Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis

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First reported in Cicero’s Rhetoric and Pliny’s Natural History, the story of Zeuxis’s portrayal of Helen of Troy is a compelling one. According to tradition, the Greek artist was commissioned to paint an image of this legendary beauty. Realizing that none of the models he summoned fully possessed the physical beauty attributed to Helen, he combined the best features of five different women into a composite image. Elizabeth C. Mansfield’s Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis catalogues the many responses to the Zeuxis myth we can identify in the visual arts, literature, performance, digital arts and history. In other words, she does not ask whether the Greek artist Zeuxis actually lived during the fourth century BCE, which is a question others have posed. Instead, she assesses the extent to which the Zeuxis Selecting Models legend can be deciphered, the nature of its mythic structure and its significance for the history of Western art.

Overall, the book turns on the premise that the Zeuxis Selecting Models legend records and perpetuates a persistent cultural anxiety about the historical approach to visual representation. As Mansfield explains, mimesis, in its full classical sense, meant first copying forms observed in nature and then generalizing or perfecting these forms to achieve a kind of ideal. This differs from the idea of direct imitation commonly associated with “mimesis” in our contemporary environment. Moreover, as she details in one of the most extraordinary aspects of her study, Zeuxian (or classical) mimesis has alternately been rejected and embraced since antiquity. Classical mimesis, which is evident in ancient aesthetics as recorded by Xenophon, Plato and Aristotle, lost most of its currency in the Middle Ages as imitation and representation were given lower priority. Renaissance artists and authors reclaimed the idea, and it has remained a prevalent theory of representation to this day.

Mansfield’s argument hinges on two major assertions. Firstly, she declares that Zeuxis Selecting Models functions mythically and, in doing so, transmits ideology. By this she means that the legend retains traces of a cultural unconscious that makes its presence felt by triggering an uncanny sensation when we are confronted by it. Secondly, the experience elicited by Zeuxis Selecting Models is a symptom of the ontological impasse posed by classical mimesis itself as it served as a vehicle for social and metaphysical solace. Mansfield’s perspective is insightful. Indeed, Mansfield’s analysis of how the Zeuxis myth influenced Western art theories about representation as they were formed and engaged is a position I hope art historians and visual culture theorists will integrate into their research as they re-evaluate the relationship between representation, nature and how artists re-create/comment upon the world we see.

Part I begins the analysis of the Zeuxis narrative. Here Mansfield discusses how the relevance of myths and legends about artistic creation, often used for the study of visual culture, underlie much of her thinking. She points out that art historians have generally turned their attention to legends when they function as subjects or works of art but tend to give less attention to myths allied with aesthetic theory. Through well-researched analyses of sources that range from Cicero and Pliny to Alberti, Vasari and academicians of the 17th and 18th centuries, the author exposes numerous interpretations of Zeuxis Selecting Models theories. In addition, the author walks us through the historical thinking in detailed case studies that are expanded in copious footnotes. The well-done case studies are nicely integrated with one another. To the author’s credit, each time she compares an example to another in one portion of the book, she includes a notation that directs the reader to the section of the book with the additional analysis. The footnotes add immensely to the main text and are highly recommended.

The second part of the book proceeds from the question: Why are there so few post-Renaissance depictions of the Zeuxis Selecting Models story cul-
naturally? Packed with detail, all of the examples manage to be dense with information and yet quite readable nonetheless. I preferred this half of the book, although my reaction is probably as much a product of taste as anything else. The chapters in this part offer specific and fascinating examples to support her argument. For example, Mansfield explains that ambivalence toward the Zeuxis Selecting Models idea evaporates in 17th century aesthetic discourse, when the Zeuxis story assumed a leading role in theoretical treatises and histories of painting. This re-positioning coincided with the rise of the academy, in the French Academy, as is well known, rigorous training was codified in drawing, anatomy, perspective and the liberal arts. The Academy model soon spread throughout Europe, and with it the disdain for commerce in favor of loftier aesthetic and intellectual ideals.

Stunningly well done is Mansfield’s remarkable examination of Angelica Kauffman’s late-18th-century paintings and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Briefly, the author claims that both women offer a critique of the theme’s characterization of creative relationship in terms of man-as-creator/woman-as-created to reveal that the misogyny promulgated by academic references to Zeuxis is a symptom of a larger issue. Another chapter includes an enthralling discussion on whether the cubistic depiction of the women in Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon is his attempt to confront the myth. There is also a chapter examining the response of a performance artist, Orlan, to the myth. Orlan has used plastic surgery to remake her body as an enactment of the myth. Each of her five operations was designed to alter a specific feature of her face. The “map” for these alterations is generated for her surgeons using computer-generated images. The features Orlan selected include the nose from a School of Fontainebleau sculpture of Diana (artist unknown), the mouth of Boucher’s Europa, the forehead of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, the chin of Botticelli’s Venus and the eyes of Gerome’s Psyche.

In summary, Mansfield, an associate professor of art history at the University of the South, offers a primer on mimesis in art making. She proposes that the Zeuxis myth illustrates ambivalence about the ability to rely on nature as a model for ideal form. In making her case, Mansfield engages the visual arts, literature and performance to examine the desire to make the ideal visible.

Speaking in “gendered” terms, Mansfield considers the many depictions of the legend during the Renaissance, questions its absence during the 18th century and offers thoughtful case study interpretations (e.g. Angelica Kauffman’s paintings, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon and Orlan’s performance art) to identify several profound retellings of the myth. *Too Beautiful to Picture* is a compelling book and an important contribution to art history, gender studies, aesthetic theory and visual culture. Although I found myself questioning some of her conclusions, the writing was so engrossing that I enjoyed the dialogue the author’s words generated in my mind. I also learned quite a bit as I read. This, in turn, provided an opportunity for me to re-think my views on mimesis, art historical themes, and the role of women in art historically. I think others, too, will find this excellent volume well worth their attention.