reduced to being an instruction manual for ancient Grammar school teachers. The many discourses (philosophy, technology, mythology, rhetoric, visual art) involved in this text make it a source to the intellectual culture of the Second Sophistic that is not in danger of running dry any time soon. To address the material culture of the paintings that Philostratus has built his *Imagines* around, however, is a possible way to continue to extract from that source that should not be ignored.

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