

Octopodal Pictoriality: The Self-Reflexivity of the Octopus in Graeco-Roman Art

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Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (*plate 1*) offers a supreme example of what Victor Stoichita terms 'the self-aware image'.[1] The painting depicts a self-portrait of the artist at work, poised with palette and brush before a canvas—only whose underside we see—that is uncannily shaped like the painting itself. The act of painting occurs in a palatial gallery hung with further paintings and a luminous mirror that reflects an image of the Spanish King and Queen who are sitting for their portrait (and whose position the viewer teasingly occupies) while the Infanta is paraded before them. Through these *mise-en-abymes*, *Las Meninas* reveals a profound self-consciousness about its own conditions of patronage and methods of production, as well as its ambivalent, pictorial status as both painted canvas and imitative image, material object and mirror of reality.[2] According to Stoichita, such 'self-awareness' is a particular feature of early modern, European painting, dependent on the seventeenth-century invention of the framed 'tableau', 'Gemälde', or 'easel painting', which, he claims, exhibited a new self-consciousness about the ontology of the image.

Earlier works of art, however, reveal that this self-referentiality was not entirely new: the sorts of metapictorial motifs that Velázquez revels in have a well-documented legacy that can be traced through Renaissance and medieval traditions right back to classical antiquity.[3] As classical art historians have recently explored, numerous Greek and Roman artworks self-consciously depict artists at work or embed other artworks within their frames.[4] Take, for example, the famous fourth-century BCE red-figure krater depicting a painter embellishing a statue of Hercules as the 'real' hero looks on (*plate 2*),[5] or the well-discussed first-century BCE wall paintings from the Villa della Farnesina in Rome depicting a fictive picture gallery (or *pinacotheca*) hung with Greek panel paintings.[6] Even the self-conscious embedding of mirror-images within the pictorial field has roots in classical art. Consider, for example, those Pompeian frescoes depicting Narcissus gazing at his reflection in the pool or Thetis contemplating her image in Achilles' shield, which capitalise on the Platonic analogy between paintings and mirrors to comment on the seductions of their own pictorial illusions.[7]

This article likewise traces 'the self-aware image' back to classical antiquity, but it moves beyond contemplating the embedding of artists, artworks or mirror-images within Graeco-Roman pictures to consider more subtle and sophisticated forms of metapictoriality. Indeed, the two sets of artworks that form this article's focus have traditionally been thought far removed from second-order issues of self-reflexivity

Detail from fish mosaic from the House of Geometric Mosaics at Pompeii (VIII, 2, 14-16), early first century BCE (*plate 4*).

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insofar as they depict nothing but *fish*, namely the 'fish plate' and 'fish mosaic'. The fish plate (*plate* 3) was a popular type of shallow red-figure ware that emerged in Attica and especially South Italy in the fourth century BCE depicting marine creatures swirling in a ring around a central depression; the fish mosaic (*plate* 4) was a type of inset floor mosaic depicting a melange of sea creatures off a rocky bay that emerged in Roman Italy during the late second and early first century BCE, though most likely based on a Hellenistic masterpiece from further east in the Mediterranean for reasons to be outlined in due course.

Suffice to say, classical art history has not paid much attention to these piscine pictures, such is the anthropocentric bias of the discipline, which has taken the human body as its prime subject ever since the publication of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764).[8] Where they have paid attention to these plates and mosaics, classical art historians have done little more than offer taxonomies of their regional differences and chronological development,[9] or insert them into broader genealogies that trace the emergence of 'still life' as a genre in antiquity.[10] Indeed, the marshalling of these plates and mosaics under the rubric of 'still life' has significantly hampered their interpretation and not just because these images are so teeming with life. Over and above all other modern genres, 'still life'



1 Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656. Oil on canvas, 318 × 276 cm. Madrid: Prado Museum (inv. P001174). Photo: Wikimedia Commons (Prado).

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2 Attributed to the Boston Group, column-krater depicting a painter applying encaustic to a statue of Hercules, c. 360–350 BCE. Ceramic, height 51.5 cm. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. 50.11.4). Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

painting—especially sixteenth and seventeenth-century, Flemish *stilleven*—has been thought to epitomise the Kantian ideal of aesthetic autonomy or 'disinterestedness', principally because such pictures operate independently from any external narratives and communicate through their artistic qualities alone.[11] Influenced by this post-Enlightenment take on the early modern 'still life', classical art historians have assumed that Graeco-Roman pictures of food, flowers and fish were likewise devoid of any wider cultural meaning and devoted only to beauty.[12] 'Pretty, but pretty meaningless; meaningful, rather, only in so far as they are pretty: that is the general academic consensus', as Michael Squire neatly summarises.[13] Rather than viewing these plates and mosaics anachronistically through a Kantian framework, I will instead embed them in the aesthetic discussions of their own time.[14] I will argue that these plates and mosaics—far from being self-standing objects of aesthetic reflection—in fact get to the heart of contemporary debates about the nature of artistic imitation (or *mimēsis*).

I will make this case by exploring their privileged depiction of an animal which was renowned in antiquity for its skill in visual mimicry: the octopus.

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3 Attributed to the Asteas-Python workshop, red-figure fish plate from Paestum, c. 340–330 BCE. Ceramic, diameter 38.3 cm. Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art (inv. 1985.50). Photo: Cleveland Museum of Art.

As we shall see, Greek and Roman writers obsessed over the octopus' ability to imperceptibly blend in with the seabed by adapting its skin to match the colours of the rocks on which it rested. They used this quirk of nature to probe the fault-lines not only between animate and inanimate matter, between sentient animal and insentient rock, but also between ontological and epistemological categories—between representation and reality, seeming and being, viewing and knowing. Despite the rich body of Greek and Latin texts that attest to a culture of discussing the octopus' camouflage and using it to sound out the limits of fact and fiction, this textual tradition has not yet been used to reveal the self-reflexivity of the octopus in Graeco-Roman art. This article therefore brings art and text together to consider what it meant to visually imitate the octopus in cultures that repeatedly conceptualised the octopus itself as a master of visual imitation. Its case studies—the fish plate and fish mosaic—while far from being the only types of object to represent octopuses in Graeco-Roman visual culture, will offer particularly productive material to ask this question of, not least because the techniques of red-figure painting and mosaic will be shown to share affinities with the octopus' own modes of representation. By revealing the octopus as *mise-en-abyme* and exposing the complex self-referentiality of the marine 'still life', this article will therefore

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demonstrate that the Greeks and Romans operated with a much broader conception of what constituted a 'self-aware image' than the art historians of today. Seeing the self-awareness of these aquatic artworks will not only enable us to recover more ecologically grounded ways of understanding the relation between art and nature than is usually associated with classical art history; it will ultimately teach us to become more self-aware of ourselves and our place in the world at this tipping point of climate crisis.

Navigating the Fish Plate

Before elaborating on that larger argument, allow me to begin by introducing my first case study and contextualising its presentation of the polyp, especially since these plates are so little discussed outside specialist catalogues. The fish



4 Fish mosaic from the House of Geometric Mosaics at Pompeii (VIII, 2, 14-16), early first century BCE. Mosaic, 88 × 88 cm. Naples: Naples Archaeological Museum (inv. 120177). Photo: Wikimedia Commons (Carole Raddato).

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plate is defined by both its form and content. Elevated on a short pedestal, the plate takes the form of a flat disc, dimpled in the centre with a semi-spherical depression (*plate* 5).[15] Fish and other marine species, including cephalopods like octopuses, are represented wheeling around this depression. These creatures are depicted using the red-figure technique, whereby black slip is used to block out the negative space around each shape's outline. Details like the patterning of the fishes' scales or the folds of the octopus' body are then painted on in brushstrokes or daubs of black slip, with some plates also using a diluted wash to shade the bodies a brownish colour. Additional white paint is commonly applied to articulate other anatomical details like fins, eyes and the octopus' suckers. Smaller creatures like clams may be blocked out entirely in this white pigment. Regardless, the sea-creatures never interact syntactically but are instead depicted paratactically with each animal individually enclosed by the black slip. The central depression is often framed with a 'wave-scroll' pattern, wholly appropriate for the marine subject matter; the circumference of the disk tends to be framed by a red band, sometimes plain or otherwise geometrically patterned; vegetal patterns are preferred for the sides.

Although some fish plates have been found in burial contexts, it is reasonably assumed that these plates were primarily used to serve fish suppers at the Greek banquet (or *deipnon*), partly because the central depression is perfectly designed to catch any juices that might run off the plated seafood, thereby creating an embedded pot of fish sauce for diners to dip morsels into.[16] The pictures of fish might thus have functioned as a plating template for the cook, whereby pieces of cooked seafood were placed atop their pictorial equivalents. Once the diner had finished their dinner, they would then be presented with a picture-book of ingredients. Even if we doubt that the catalogues of fish represented on these plates were used this precisely in practice, they nevertheless bear testimony to a broader interest in taxonomising marine life that flourished in the late classical era.[17] We might compare Aristotle, Theophrastus and Clearchus' contemporary zoological works which classified and described underwater animals, or Archestratus of Gela's *Life of Luxury*, a fourth-century BCE poem that offered a culinary index of Mediterranean fish.[18]

The octopus appears on many surviving fish plates. It is distinguished formally from the other fish on account of both its frontality and its fluidity of line. First, whereas fish run nose-to-tail around the ring of these plates, the octopus breaks the cyclical composition and confronts the viewer's gaze head-on. In this respect, the revelation of the tentacular octopus as the plate is cleared of food parallels the revelation of the anguine head of the gorgon—another creature capable of petrification, actual rather than apparent petrification this time—that stares back from the tondos of drinking-cups as symposiasts drain their wine.[19] Given that the octopus was a popular shield-device in archaic and classical vase painting (*plate* 6), it perhaps served a similarly apotropaic function here.[20]

Second, whereas the fishes' bodies are marked by straight or slightly arched lines, either painted in solid brushstrokes or dotted in daubs of paint, the octopus' tentacles introduce meandering lines that snake, scroll and unfurl across the black slip. Sometimes the octopus extends its tentacles freely away from its head, nowhere more dramatically than in the Cleveland example (see *plate* 3). Here, five of the octopus' tentacles stream supplely behind its body, cutting across the cyclical composition like a greedy handprint scraping the black slip clean, while three others loop and

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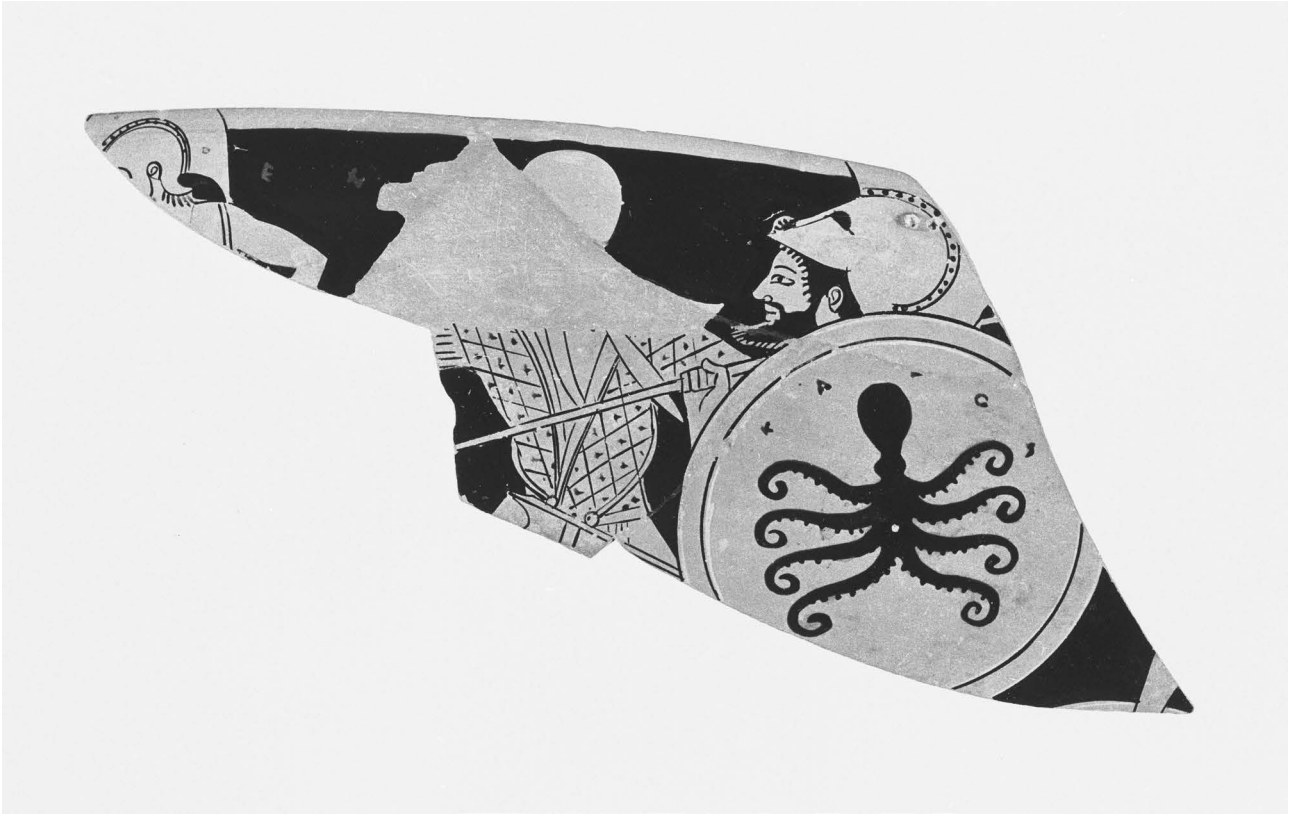
5 Attributed to the Asteas-Python workshop, red-figure fish plate from Paestum, c. 340–330 BCE. Ceramic, diameter 31.6 cm. Ohio: Toledo Museum of Art (inv. 1977.30). Photo: Toledo Museum of Art.

flutter about the head. To the side of the octopus' head and nestled between the tips of its tentacles are two other miniature octopuses painted in white, who mirror its pose with their radiating, corkscrew tentacles. Such sprawling poses call to mind the iconography of Bronze Age 'octopus vases', which have the cephalopod's outspread tentacles wrap around the bellies of their pots, often unbounded by any pictorial framing device (*plate 7*).[21]

On other fish plates, however, the octopus instead clings with its suckers to the central depression (not unlike the octopus in a famous simile from *Odyssey* 5 who stubbornly cleaves to a rock from which he is being dragged) and tightly contracts its tentacles, creating rolling patterns of circular loops.[22] Take, for example, this plate in Houston (*plate 8*), in which the black holes of the octopus' eyes are mirrored in the voids between its looped tentacles and, indeed, in the dozens of little suckers, likewise framed with white rings, that are festooned around its body like fairy lights. Whether the octopus appears in the 'expanded' or 'contracted' pose, its formal

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6 Epiktetos, Attic red-figure cup fragment depicting a shield with an octopus device and *kalos*-inscription, c. 510–500 BCE. Ceramic, length 15 cm. Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum (inv. 86.AE.306.2). Photo: Getty.

anomalousness from the other fish nevertheless invited special attention: just what was this creature doing on the plate?

Theorising Verisimilitude in the Fourth Century BCE

The octopus' formal distinction from the other fish maps onto an important, conceptual distinction. For fourth-century BCE viewers, the octopus had the unique potential to operate self-referentially, given that it was conceptualised along the same lines as the visual arts, namely through a discourse of verisimilitude. As we shall see, poetic traditions concerned with the 'truth-likeness' of octopuses and artworks faintly mirrored each other as early as the seventh century BCE, suggesting that late archaic and early classical vase paintings of octopuses might already have functioned metapictorially.[23] This seems most likely of those vases that figured the octopus as a shield-device (see *plate* 6): by embedding the octopus as a representation within the representation, these vases explicitly raised the issue of image-making and thus invited a threefold comparison between the illusionistic strategies of vase painter, shield-maker and octopus alike. The coinciding of these ways of thinking about octopuses and artworks might have extended back beyond surviving poetry—perhaps to lost oral traditions in the Bronze Age, which would have rendered even those 'octopus vases' (see *plate* 7) self-referential in nature. The conceptual tie between octopuses and artworks that was loosely drawn in early Greek poetry was pulled tight in the fourth century BCE. Whereas previous poets had mentioned the optical illusions of octopuses and artworks in passing to serve various literary purposes, in the fourth century BCE these illusions were made the stand-alone objects of specialist, intellectual inquiry in the disciplines of biology and philosophy. This cultural historical context, I suggest, gives fish plates special claims to self-referentiality over earlier vase paintings of octopuses.

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The octopus' skill in camouflage was co-opted early on in archaic and early classical poetry as a metaphor for describing how humans might blend in with the social, cultural and political orthodoxy by suppressing their authentic selves and copying those around them instead.[24] So, the epic poet of the (probably) seventh-century BCE *Thebaid* had the hero Amphiaraus advise his son to 'hold onto the octopus' outlook' when consorting with different peoples abroad and to 'go along with their colour'.[25] Theognis, a sixth-century BCE lyric poet, similarly urged himself in his dealings with his friends to 'turn a character that shifts its colour (*poikilon ēthos*)' and 'adopt the nature of the devious octopus (*poloupou…poluplokou*), which seems to appear just like (*toios idein ephanē*) the rock to which it clings'.[26] Sophocles, the fifth-century BCE tragedian, put a gendered twist on the proverb when he had a female character (Clytemnestra?) in his fragmentary play *Iphigeneia* advise wives in their dealings with their husbands to 'change the colour of [their] genuine thoughts like an octopus on a rock' and thus to avoid marital conflict.[27] Although the exhortatory context of these remarks suggests that the octopus was used primarily as a positive *exemplum* by which 'likeminded-ness' (or *homophrosunē*) could be achieved, other poets saw the polyp not as an emblem of pragmatic versatility but intolerable disingenuousness. Thus, Ion,



7 Minoan 'octopus vase' from Palaikastro, Crete, c. 1500 BCE. Ceramic, height 28 cm. Heraklion: Heraklion Archaeological Museum. Photo: Wikimedia Commons (Wolfgang Sauber).

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a tragedian contemporary with Sophocles, had another character decry: 'I hate the colour-changing octopus, clinging with his bloodless suckers to the rocks'.[28] Whether laudable or lamentable, the octopus' resemblance of rock was nevertheless proverbial by the fifth century BCE for describing how individuals might imperceptibly blend in with the *status quo*.

With the inception of biology by Aristotle in the fourth century BCE,[29] as well as the flourishing of colour theory in this period,[30] the octopus' colour-changing ability (or *metachrōsis*, as it was technically termed) became a central object of scientific analysis. Aristotle briefly offered commentary on it in his *History of Animals*, where he noted: 'the octopus hunts fishes by changing its colour and making it just like (*poiōn homoion*) whatever stones it is next to. It does the same thing also when frightened'.[31] It was Aristotle's successor in the Peripatos, Theophrastus, however, who properly theorised *how* the octopus' *metachrōsis* worked in a specialist treatise entitled *On Animals that Change Colour*, which also dealt with the camouflage of the chameleon and the *tarandos* (an ox-like creature that could apparently change the colour of its fur to match different surroundings).[32] In this treatise—which survives in just a few paraphrased quotations—Theophrastus appears to have explained the octopus' ability to 'make itself like' (*sunexomoiousthai*) rocks on account of changes in its 'vital spirit' (or *pneuma*).[33] Regrettably, little more can be said about this lost treatise, but its very existence suggests that the octopus' lithic 'likeness' (or *homoiotēs*) was of significant scientific concern at precisely the time that our fish plates flourished. The interest the Peripatetics showed in the octopus' camouflage filtered down into paradoxographical collections (i.e., anthologies of marvels), which emerged in the third century BCE. These popular collections regularly reference the octopus' skill in camouflage



8 Red-figure fish plate from Paestum, c. 350 BCE. Ceramic, diameter 22.2 cm. Houston: Museum of Fine Arts (inv. TR:76–2013). Photo: Museum of Fine Arts/Thomas R. DuBrock.

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(alongside that of the chameleon and *tarandos*) in terms that suggest familiarity with Peripatetic biology, but which eschew its more detailed explanations to allow the polyp to appear as a paradox.[34]

The verisimilitude of the visual arts followed a similar trajectory between the seventh and fourth centuries BCE as it was transformed from poetic trope into philosophical topic. Early poets occasionally appraised the lifelikeness of the visual arts: so, the eighth- or seventh-century BCE poet Hesiod admired a metallic headband made by Hephaistus for depicting animals that were 'like (*eiokota*) living beings with voices',[35] while the fifth-century BCE tragedian Aeschylus had some satyrs remark that their painted masks were so lifelike that their mothers would mistake them for the faces of their real children ('That's how like (*empherēs*) me it is!').[36] In the fourth century BCE, philosophers began to theorise this vaunted verisimilitude. In a famous passage from Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (a collection of dialogues involving Socrates completed c. 370–350 BCE), the philosopher discusses with the sculptor Cleiton how he bestows on his athletic statues 'the appearance of life' (*to zōtikon phainesthai*).[37] Socrates suggests it is not only by accurately 'making an image' (*apeikazōn*) of the body's various features in relation to the overall pose so that they appear 'more like (*homoiotera*) real parts and more persuasive (*pithanōtera*)', but also by 'imitation' (*apomimeisthai*) of the athletes' feelings, which express themselves through the face and especially the eyes. By perfectly capturing both the athlete's outer appearance and inner psyche, Socrates argues that the sculptor best approximates a real-life, embodied and ensouled individual.

As well as theorising *how* art achieved its verisimilitude, fourth-century BCE philosophers also offered *definitions* of art predicated on its resemblance to reality. So, Xenophon's Socrates—in a preceding dialogue with the painter Parrhasius—initially defines painting as 'a representation of things seen (*eikasia tōn horōmenōn*)'.[38] In Plato's philosophical dialogues, dating to the first half of the fourth century BCE, painting is repeatedly defined in terms of its 'likeness' (*homoiotēs*) to truth.[39] In his *Sophist*, for example—a dialogue that delineates the nature of sophistry through analogy to painting—Theaetetus defines an image (or *eidōlon*) as 'an object that is distinct from, but nevertheless fashioned in the likeness of (*aphōmoiōmenon*), a true object'.[40] Painters are thus concerned, Theaetetus argues, not with reality, but with 'the product of certain likenesses (*homoiōmatōn*)'—and so, the argument ultimately goes, are sophists, who persuade with their specious arguments.[41] For this reason, Plato elsewhere assimilates the sophist to the marine god Proteus—the octopus' double—who deceives with his shape-shifting illusions.[42] In Book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato works this definition of painting into a full-blown metaphysical theory of pictorial *mimēsis*. Here, Plato's Socrates argues that painting is concerned with *homoiotēs* on two counts: not only are paintings 'likenesses' of visible objects, but these objects are themselves 'likenesses' of the invisible Forms, Plato's ultimate category of reality.[43] If appraisals of verisimilitude in archaic and early classical Greek poetry show that Jean-Pierre Vernant went too far in claiming that artworks were not seen as 'likenesses' of reality until the fourth century BCE—having only been seen as 'substitutes' for their referents before that—it remains true that this century oversaw verisimilitude's intellectualisation and transformation into a defining criterion of what art was.[44]

Alongside such abstract theorising, a rhetoric of verisimilitude burgeoned around contemporary painting. This can be evidenced from early ekphrastic epigrams, like those of Erinna,[45] and from anecdotes about fourth-century BCE masters now preserved in Roman collections. Among the latter, we might class stories about the painter Androcydes of Cyzicus, who was apparently such a glutton for seafood that

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in his painting of Scylla—an octopus-like sea-monster with dog-headed appendages below the waist—he depicted the surrounding fish 'with most enthusiasm and lifelikeness' (*empathestata kai zōtikōtata*).[46] This popular anecdote—which humorously made Androcydes' triumph in verisimilitude a symptom of personal vice—suggests that fourth-century BCE viewers were especially primed to see paintings of fish in terms of lifelikeness. This is perhaps particularly true of fish plates, which, if used to serve morsels of seafood, expressly invited viewers to consider the match between the marine creatures and their mimetic doubles lurking beneath the meal.

Fish plates emerge out of, and themselves inform, the complex intellectual milieu that this section has been tracing for the fourth century BCE. They provide the coordinate at which these two flourishing discourses of verisimilitude—one concerned with the polyp, the other with painting—converge. By privileging the octopus in their compositions—that is, by foregrounding a 'likeness' of nature's best creator of 'likenesses'—these plates thus invited their viewers to see each discourse in light of the other. How octopodal are painting's illusions, and how painterly is the octopus' camouflage? How natural is the painter's *mimēsis*, how cultured the polyp's mimicry? As the next section outlines, these are especially pertinent questions to ask of red-figure painting, given that this medium uniquely manifests its 'likenesses' by eliding ground and figure, not unlike the crafty octopus who similarly relies on a slippage between body and background to create his rocky resemblances.

Bodies and Backgrounds

It is not just cultural historical reasons that make fish plates' handling of the octopus especially self-reflexive, but medium specific ones too. Unlike in black-figure vase painting—or indeed in panel or wall painting, for that matter—in red-figure vase painting, body and background uniquely coincide. Each figure acts as an open window onto the clay surface of the plate. The octopus, as we have seen, was renowned in classical Greek thought for likewise being able to make its body appear as its background. Seen from this perspective, red-figure octopuses do precisely what octopuses do best in nature: they assimilate themselves to the background on which they rest. Unlike black-figure octopuses (see *plate 6* and *plate 7*), there is a sense in which a red-figure octopus is depicted in the very act of camouflage (*plate 9*). Indeed, a red-figure octopus goes beyond what an octopus could actually achieve in nature. In nature, the octopus' body and marine background do not literally coincide. It is the octopus' sleight of hand that creates the illusion of transparency. A red-figure painting of an octopus, however, literally has the octopus become transparent, so that its red-figure body becomes identical with the red ground of the plate.

Seeing the octopus as camouflaged against the terracotta ground, however, is only half the story. In the first place, to do so is to ignore all the *other* red-figure fish on these plates, who cannot be claimed to have the same skill in camouflage and yet also appear as transparent windows onto the clay surface of the plate. Moreover, such an interpretation overlooks the importance of the black slip which outlines the octopus' body—and the bodies of all the other fish—for the diners to see, as well as the additional white paint, which is used to articulate the octopus' suckers and eyes. If the octopus is depicted in camouflage, then the black slip and the white paint ensure that it fails to make a success of it! Red-figure painting, of course, manifests its images precisely by inverting traditional figure-ground relationships, so that the true ground (the terracotta surface) is made to appear as the figure, and the paint superimposed on the clay (the black slip) is made to appear as the background. Fish plates play into this inversion, given that the black slip makes better sense as the marine background than

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9 Attributed to the Asteas-Python workshop, red-figure fish plate from Paestum, c. 340–330 BCE. Ceramic, diameter 27.8 cm. New Jersey: Princeton University Art Museum (inv. y1979–3). Photo: Princeton University Art Museum.

the red clay insofar as it is closer in colour to that of the 'wine-dark' Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, given that the octopus was known in fourth-century BCE zoology to eject ink when frightened, the black slip makes even better sense as seawater that has been made especially opaque by the octopus' ejaculate.[47] By having the painter's slip evoke the polyp's secretions, these plates thus bolster their figure-ground reversals and further invite the viewer to see red creatures swimming in inky waters.[48]

The octopus—at once camouflaged in red and exposed against black—thus probes the ambivalent relationship between figure and ground at stake in the medium. Does the plate represent an octopus that has successfully imitated the clay surface of the plate, or one that has conspicuously failed to imitate the black slip? That depends, of course, on the way we view the plate, on whether we attend to its true, clay mediality or whether we immerse ourselves in the fictional, 'wine-dark' seascape instead. For aesthetician Richard Wollheim, the simultaneity of these two modes of viewing—one which attends to the material properties of the representing medium, the other which absorbs itself in the represented world—defines the very 'twofold' experience of seeing pictures.[49] Wollheim termed this dual way of viewing as 'seeing-in' (seeing the object *in* the image) to distinguish it from the singular, unreflective experience of 'seeing-as' (seeing the object *as* the image), which only happens in the case of *trompe l'oeil*. According to Wollheim's hypothesis, the viewer of any red-figure pot or plate—at least the one that 'sees-in'—should hold both frames of reference simultaneously: they should see the figures as open windows onto the clay surface of the vessel, while at the same time seeing the red figures as

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superimposed onto the black slip. The octopus—at once see-through and stand-out—therefore gets to the heart of the twofoldedness of the medium in which terracotta and black slip compete for the status of ground without resolution.

This unresolved twofoldedness finds further expression in the wave-scroll that frames the embedded sauce pot of most of these fish plates.[50] The patterning here leaves it open-ended whether red or black is to be taken as the ground. In the Princeton plate (see *plate 9*), for example, it remains ambiguous if the viewer is looking at red waves cresting inwards on a black background or black waves cresting outwards on a red background.[51] The former scenario would be in keeping with the red-figure technique used for the articulation of the fish in the centre; but the latter scenario would be in keeping with the black-figure technique used of the external frame, which depicts little daubs of black paint on a red background. As with the octopus, the viewer is made to self-consciously entertain both perspectives, to see both the black slip and the terracotta surface as the ground at once.

One fish plate goes even further in its interrogation of the ambivalent relation between figure and ground by having the octopus break into the frame of this sauce pot. In a recently auctioned example (*plate 10*), the octopus is depicted in the 'contracted' pose, clinging to the ring with looped tentacles that evoke the meandering pattern of the border. While one tentacle is blocked by the frame, another breaks over it, creating the appearance that the octopus is straddling the frame and crawling out the plate towards the handler.[52] Given that the octopus was renowned in antiquity for mischievously trespassing onto human habitats to steal their food—there are stories of them crawling onto land to plunder coastal orchards and fishponds and even climbing up sewers into peoples' storage rooms—the plate toys with the threat that this boundary-breaking octopus is coming for the diner's supper.[53] Crucially, the octopus' errant tentacle appears transparent so that the frame's wave-scroll pattern continues uninterrupted across it. There is a playful suggestion, then, that the octopus has perfectly mimicked the border with this creeping tentacle. In making this suggestion, the plate provokes meditation on the octopus' ability to elide itself with its background, and thus invites the viewer to reconsider the rest of the octopus' body as camouflaged against the terracotta ground of the plate. There is a sense that this cunning octopus is particularising its act of camouflage, conforming different parts of its body to different backgrounds, as it stealthily steps over the threshold of the frame. At the same time, however, the painter has clearly taken pains to establish the black slip as the background and the terracotta as the figure, in part through the dozens of white suckers that outline the octopus' tentacles, including the stray frame-breaker. As with the wave-scroll pattern itself—which leaves it ambiguous whether these are black waves painted on a red background or red waves superimposed on a black background—it is the combination of both perspectives that matter here. The viewer is made to do Wollheim's double-vision: to view the octopus as camouflaged against clay and exposed in dark waters.

Hooked on Painting?

If these plates draw an analogy between the 'likeness'-making craft of the octopus and the vase (or rather plate) painter, not least because both create 'likenesses' of natural phenomena through (actually or apparently) eliding figure and ground, they also invited viewers to consider their differences. Some of these differences are obvious enough. First, the octopus makes its own body into a 'likeness', whereas the vase painter makes a 'likeness' out of an external medium. Second, the octopus' 'likenesses' are ephemeral, whereas the vase painter's 'likenesses' endure (until

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someone drops the plate…). Third, the octopus makes 'likenesses' to avoid being seen, whereas the vase painter paints 'likenesses' to be consumed by the gaze of the diners. Fourth, as noted by Aristotle, the octopus uses its 'likeness'-making skill both to evade predators and itself hunt prey. But what about the vase painter? Is his craft similarly predatory?

Such a question begs pause for thought. It gets to the heart of a fiery fifth- and fourth-century BCE philosophical debate between the philosophers Gorgias and Plato regarding the ethics of pictorial (and indeed poetic) representation.[54] According to Plato's *Republic*, at least, painterly 'likenesses'—twice removed from the truth, as we have seen—are similarly harmful, taking viewers in and then corrupting them epistemologically and morally. It is for this reason he wants to ban painting entirely from his Ideal City.[55] Interestingly, Plato likewise advocates the outlawing of fishing in another dialogue, the *Laws*, for being a sport reliant on deceptive ruses that corrupt the souls of its practitioners.[56] From this Platonic perspective, the vase painter, who has decorated the plate, and the fisherman, who has provided the meal, might both be charged with being as *poluplokos*—cunning, deceptive, devious even, to use Theognis' term—as the octopus. Such a conclusion, of course, threatens to make the diners the butt of the joke, assimilating them not with the cunning octopus on the plate but with the crowd of unsuspecting fishes that constitute its prey and not with the fisherman but with the catch of the day they are currently consuming!

That the octopus might have prompted Greek viewers to reflect humorously on these questions of pictorial aesthetics and ethics need not surprise us when we



10 Red-figure fish plate from Paestum, *c.* 350 BCE. Ceramic, diameter 30 cm. Sold by Phoenix Ancient Art, New York, in 2006. Photo: After McPhee and Trendall, *Greek Red-Figured Fish-Plates*, plate 34a.

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remember that the *deipnon*, where such plates surely played a role, and the *symposion* that followed it, were privileged venues for informal philosophical discussion. Indeed, fourth-century BCE comedy regularly parodies the philosophical nature of Greek dining through the character of the philosopher-chef. Take the philosopher-chef of Damoxenus' comedy *The Foster Brothers* who absurdly claims that a worthy chef must know his Democritus and Epicurus before knowing how to prepare fish properly![57] It is no great stretch, then, to imagine fourth-century BCE diners playfully using these plates and their self-conscious exploitation of the octopus to discuss the predation of painting, a topic which preoccupied the aestheticians of the day.

Charting the Fish Mosaic

The other category of object that I shall argue makes especially self-reflexive use of the octopus is the fish mosaic, which likewise deserves some introduction and contextualisation. From the second century BCE on, those living under Roman hegemony began to decorate their civic buildings and private homes with mosaics depicting a medley of sea creatures using the so-called *opus vermiculatum* ('wormy work') technique.[58] This technique, which hailed from the Hellenistic east, allowed mosaicists to achieve a remarkable degree of naturalism by laying minute tesserae in thin, curving, worm-like lines that emphasised the roundedness of the forms. Two of the best-known examples of these fish mosaics are *emblēmata*—that is, panels that were prepared separately and then inserted into a larger floor mosaic—found in Pompeian dining rooms (or *triclinia*), one found in the House of the Faun (*plate 11*) and the other in the House of Geometric Mosaics (see *plate 4*), with both plausibly dating to the early first century BCE.[59] These mosaics' placement in *triclinia* demonstrates that Roman Republican culture inherited classical Greece's interest in the gastronomy of fish, as does the fact that mid-Republican poet Ennius translated Archestratus' *The Life of Luxury* into Latin a little before the date of these mosaics.[60] These two examples will form this section's focus.

These Pompeian mosaics privilege the octopus by putting it squarely in the centre of their compositions. As in the fish plates, whereas the rest of the fish are depicted side-on, the octopus (and its cephalopod cousin, the squid, in the House of Geometric Mosaics) is anomalously depicted face-first, thus evoking once more the anguine head of the gorgon, which likewise occupied the centre of many Roman mosaics (*plate 12*). In making this iconographic allusion, these mosaics again draw a parallel between the gorgon's ability to transform flesh into stone and the octopus' ability to *appear* to do so. Further still, whereas most fish are depicted in isolation from each other, thus allowing the easy identification of species, these mosaics depict the octopus engaged in dramatic combat (in this regard, most unlike fish plates, where the octopus never interacts with its neighbours). In each mosaic, the mushroom-headed octopus is shown grappling dramatically with a crayfish. It loops its tentacles around the crayfish's tail and antennae, while spraying others around its head as if ready to lash them down on the poor crustacean. While the rest of the fish remain oblivious to the octopus' strangulation of the crayfish, in both examples an eel slithers towards the creature.[61] In the House of the Faun—which is damaged at precisely this point—a baguette-shaped eel can just be made out darting at one of the octopus' tentacles from the top left; in the House of Geometric Mosaics, an undulating eel instead approaches from the bottom right. Later examples make clear the eel's intention here: in a mosaic from Aquileia, the eel viciously chomps down on the tentacle of the octopus, now helplessly tipped upside down as it grapples with the crayfish's tail (*plate 13*). In having the eel (about to) gnaw the octopus' tentacle, these

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11 Fish mosaic from the House of the Faun at Pompeii (VI, 12), early first century BCE. Mosaic, 117.5 × 117.5 cm. Naples: Naples Archaeological Museum (inv. 9997). Photo: Azoor Photo/ Alamy.

emblēmata self-consciously held a mirror up to the Pompeian diners, as they nibbled on titbits of fish around the mosaic.

The innate antagonism between the octopus, crayfish and eel was a popular motif from ancient zoology, first recorded by Aristotle and subsequently commented upon by numerous Hellenistic and Roman writers.[62] In his *History of Animals*, Aristotle outlined the standard terms of their ouroboric battle: the octopus consumes the crayfish; the crayfish impales the eel on its spiky body; and the eel devours the octopus by slipping through its tentacles. Each conquers and is in turn conquered, in what Aristotle terms a 'tragic reversal' (or *peripeteia*) of fortune.[63] By privileging this Aristotelian triad in their centres, these fish mosaics clearly offered scientific, as well as gastronomic, interest to Roman viewers. The (incipient) nibbling of the eel on the octopus' tentacle further allowed these mosaics to intervene in a specific zoological debate about whether the autophagic octopus gnawed off its own tentacle in winter, or if this was a misconception generated by the eel's amputation of the polyp (as Aristotle himself asserted).[64] Given that the diversity and complexity of sea life—including its self-regulating cycles of consumption—were used in antiquity to advance arguments for providential design, including by Cicero, the first-century BCE Roman statesman and philosopher, there is also a theological register that is worth underscoring.[65]

Whereas fish plates eschew any attempt to depict the topography of the seabed, the Pompeian mosaics frame their fishy catalogue with rocky outcrops that locate the viewer off the coast: note the rocky pile to the left of the mosaics on which a

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12 Mosaic depicting gorgoneion, with town and port scenes, from the House of the Centenary at Pompeii (IX, 8, 3–6), late first century BCE. Mosaic, 120 × 89 cm. Naples: Naples Archaeological Museum (inv. 112284). Photo: Azoor Photo/ Alamy.

kingfisher sits, and the rocky headlands that jut into the sea in the bottom right. Whereas the House of Geometric Mosaics floods the space around the fish with plain black tesserae (rather like the black slip of fish plates, thus once more evoking the octopus' ink), the House of the Faun follows through on the suggestion of the rocky outcrops by depicting an elaborate seascape, where pale blue sky and teal sea are divided by a horizontal line. This means that all the fish that are depicted above the horizon—including the octopus, crayfish and eel—appear absurdly to float in the sky in contrast to the fish depicted below the horizon, who appear more properly in their natural habitat. In projecting its catalogue of underwater creatures onto both sea and sky, the House of the Faun example provokes questions about the fit between bodies and backgrounds; questions which its central figure, the octopus, is already wont to provoke.

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Despite these subtle differences between the two mosaics, the similarity in the composition of the central triad, which is mirrored in later mosaics and paintings, suggests a common origin beyond that of South Italian fish plates, most likely a Hellenistic masterpiece from the east, perhaps from Alexandria or Pergamon.[66] Not only are naturalistic representations of fish well attested in Hellenistic archaeology,[67] but other artworks in these properties also appear to have ostensible Hellenistic origins. The House of the Faun, for example, also contains the famous 'Alexander Mosaic', depicting Alexander the Great defeating the Persian king Darius III, which is almost certainly a copy of an early Hellenistic painting commissioned by Alexander's successors in the power struggles that followed his death.[68] Moreover, the octopus-crayfish-eel motif would have appealed especially to Hellenistic audiences, given that it was a popular, zoological trope first recorded by Aristotle, whose biological works were being mined by Alexandrian and Pergamene scholars in the third and second centuries BCE.[69] If these fish mosaics were copies of a Hellenistic masterpiece, as seems more than likely, then the octopus—nature's best copyist—gets to the core of their derivative status. Indeed, the octopus might be said to offer broader commentary on the secondary status of these villas' decorative programmes, filled as they were with



13 Fish mosaic from the House of Licurgus and Ambrosia, Aquileia, c. 50–100 CE. Mosaic, 123 × 123 cm. Aquileia: National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia. Photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/ Art Resource, NY.

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reproductions of Greek paintings and statues, such as the dancing faun from which the House of the Faun takes its name.

The Success and Failure of Visual Illusion

The octopus not only reflects these mosaics' derivative status as copies of a Hellenistic archetype, but more fundamentally reflects their imitative status as representational artworks *tout court*. In the Hellenistic and Roman eras, there was an expansion in the terminology used to describe the octopus' camouflage: we find not only the language of 'likeness' (*homoiotēs, eikōn, similitudo*) being applied to the polyp, but now also the language of 'imitation' (*mimēsis, imitatio*), 'deception' (*apatē, fraus*), 'trickery' (*sophisma*) and 'guile' (*dolos, dolus*).[70] Given that these discourses also served as aesthetic terms for defining the ontology of visual representation (and the ethics of the artist) in these periods, there was a bolstering of the conceptual analogy between octopus and artist.[71] While no surviving Hellenistic or Roman text explicitly articulates this octopus-artist analogy, Pliny gestures towards it when he uses the rhetoric of *similitudo* to describe both the camouflage of the octopus and the lifelikeness of statues and paintings in his maddeningly intra-textual *Natural History* (first century CE).[72] Other texts show that the octopus' camouflage was readily deployed in comparison to other forms of manmade illusionism in Roman criticism. The first-century BCE Roman philosopher Philodemus, for example—building on Plato's sophist-Proteus comparison—appears to have compared the octopus to the orator, presumably because of the 'speciousness' of his arguments.[73] The second-century CE imperial Greek satirist Lucian instead compared the illusions of the polyp with the pantomime dancer, who imitated different mythological heroes through the voiceless medium of his body.[74] Such surviving examples strongly suggest that the Romans were well attuned to interpreting the octopus' *metachrōsis* in terms of manmade *mimēsis*. This cultural context, I suggest, primed Roman viewers to see the metapictorial stakes of these fish mosaics much quicker than classical art historians have tended to.

The centring of the octopus-crayfish-eel triad especially focused viewers' attention in this metapictorial direction. The octopus' mimicry of rock played a central part in its battle with the crayfish and eel as it got told in antiquity. While Aristotle's *History of Animals* does not directly link its discussion of this triangulated battle with its later commentary on the octopus' craft of camouflage, it did not take a great deal of imagination for later authors to join the dots. The imperial Greek poet Oppian, for example, in his didactic-cum-epic poem about fishing, the *Halieutica* (written c. 176–180 CE, about 100 years after Pompeii's burial), introduces his account of the three-way battle with explicit commentary on the octopus' skill in mimicry:[75]

> No-one, I think, is ignorant of the craft (*technē*) of octopuses, which make themselves like (*homoiïoi*) in appearance to rocks—whatever rock they happen to embrace and entwine with their tentacles. By their deceits (*apatai*) they easily mislead and escape fishermen and stronger fishes alike. But when a weaker fish meets them near at hand, straightaway they leap forth from their stony form and reveal themselves to be octopuses and fish, and by this guile (*dolos*) they contrive food and escape destruction. (*Hal.* 2.232–240).[76]

Oppian begins by noting that the mimicry of octopuses was common knowledge in the Roman world and not just part of a specialist discourse. He then subverts the traditional language of *ekphrasis* to describe the octopus as a sort of reverse sculptor

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who uses his 'craft' (*technē*) to transform not stone into flesh, but flesh into stone. Like Pygmalion's statue, however, Oppian's octopus comes to break free from its 'stony form', become animate and terrify the unsuspecting fishes swimming past. Oppian's use of the language of 'likeness' (*homoiotēs*) and 'deception' (*apatē*) here—which functioned as privileged words for describing the visual illusions of art from Plato onwards—especially strengthen the implicit analogy being set up between octopus and craftsman.[77]

Despite Oppian's initial vaunting of the octopus' skill in mimicry, his narration of the octopus-crayfish-eel battle immediately reveals its inadequacy. The eel, Oppian tells us, sees through the octopus' disguise at once:

> Nor does the octopus' cunning intelligence (*mētis*) in stony wisdom save him. For even if, in his endeavours to escape, he twines himself about a rock and dresses himself in a colour that is perfectly like it (*paneikelon*), yet he escapes not the wit of the eel. She alone sees him and his plan (*noēma*) is rendered unsuccessful. (*Hal.* 2.296–300).[78]

The language of 'cunning intelligence' (*mētis*)—a word associated from early on with the esoteric knowledge of divine and mythological craftspeople like Athena, Hephaistus, Prometheus and Daedalus—and the familiar language of 'likeness' (*paneikelon*) configure the octopus once more as a reverse sculptor attempting to simulate stone out of flesh [79] Despite the octopus' skilful simulations, however, the eel sees him for what he is. That the eel's unmasking of the octopus' illusions was an established feature of this zoological trope is further suggested by the fact that the second-to-third-century CE Greek paradoxographer Aelian similarly mentions it: 'even though the octopus changes its colour to that of the rocks, even this clever trick (*sophisma*) seems to avail it nothing, for the eel is quick to perceive the creature's scheme (*palamēma*)'.[80] Against the crayfish, however, Oppian's crafty octopus fares better. He hides close by, lurking beneath a rock in disguise, and rushes upon the unsuspecting crayfish like a criminal hiding in a dark alley and striking a drunk diner as he stumbles home.[81] This time the octopus' 'plans' (*noēmata*) prevail.[82]

Crucially, then, ancient zoology has the octopus-crayfish-eel battle stage the success and the failure of *mimēsis*: the octopus' mimicry tricks the crayfish but fails to dupe the eel. Although no surviving source earlier than Oppian explicitly links the octopus' mimicry to its battle with these creatures, it is likely that this linkage went back to the Hellenistic period, when Aristotle's works were being carefully read, dissected and reassembled, not least in Aristophanes of Byzantium's (now lost) third epitome of Aristotle's zoological works dedicated to fish.[83]

Indeed, the popularity of the octopus-crayfish-eel motif in late Republican Italy might itself suggest that the octopus' mimicry was an established part of its antagonism with the crayfish and eel. It is this feature that bestows on these mosaics their sophisticated self-reflexivity, which doubtless contributed to their appeal. On the one hand, by depicting the octopus strangling the crayfish, the mosaics picture the fatal result of the octopus' successful deception. By having the crayfish stare dumbly at the rocky outcrop to the left, these mosaics further allow us to see what the octopus looked like as focalised through the crayfish. On the other hand, by depicting the eel darting at the octopus, they suggest that the octopus' visual tricks have not worked against this more perceptive creature. In this regard, since the mosaics manifest the octopus clearly in the centre of their compositions, they force an alignment between the Roman diner's perspective and that of eel, who likewise sees the octopus plainly before it.

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By picturing this ouroboric triad—rather than the octopus engaged in a more simplistic duel with one or other of these creatures (as in some later mosaics and paintings)—these mosaics therefore picture *both* the success *and* the failure of the octopus' optical illusions.[84] Exploiting the analogy between the verisimilitude of the octopus and the visual arts, these *emblēmata* thus provoked viewers to reflect on the effects of their own pictorial illusions, which aimed at the very inverse of the octopus' simulations, namely the masking of stone as flesh, rather than flesh as stone. Did the mosaic manage to persuade the Roman diner that its images were real, as the octopus did the crayfish, or did it fail to cloak fully its artifice, as the octopus did in the case of the eel? To use Wollheim's terms, was the viewer of the mosaic made to 'see-as', like the crayfish, or 'see-in', like the eel?

On the one hand, there is clearly some attempt by these mosaics to deceive the viewer. This is gleaned not only by the naturalistic style in which the fish are represented (note, for instance, the subtle gradations in colouring that give the appearance of shimmering scales), but also by these mosaics' placement as *emblēmata* in the centre of floors, as if they were real indoor fishponds (or *piscinae*), which are well attested in the textual and archaeological record.[85] The House of Geometric Mosaics example was even embedded in a shallow, marble-lined basin filled with water, further enhancing the sense of *trompe l'oeil*.[86]

On the other hand, many features work against the viewer's deception. We have already noted the artificiality of these mosaics' compositions in which every fish is presented from side-on or face-first rather than from a more realistic bird's-eye-view perspective. We might also note the unrealistic scale of the representation in which most of the creatures are shown smaller than in nature. The House of the Faun not only has an unrealistic background, which has some of the fish float free in the sky, as we noted earlier, but it also has a traditional acanthus frame, which borders off the representational field from the rest of the dining room. Although the House of Geometric Mosaics has a more realistically plain background and lacks such external framing, it internally frames its fish with rocky outcrops and a kingfisher, just like the House of the Faun, which make no sense at all if we are to believe this is an indoor *piscina*. Interestingly, the border of the House of the Faun example also contains birds nestled among its acanthus leaves, including two parrots, the better preserved of which is perched on a basin (*plate 14*).[87] Like the octopus, the parrot—or 'the imitative bird', as Ovid calls it—was renowned for its mimicry, verbal rather than visual, thus once again returning us to the theme of illusion.[88] Indeed, by drawing attention to the theme of *mimēsis* through the octopus (and the parrots in this particular case), these mosaics encourage viewers to muse self-consciously on the mosaic's own imitative strategies in ways that further ward against complete deception by the image. On balance, then, viewers are almost certainly going to identify with the privileged, twofold viewing position of the eel, who sees both the represented object and the representing subject, and therefore 'sees-in'.

Even if it seems implausible that these artworks functioned as *trompe l'oeils* in practice, there was nevertheless a prevalent discourse in Hellenistic and Roman times that fantasised about the successful deceptions of mosaics.[89] Roman authors were obsessed with the Hellenistic mosaicist Sosus of Pergamon and his famous 'unswept room' mosaic, which represented the scraps of a banquet on the floor, including fish bones and heads, 'as if actually left there' (*velut relicta*) as Pliny puts it.[90] Surviving Roman copies of this mosaic suggest Sosus depicted the scraps in a realistic scale (unlike our fish mosaics) and as illuminated from a single light source (*plate 15*). Playing on this trope, the Flavian poet Statius would refer to himself as treading with

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14 Detail of fish mosaic from the House of the Faun at Pompeii (VI, 12).

fear over the 'strange shapes' (*novis…figuris*) depicted on the mosaic floors of his friend's villa, which apparently outdid the illusions of even Sosus' 'unswept room'.[91] All this to say, even if these fish mosaics did not in reality deceive viewers, there was nevertheless an active discourse in Roman thought that was open to the possibility—and that perhaps encouraged the sophistic *performance* of such a response if the Statius passage is anything to go by.[92] Such a masquerade of gullibility would paradoxically align the viewer both with the mistaken crayfish and the deceptive octopus.

Given that the octopus' deception is to blame for the crayfish's demise, these mosaics return us, once more, to questions about the ethics of pictorial *mimēsis*. Is the *apatē* of mosaic as dangerous as the deception of the octopus? Will it too risk corrupting its viewers? Or is the viewer safe, like the eel, so long as they retain a residual awareness of the artifice involved in the deception? Taking their cue from Plato, Roman aestheticians were greatly preoccupied with whether the illusions of art were a risk to society at large. The Jewish-Greek philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE-50 CE), for example, wrote in Platonic terms of painters and sculptors as 'collaborators in deception (*apatē*)' along with the poets, who together 'entice the two leading senses, sight and hearing' and 'seize the soul having made it unsteady and unsettled'.[93] A few centuries later, the rhetorician Philostratus the Younger, by contrast, would try to disarm the deceptions of painting from the ethical charges of thinkers like Philo. He argued that the illusions of painting were in fact harmless and 'a suitable and irreproachable means of providing entertainment'.[94] Like the Greek banquet and symposium, the Roman dinner party (or *cena*) was a hospitable venue for such philosophical debates. So, the first-century BCE Latin poet Horace describes himself and his companions settling down at a dinner party to discuss the ethical questions *du jour*.[95]

The fish mosaics, I suggest, stage a playful intervention in these debates about the ethics of *mimēsis* by prompting Roman diners to compare the potentially devastating effects of the octopus' imitative strategies with those of the mosaic itself. The mosaics thus use the octopus-crayfish-eel triad to advertise the frisson of risk posed by their own pictorial illusions—and, indeed, all the other aesthetic illusions that make up the *cena*'s representational games. In Petronius' famous send-up of the *cena* in the *Satyrica* (first century CE), for example, the guests are tricked not only by painterly illusions—to such an extent that one guest jumps back in fright at a wall painting of a dog—but also by various theatrical and gastronomic illusions, such as the mock quarrel between two slaves that ends in amphorae being smashed, only for oysters and scallops to tumble out for the diners' delight![96] Just how dangerous such dinner-time deceptions are is precisely the question these fish mosaics pose.

Distinguishing Reality from Representation

The octopus raises questions not just about the ethics, but also the epistemology of imitation. Another passage from Philo of Alexandria indicates that the octopus was used in ancient philosophy to advance sceptic arguments for the unknowability—

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or what was known, thanks to a haptic understanding of knowledge, as the 'ungraspability' (*akatalēpsia*)—of perceptual impressions (*phantasiai*).[97] 'Take, for instance, the chameleon and the octopus,' Philo wrote. 'The former, we are told, changes its colour and makes itself similar to (*homoiousthai*) the grounds upon which it is its custom to crawl; the latter, meanwhile, makes itself similar to those rocks under the sea, whichever ones it grasps (*peridraxētai*)'.[98] Philo elliptically adduces these examples, alongside the camouflage of the *tarandos*, without further explanation as 'clear proofs for ungraspability' (*pisteis enargeis akatalēpsias*)—note the punning transformation of the grasping octopus into an argument for epistemic 'ungraspability'—in a way that suggests the sceptic argument was well known.[99]

The argument must have gone as follows: if a viewer has been tricked before into thinking a chameleon is a branch, let us say, or an octopus is a rock, then that viewer can never be certain that a branch is a branch or a rock is a rock rather than a chameleon or octopus in disguise. Knowing for sure that a branch is a branch or a rock is a rock therefore remains an 'ungraspable' proposition. Philo embeds this argument in his (somewhat idiosyncratic) recounting of the 'sceptic modes' associated with the first-century BCE Pyrrhonist sceptic Aenesidemus, although the technical language of *akatalēpsia* indicates that the paradigm went back further to the New Academic sceptics of the third and second centuries BCE and their takedown of the Stoic doctrine of perceptual 'graspability' (*katalēpsis*), which would make sense given the popularity of discussing animal camouflage in Hellenistic science and paradoxography.[100]

Fish mosaics raise the issue of 'graspability' quite literally insofar as they depict the octopus securely gripping the crayfish but unable to grasp the eel (whose slipperiness proves its saviour according to the Aristotelian trope).[101] Given that the octopus was embedded in sceptic arguments for the *akatalēpsia* of perceptual impressions, these pictures of fraught grasping self-consciously called into doubt the viewer's own 'apprehension' of what they were seeing. First, since the octopus was used by sceptic philosophers to question the reliability of securely recognising rocks, can the viewer be certain that what was earlier identified as rocky outcrops within



15 Detail of an 'unswept room' mosaic after Sosus of Pergamon, signed by a Heraklitos, found on the eastern side of the Aventine Hill in Rome, second century CE. Mosaic, width of frieze c. 70 cm. Rome: Vatican Museums (inv. 10132). Photo: Wikimedia Commons (Yann Forget).

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the pictures are actually that, and not octopuses in disguise? Can he or she be sure that they are not being deceived like the crayfish?

Second, given that mosaic is a medium that is itself made up from fragments of rock, can viewers know for sure that there is not a disguised octopus lurking somewhere in these mosaics, ready to emerge from the tesserae at any moment? Such a thrilling possibility gained plausibility from the octopus' reputation in antiquity, as I previously mentioned, for mischievously crawling out the sea into fishponds and people's homes.[102] It is an especially live question for the House of Geometric Mosaics example which was submerged under water in a basin that could feasibly have housed an octopus. By imitating *in rock* nature's best imitator *of rock*, these mosaics thus problematised the relation between representing subject and represented object, figure and ground, and thus cast doubt on who is imitating who, pavement or polyp.

Adding to this particular epistemological conundrum is the fact that one line of ancient zoological thought had the octopus perform its imitation of rock through a mosaic-like process of arranging on its skin little fragments of stone. The first-century CE polymath Plutarch in one of his *Natural Questions* entitled 'by what means does the octopus change its colour?' preserves this atomic explanation of the octopus' *metachrōsis*.[103] Plutarch writes of the octopus contracting its pores and catching in its skin little particles of stone that are dislodged from nearby rocks being buffeted by the waves.[104] In this way, the octopus not only imitates the rock, but cloaks itself in its very materiality to do so. If first-century BCE viewers of these Pompeian fish mosaics were aware of this theory, then the self-reflexivity of the octopus is redoubled. The mosaics appear to self-consciously figure the octopus' body out of precisely the sorts of stony particles with which the octopus decks itself out in nature. The mosaics thus establish a parallel between their own atomising strategies of representation and that of the octopus, with one crucial difference: whereas in nature the octopus uses these bits of rock to disguise itself, here the mosaicist puts them to opposite effect, to display rather than conceal the octopus. The isomorphism between mosaic and octopus as representing media, however, only serves to increase the epistemological problem of telling the two apart: for if the octopus is a mosaicist *par excellence*, then how can we be sure this mosaic is not an octopus in disguise? Later, painted versions of the octopus-crayfish-eel triad (*plate 16*) miss out on the fun and thrill of this particular epistemological conundrum.

Given that the illusions of the octopus prompted ancient thinkers to consider the impossibility of telling reality apart from its convincing representation, then these mosaics—in one final twist—invited viewers to reflect on the epistemological dilemmas induced by their own pictorial simulations. After all, if a mosaic is naturalistic enough to trick a viewer into thinking its images were real—as Romans liked to imagine they could be—then how can a viewer ever be sure that the grounds they look upon in everyday life are true and not *trompe l'oeil*?[105] The sceptics' octopus, in other words, playfully transforms the discourse of *apatē* from an anodyne cliché of the rhetoric of mosaics into an aporetic, epistemological dilemma that would leave the diners distrusting their very foundations.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Graeco-Roman art was more subtle and sophisticated in its self-referentiality than classical art history has given it credit for. Classical artworks reflected on their representational strategies and effects not just explicitly by depicting the production and perception of artworks or mirror-images, but also implicitly by alluding to other forms of illusionism, not least the

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16 Wall fragment depicting octopus-crayfish-eel triad, from the Pietra Papa archaeological complex, Rome, second century CE. Fresco, 97 × 129 cm. Rome: Palazzo Massimo alle Terme (inv. 463253). Photo: Wikimedia Commons (Carole Raddato).

octopus' camouflage. This argument has gone some way, then, to recovering the complex self-reflexivity of the ancient 'still life', a genre traditionally disregarded as being beautiful but barren of meaning. Such a conclusion invites early modernists to reassess later 'still lives' too, especially seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings of fish, which regularly privilege polyps and may turn out to have more in common with those dizzyingly self-referential paintings of painting, like Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, than previously thought.

In essence, this article has taken classical art history up to speed with classical philology, a discipline that has been quicker to recognise the oblique metapoetics of much Greek and Latin literature. Latinists, for instance, have extensively explored the metapoetic role of the parrot—nature's consummate verbal imitator—in Ovid and Statius' famous parrot-poems (*Am.* 2.6; *Silv.* 2.4), alluded to earlier, where the creature provides indirect commentary on the nature of poetic *mimēsis*.[106] This article has made the parallel metapictorial claim for the octopus—nature's consummate visual imitator—in fish plates and mosaics. Yet, I also briefly suggested that the parrots in the border of the House of the Faun example served a metapictorial function, despite their domain being verbal rather than visual *mimēsis*. As scholars of *ekphrasis* have long acknowledged, self-referentiality can work across medial lines: if a visual representation embedded in a verbal representation can operate as a *mise-en-abyme*, who's to say the reverse cannot be true?[107] A metapictorial account of the parrot in Greek and Roman art remains to be written. It's not for nothing, surely, that the 'imitative bird' appears in some of antiquity's most self-consciously illusionistic artworks, such as the Boscoreale wall paintings in the Metropolitan Museum.[108]

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More than just showing that ancient artworks were as sophisticated in their self-referentiality as ancient texts, establishing the metapictoriality of these octopodal artworks allows us to recover more ecologically minded ways of theorising the relation between art and nature than might be expected of classical art history. Classical art history is not normally connected with ecological thinking: not only is it a visual tradition presumed to prioritise the human body over other living beings or landscapes and to value the dematerialised form of an artwork over the natural matter out of which it is made, it is one that repeatedly conceptualised artistic imitation as an encroachment on the domain of nature.[109] Such thinking undergirds all those anecdotes about classical masters emulating natural forms so persuasively that nature herself is duped, for example the tale of Zeuxis imitating some grapes so realistically that birds flew headfirst into the painting.[110] The rhetoric of the artist as nature's antagonist runs deep in the art historical and ekphrastic tradition: Apelles 'painted a nude hero and rivalled (*provocavit*) nature herself (*naturam ipsam*) with that picture', writes Pliny;[111] in a statue by Lysippus 'art (*technē*) vied with nature (*phusis*)' to such an extent that 'we stood speechless at the sight when we saw the bronze accomplishing the deeds of nature (*erga phuseōs*) and departing from its own proper province', as the imperial Greek sophist Callistratus wrote.[112] Little surprise—given the ancient conceptualisation of imitative art as an unnatural transgression on nature's territory—that the 'ecocritical' turn in art history has yet to take hold in the specialised field of classical art history.[113]

On the one hand, fish plates and mosaics might appear to conform to such agonistic thinking. The fish plates self-replenish the meal with pictures of seafood in a way that suggests art can supplant nature; the fish mosaics revel in rivalling real fishponds in their pictorial illusionism and architectural placement. On the other hand, however, these plates and mosaics' self-conscious paralleling of the mimicry of the octopus with the *mimēsis* of the artist suggests that artistic imitation is itself a natural practice—that when an artist imitates a natural object, he or she is merely imitating nature's own imitative inclinations. These plates and mosaics give, in other words, a *natural history* to naturalism. More than this, these artworks reveal artists to be using mimetic techniques that relate to nature's own methods of representation: the black-figure pot painter makes images by eliding the vase's figure and ground in a way that actualises the apparent elisions of octopodal camouflage; the mosaicist makes images by assembling tesserae in a way that emulates the octopus' arrangement of lithic particles on its skin (at least according to Plutarch). Seen in this light, artistic imitation is conceptualised less as an encroachment on—than a continuation of—nature. This way of thinking about the art of *mimēsis* as an extension or expression of nature's own imitative impulses is repeatedly interrogated by Pliny's *Natural History*—a central text for establishing an 'ecocritical' classical art history—especially in his descriptions of complex images spontaneously generated by the natural formations of stone.[114]

Notwithstanding the fact that these plates and mosaics operated in culinary contexts that celebrated man's dominion over sea-life, their self-conscious play with the octopus' illusionism nevertheless challenged the deep-held assumption that humans were cognitively and culturally superior from other species on account of their affinity with *mimēsis*. This assumption was first made by Aristotle, who—despite being attuned to the mimicry of the octopus in his biological works—nevertheless posited in the *Poetics* that mankind differs from other animals insofar as *mimēsis* is instilled in humans as 'a natural instinct' (*sumphuton*), thus making them 'the most mimetic' (*mimētikōtaton*) of all species.[115] It was developed by the Stoic Chrysippus

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(quoted by Cicero) who argued that, unlike other animals who were put on earth to serve man, humankind was uniquely put here 'to contemplate and imitate the world' (*ad mundum contemplandum et imitandum*).[116] These plates and mosaics, however, reveal other creatures to be as invested in imitating the world and suggest they might even be better at it: after all, the octopus imitates instantaneously and effortlessly, using only its body (perhaps with the aid of rocky particles), in a way that tricks even the most astute of human observers. If there is competition within these plates and mosaics, it is not a one-sided contest in which art infringes on nature through imitation (as with Zeuxis and the grapes), but a two-way challenge in which nature is implied to imitate more 'naturally' than any artist. In this respect, these fish plates and mosaics point to a similar conclusion as Pliny's famous anecdote about the fourth-century BCE painter Protogenes and the sea-sponge: unable to represent the foam of a dog's drooling muzzle realistically enough, Protogenes hurled a wet sponge at the panel in frustration and fortuitously impressed the desired mark, thus revealing nature to be a more precise imitator that the artist himself.[117] Our fish plates and mosaics go further than this anecdote, however, in showing that animals imitate not just by chance (*tuchē*) but by craft (*technē*): if the barely sentient sea-sponge imitates serendipitously, the cunning octopus does so self-consciously and skilfully. The reverse of the claim that these plates and mosaics give a natural history to naturalism is that they also give an art history to animal camouflage, inviting viewers to see octopuses as accomplished artists, whose imitative artworks are embodied and ephemeral.[118]

In making us question whether we have exclusive claims to being 'the artful species'—as one philosopher recently asserted—the lessons of these plates and mosaics could not come at a more critical time.[119] As our marine ecosystems reach a crisis point thanks to decades of overfishing, water pollution and the heating of the oceans through global warming (to such an extent that several of the fish in the Roman mosaics are now listed as 'near threatened', 'vulnerable' and 'endangered' in the Mediterranean), these plates and mosaics ultimately inspire us to become more self-aware of the complex affinities we share with sea-life.[120] As numerous recent books, films and television series have found, no creature better shakes us out of our anthropocentrism than the artful octopus—a creature that Peter Godfrey-Smith argues is the closest humans will come to encountering intelligent alien life on earth.[121] The fish plates and mosaics explored here provide a prehistory to such thinking, showing that even in antiquity the octopus was used to question the exceptionalism of human cognition, craft and culture. If we have been slow to heed these ancient lessons, it is because we have not yet learnt to see the nuances of classical art's self-reflexivity. Whether or not these lessons will now be taken on board remains to be seen. What I hope to have demonstrated decisively, however, is that when it comes to the octopus, there is always more than meets the eye.

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Notes

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1 Victor Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen, Cambridge, 1997, 247–255. The self-reflexivity of *Las Meninas* has generated a vast bibliography, from art historians and philosophers alike. Particularly important are: Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Oxford, 2002 [1970], 3–18; John R. Searle, '*Las Meninas* and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation', *Critical Inquiry*, 6: 3, 1980, 477–488; Leo Steinberg, 'Velázquez's *Las Meninas*', *October*, 19, 1981, 45–54; Svetlana Alpers, 'Interpretation without Representation, or, the Viewing of *Las Meninas*', *Representations*, 1, 1983, 30–42; and W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Metapictures', in *Picture Theory*, Chicago, 1994, 35–82, esp. 58–64.

2 The term *mise-en-abyme* comes from literary criticism: see Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley with Emma Hughes, Cambridge, 1989, defining it as 'any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it' (p.8). Dällenbach begins, however, with a passage from André Gide, who

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applies the term to the use of mirrors in paintings by Old Masters like Velázquez (p.10–12).

3 For the terminology of 'metapictures', see W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Metapictures'. Such metapictorial motifs have further precedent in Near Eastern art: see Zainab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity*, London, 2014, 145–172.

4 For this phenomenon, see Maryl B. Gensheimer, 'Greek and Roman Images of Art and Architecture', in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Art and Architecture*, ed. Clemente Marconi, Oxford, 2014, 84–104. For such self-reflexivity in vase painting, see Monica De Cesare, *Le statue in immagine: studi sulle raffigurazioni di statue nella pittura vascolare greca*, Rome, 1997; Werner Oenbrink, *Das Bild im Bilde: Zur Darstellung von Götterstatuen und Kultbildern auf griechischen Vasen*, Frankfurt, 1997; Richard Neer, *Style and Politics in Athenian Vase-Painting: The Craft of Democracy: ca.530–460 BCE*, Cambridge, 2002, 77–85; Jenifer Neils, 'Vases on Vases', in *Greek Vase Painting: Form, Figure, and Narrative*, ed. P. Gregory Warden, Dallas, 2004, 28–34. In relief sculpture, see Verity Platt, *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion*, Cambridge, 2011, 31–50, 114–119; Jennifer Trimble, 'Figure and Ornament, Death and Transformation in the Tomb of the Haterii', in *Ornament and Figure in Graeco-Roman Art*, ed. Nikolaus Dietrich and Michael Squire, Berlin, 2018, 327–352; and Jaś Elsner, 'Ornament, Figure and *Mise-en-Abyme* on Roman Sarcophagi', in the same volume, 353–391. In Roman wall painting, see Michael Squire, 'Framing the Roman "Still-Life": Campanian Wall Painting and the Frames of Mural Make-Believe', in *The Frame in Classical Art: A Cultural History*, ed. Verity Platt and Michael Squire, Cambridge, 2017, 188–253; Nathaniel Jones, *Painting, Ethics, and Aesthetics in Rome*, Cambridge, 2019, 47–92.

5 For this vase's metapictorial games, see: Monica De Cesare, 'Una statua di Eracle tra mito ed escatologia: per una lettura unitaria del cratere apulo di New York MMA 50.11.4', *Atti della Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, Rendiconti*, 9, 1994, 247–258; De Cesare, *Le statue in immagine*, 103–105; Clemente Marconi, 'The Birth of an Image: The Painting of a Statue of Herakles and Theories of Representation in Ancient Greek Culture', *Res: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 59/60, 2011, 145–167; Verity Platt, 'Likeness and Likelihood in Classical Greek Art', in *Probabilities, Hypotheticals, and Counterfactuals in Ancient Greek Thought*, ed. Victoria Wohl, Cambridge, 2014, 185–207; Platt, 'Religion and Ritual', in *A Cultural History of Colour in Antiquity*, ed. David Wharton, London, 2021, 63–80.

6 For the metapictorial games of this *pinacotheca*, see: Stéphanie Wyler, 'Roman Replications of Greek Art at the Villa della Farnesina', *Art History*, 29: 2, 2006, 213–232; Nathaniel Jones, 'Ancient Painted Panels: Terminology and Appearance', *Mnemosyne*, 67: 2, 2014, 295–304; Jones, 'Temple Inventory and Fictive Picture Gallery: Ancient Painting between Votive Offering and Artwork', in *Museum Archetypes and Collecting in the Ancient World*, ed. Maia W. Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, Leiden, 2014, 118–128; Jones, *Painting, Ethics, and Aesthetics*, 204–229; Verity Platt and Michael Squire, 'Framing the Visual in Greek and Roman Antiquity', in *The Frame in Classical Art*, 66–71; Nicola Barham, 'Theorizing Image and Abstraction in Ancient Rome: The Case of the Villa Farnesina', *Art History*, 44: 1, 2021, 164–185.

7 For the metapictoriality of Narcissus paintings, see Philostratus' *Imag.* 1.23 with Jaś Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Roman Art*, Princeton, 2007, 132–176. For Achilles' shield as metapoetic and metapictorial *mise-en-abyme* in the *Iliad* and Roman painting/mosaic, see Michael Squire, 'Ekphrasis at the Forge and the Forging of Ekphrasis: The "Shield of Achilles" in Graeco-Roman Word and Image', *Word & Image*, 29: 2, 2013, 157–191, esp. 165–179.

8 For Winckelmann's anthropocentricism, see Michael Squire, *The Art of the Body: Antiquity and Its Legacy*, London, 2011, 32–68; and Milette Gaifman and Verity Platt, 'Introduction: From Graecian Urn to Embodied Object', in *The Embodied Object in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Milette Gaifman, Verity Platt and Michael Squire, special edition *Art History*, 41: 3, 2018, 402–419, esp. 408–409. Advocating for a more zoocentric classical art history: Alistair Harden, 'Animals in Classical Art', in *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, ed. Gordon Lindsay Campbell, Oxford, 2014, 24–60.

9 For a catalogue of fish plates, see Ian McPhee and A. D. Trendall, *Greek Red-Figured Fish-Plates*, Basel, 1987, with their 'Addenda to *Greek Red-Figured Fish-Plates*', *Antike Kunst*, 33: 1, 1990, 31–51. For a comprehensive catalogue of fish mosaics, see Richard Daniel De Puma, *The Roman Fish Mosaic, Vol. 1–2*, PhD Diss. Bryn Mawr, 1969; and (tracing a more selective type) Paul Meyboom, 'I mosaici pompeiani con figure di pesci', *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome*, 39: 4, 1977, 49–93.

10 See Stefano De Caro, *La natura morta nelle pitture e nei mosaici delle città vesuviane*, Naples, 2001, esp. 14–17, 27; Jean-Michel Croisille, *Les natures mortes campaniennes: répertoire descriptif des peintures de nature morte du Musée National de Naples, de Pompéi, Herculanum et Stabies*, Brussels, 1965, esp. 8 with Plate II no.3, Plate XLIV no.85 and 86; Croisille, *Natures mortes: dans la Rome antique: naissance d'un genre artistique*, Paris, 2015, esp. 14, 20–21, 90–94.

11 For a summary of such views, see Michael Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2009, 357–363; and Squire, 'Framing the Roman "Still-Life"', 196–211, singling out Arthur Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819) as epitomising such Kantian theorising about the 'still life'.

12 See, e.g., Croiseille, *Les natures mortes campaniennes*, 14 ('l'intérêt, plus désintéressé et raffiné, de la contemplation des objets pour eux-mêmes, dans la beauté simple de leurs formes et de leurs couleurs').

13 See Squire, *Image and Text*, 359.

14 I thus follow Squire, *Image and Text*, 357–428, and Squire, 'Framing the Roman "Still-Life"', which embed Pompeian 'still life' paintings of food in ancient debates about representation.

15 There is debate over what term the Greeks used for these plates: *oxubapha, pinakes, pinakiskoi ichthuēroi*? See McPhee and Trendall, *Greek Red-Figured Fish-Plates*, 22; Norbert Kunisch, *Griechische Fischteller: Natur und Bild*, 1989, Berlin, 49–62; and John Wilkins, 'Eating Fish in Greek Culture', in *Greek Art in View: Studies in Honour of Brian Sparkes*, ed. Simon Keay and Stephanie Moser, Oxford, 2004, 148–158.

16 For the gastronomic function of fish plates, see McPhee and Trendall, *Greek Red-Figured Fish-Plates*, 18–22, 54–58. The suggestion of Kunisch, *Griechische Fischteller*, 43–62, that these plates were not used to serve fish, but as the target in the wine-slinging drinking game known as *kottabos* has been shown implausible by McPhee and Trendall, 'Addenda', 32–34. For the centrality of fish in the classical Greek diet, see: Nicholas Purcell, 'Eating Fish: The Paradoxes of Seafood', in *Food in Antiquity*, ed. John Wilkins et al., Exeter, 1995, 132–149; James Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passion of Classical Athens*, London, 1997, 3–35; Peter Garsney, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge, 1999; and Wilkins, 'Eating Fish'. The octopus was a delicacy: see, e.g., Aristophanes fr. 333 K-A, Plato Com. fr. 189.17–19 K-A, Xenarchus fr. 1.7–10 K-A, Machon fr. 9 Gow.

17 For the relation between art and zoology in Hellenistic and Roman times, see Joshua Thomas, *Art, Science, and the Natural World in the Ancient Mediterranean, 300 BC to AD 100*, Oxford, 2021, glossing over fish plates at 206–207.

18 For Archestratus, see S. Douglas Olson and Alexander Sens, *Archestratos of Gela: Greek Culture and Cuisine in the Fourth Century BCE*, Oxford, 2000.

19 For this phenomenon, see Rainer Mack, 'Facing Down Medusa (An Aetiology of the Gaze)', *Art History*, 25: 5, 2002, 571–604; and Jonas Grethlein, *Aesthetic Experiences and Classical Antiquity: The Significance of Form in Narratives and Pictures*, Cambridge, 2017, 244–248.

20 For the octopus as shield-device between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE, see the catalogue of Annelore Vaerst, *Griechische Schildzeichen vom 8. bis zum 6. Jh., 3 Vols.*, PhD Diss. Salzburg, 1980, 625–626.

21 For Bronze Age depictions of marine creatures, see Andrew Shapland, *Human-Animal Relations in Bronze Age Crete*, Cambridge, 2022, 153–181, with further bibliography.

22 *Od.* 5.432–435. The passage is discussed by Alex Purves, 'Homer and the Simile at Sea', *Classical Antiquity*, 43: 1, 2024, 97-123, esp. 108, who suggests there is something octopodal about the assimilative form of the simile.

23 In archaic and early classical vase painting, the octopus appears most regularly as a shield-device, occasionally as an ancillary figure in fishing/sailing scenes (e.g., *Beazley Archive Pottery Database* 201573), and rarely as a spot-lit solo subject (e.g., *Beazley Archive Pottery Database* 11061).

24 For the octopus as a model of cunning intelligence (*mētis*) in Greek thought, see Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Chicago, 1978, 27–54.

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25 Pseudo-Homeric *Thebaid* fr. 8 W: πουλύποδός…ἔχων νόον…χροιῆι ἔπεσθαι. Compare Pindar fr. 43 S-M. All ancient texts and translations are adapted from the most recent Loeb edition.
26 Theognis 213–216: ἐπίστρεφε ποικίλον ἦθος…πουλύπου ὀργὴν ἴσχε πολυπλόκου, ὃς ποτὶ πέτρῃ,/ τῇ προσομιλήσῃ, τοῖος ἰδεῖν ἐφάνη.
27 Sophocles fr. 307 R: χρῶμα πουλύπους ὅπως/ πέτρᾳ τραπέσθαι γνησίου φρονήματος.
28 Ion *TrGF* 19 F 36: καὶ τὸν πετραῖον πλεκτάναις ἀναίμοσι/ στυγῶ μεταλλακτῆρα πουλύπουν χροός. See also Eupolis, *Demes* fr. 117.
29 For an introduction to Aristotle's biology, see Sophia M. Connell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Biology*, Cambridge, 2021.
30 See, e.g., Aristotle's *On Colours* and Theophrastus' *On the Senses*. For discussion, see Katerina Ierodiakonou, 'Philosophy and Science', in *A Cultural History of Color*, ed. Wharton, 17–34.
31 Aristotle *Hist. an.* 622a9–11: θηρεύει τοὺς ἰχθῦς τὸ χρῶμα μεταβάλλων καὶ ποιῶν ὅμοιον οἷς ἂν πλησιάζῃ λίθοις. τὸ δ᾽ αὐτὸ τοῦτο ποιεῖ καὶ φοβηθείς. See also *Part. an.* 679a13–14.
32 For the sources, see William W. Fortenbaugh, Pamela M. Huby, Robert W. Sharples, and Dimitri Gutas, ed., *Theophrastus of Eresus: Sources for his Life, Writings, Thought and Influence*, 2 vols., Leiden, 1992, 365A-365D. Discussed by Robert Sharples, *Theophrastus of Eresus: Sources for his Life, Writings, Thought & Influence, Commentary, Vol. 5, Sources on Biology*, Leiden, 1995, 90–98; and Katerina Ierodiakonou, 'Theophrastus on Non-Human Animals that Change Colour', in *Psychologie de la couleur dans le monde gréco-romain*, ed. Katerina Ierodiakonou and Pascale Derron, Geneva, 2020, 81–119.
33 Theophrastus' rhetoric of *sunexomoiousthai* is preserved in Athenaeus 7.317f (= Fortenbaugh et al., ed., *Theophrastus of Eresus, Sources*, 365B) and the theory of *pneuma* in Plutarch *Mor.* 916b (= *NatQ* 19 = Fortenbaugh et al., ed., *Theophrastus of Eresus, Sources*, 365C). There is confusion whether Theophrastus thought the octopus only changed colour from fear (as Plutarch states in *Mor.* 916b (=*NatQ* 19) = Fortenbaugh et al., ed., *Theophrastus of Eresus, Sources*, 365C) or also as a means of predation (as Plutarch implies in *Mor.* 978e-f (=*De soll. an.* 27) = Fortenbaugh et al., ed., *Theophrastus of Eresus, Sources*, 365D): see Sharples, *Theophrastus of Eresus, Commentary, Vol. 5*, 90–98. Biologists now ascribe the octopus' *metachrōsis* to mirror-like cells that refract and reflect light (iridophores and leucophores) and pigmented cells that can be expanded or contracted (chromatophores): see Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds: The Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life*, London, 2017, 107–135.
34 See Antigonus *Mir.* 25, 50; Pseudo-Aristotle *Mir.* 832b8–17. For their debts to Peripatetic biology, see Sharples, *Theophrastus of Eresus, Commentary, Vol. 5*, 90–92; and Wolfgang Kullmann, 'Zoologische Sammelwerke in der Antike', in *Gattungen wissenschaftlicher Literatur in der Antike*, ed. Wolfgang Kullmann et al., Tübingen, 1998, 121–139, esp. 128–129.
35 Hesiod *Theog.* 584: ζωοῖσιν ἐοικότα φωνήεσσιν. For appraisals of verisimilitude in archaic texts, see Hugo Shakeshaft, 'Beauty, Gods, and Early Greek Art: The Dedications of Mantiklos and Nikandre Revisited', *Art Bulletin*, 104: 2, 20–46, esp. 30–31.
36 Aeschylus *Theoroi* F 78a.13–17 *TrGF*: οὕτως ἐμφερὴς ὅδ᾽ ἐστίν. For this passage, see Froma Zeitlin, 'The Artful Eye: Vision, Ecphrasis and Spectacle in Euripidean Theatre', in *Art and Text in Greek Culture*, ed. Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne, Cambridge, 1994, 138–196, esp. 138–139.
37 Xenophon *Mem.* 3.10.6–8. For discussion of this passage (and Socrates' framing dialogues with the painter Parrhasius and the armourer Pistias), see Göran Sörbom, *Mimesis and Art: Studies in the Origin and Early Development of an Aesthetic Vocabulary*, Bonniers, 1966, 78–98; Felix Preisshofen, 'Sokrates im Gespräch mit Parrhasios und Kleiton', in *Studia Platonica: Festschrift für H. Gundert*, ed. Klaus Döring and Wolfgang Kullmann, Amsterdam, 1974, 21–40; Agnes Rouveret, *Histoire et imaginaire de la peinture ancienne (Ve siècle av. J.-C.-Ier siècle ap. J.-C.)*, Rome, 1989, 14–15; Simon Goldhill, 'The Seductions of the Gaze: Socrates and his Girlfriends', in *Kosmos: Essays in Order, Conflict, and Community in Classical Athens*, ed. Paul Cartledge et al., Cambridge, 1998, 105–124, esp. 109–112; Deborah Steiner, *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought*, Princeton, 2001, 33–35; Richard Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, Princeton, 2010, 155–157.
38 Xenophon *Mem.* 3.10.1 with previous note.
39 For *homoiotēs* in Greek aesthetics, see J. J. Pollitt, *The Ancient View of Greek Art*, New Haven, 1974, 201–204.
40 Plato *Soph.* 240a: τὸ πρὸς τἀληθινὸν ἀφωμοιωμένον ἕτερον τοιοῦτον.
41 Plato *Soph.* 266d: τὸ δὲ ὁμοιωμάτων τινῶν γέννημα. See also Plato *Criti.* 107c-d. For Plato and painting, see Eva Keuls, 'Plato on Painting', *American Journal of Philology*, 95: 2, 1974, 100–127, revised in *Plato and Greek Painting*, Leiden, 1978; Nancy Demand, 'Plato and the Painters', *Phoenix*, 29: 1, 1975, 1–20; and Michael L. Morgan, 'Plato, Inquiry, and Painting', *Aperion* 23: 2, 121–145.
42 See, e.g., *Euthyd.* 288b.
43 Plato *Rep.* 10.595a-599b. For the *Republic*'s aesthetic theory, see: Christopher Janaway, *Images of Excellence: Plato's Critique of the Arts*, Oxford, 1998, 106–157; Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Princeton, 2002, 37–147; Jonas Grethlein, *The Ancient Aesthetics of Deception: The Ethics of Enchantment from Gorgias to Heliodorus*, Cambridge, 2021, 75–106.
44 See Jean-Pierre Vernant, 'From the "Presentification" of the Invisible to the Imitation of Appearance' and 'The Birth of Images', in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, ed. Froma Zeitlin, Princeton, 1991, 151–163, 164–185. Vernant's thesis has been critiqued by Steiner, *Images in Mind*, 3–78; Richard Neer, 'Jean-Pierre Vernant and the History of the Image', in *The Art of Art History in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Verity Platt and Michael Squire, special edition of *Arethusa*, 43: 2, 2010, 181–195, revised in *The Emergence of the Classical Style*, 1–19; and Grethlein, *Aesthetic Experiences*, 178–181.
45 See, e.g., Erinna *Anth. Pal.* 6.352.
46 Quotation from Plutarch *Mor.* 668c (=*Quast. conv.* 4.4.2): ἐμπαθέστατα καὶ ζωτικώτατα; see also Plutarch *Mor.* 665d (=*Quaest. conv.* 4.2.3) and Athenaeus 8.341a. For Androcydes of Cyzicus, see Sascha Kansteiner et al., ed., *Der Neue Overbeck: Die antiken Schriftquellen zu den bildenen Künsten der Griechen*, 5 vols., Berlin, 2015, 1788–1792.
47 See Aristotle *Hist. an.* 524a13, 524b15–22, 621b30-622a2. Whereas the cuttlefish emits its abundant ink for concealment, Aristotle claims the octopus emits its less copious ink only out of fear.
48 I have found no reference to the octopus' secretions being used as ink by ancient artisans. The ejaculate of the cuttlefish (*sepia*, and hence itself called *sepia*) was used as black ink (*atramentum*) by Roman writers (e.g., Persius *Sat.* 3.13, Ausonius *Epist.* 4.76, 7.54), though Pliny says painters' pigment was not made from it (*HN* 35.43). *Sepia* became a popular writing and drawing material in the Renaissance.
49 See Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, 1980, 205–229. Ancient writers may have anticipated Wollheim's thinking: see Michael Squire, 'Apparitions Apparent: Ekphrasis and the Parameters of Vision in Philostratus' *Imagines*', *Helios*, 40: 1–2, 2013, 97–140, esp. 99–107. Wollheim's theory of 'seeing-in' has found favour with Richard Neer, 'The Lion's Eye: Imitation and Uncertainty in Attic Red-Figure', *Representations*, 51, 118–153; Neer, *Style and Politics*, 27–86; Steiner, *Images in Mind*, 19–22; Platt, *Facing the Gods*, 48–49; and Grethlein, *Aesthetic Experiences*, 149–248.
50 For the relation between figure and ornament/frame, see Platt and Squire, ed., *The Frame in Classical Art*; and Dietrich and Squire, ed., *Ornament and Figure*.
51 For such ambiguity in the ornamentation of earlier vases, see Neer, *Style and Politics*, 36–37.
52 Aristotle *Hist. an.* 622a4–6 notes that the octopus is accustomed to approach a man's hand underwater—something he interpreted as stupidity, rather than curiosity.
53 See, e.g., Pliny *HN* 9.92, Oppian *Hal.* 4.264–307, Aelian *NA* 13.6, Athenaeus 7.317c (quoting Clearchus' *On Aquatic Creatures* fr. 102 Wehrli). For further discussion, see Camilla Asplund Ingemark, 'The Octopus in the Sewers: An Ancient Legend Analogue', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 45: 2, 2008, 145–170.
54 See Grethlein, *The Ancient Aesthetics of Deception*, 1–32, 75–106.
55 Plato *Rep.* 10.595a-608b.
56 Plato *Laws* 7.823e.
57 Damoxenus *The Foster Brothers* fr. 2. For the philosopher-chef comic trope, see Matthew Wright, 'Poets and Poetry in Later Greek Comedy', *The Classical Quarterly*, 63: 2, 2013, 603–622, esp. 608–610.
58 The earliest surviving example is the damaged 'Cave of the Lots' mosaic at Praeneste (late second century BCE). For discussion, see Sandra Gatti, 'Nuove ricerche sull'Antro delle Sorti in Palestrina', in *Lazio e Sabina II: atti del convergno secondo incontro di studi sul Lazio e la Sabina*, Rome, 2004, 53–66; Paul Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina: Early Evidence*

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of Egyptian Religion in Italy, 1995, Leiden, 8–16; and Joshua Thomas, *Art, Science, and the Natural World*, 207–214.

59 On the dating, see Meyboom, 'I mosaici pompeiani', 55–56; Thomas, *Art, Science, and the Natural World*, 220–222.

60 See Annalisa Marzano, *Harvesting the Sea: The Exploitation of Marine Resources in the Roman Mediterranean*, Oxford, 2013, 22–28; and Thomas, *Art, Science, and the Natural World*, 231–235.

61 For the octopus-crayfish-eel motif in art, see Richard Daniel De Puma, 'The Octopus-eel-lobster Motif on Hellenistic and Roman Fish Mosaics', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 74: 1, 1970, 191–192; Harald Mielsch, *Griechische Tiergeschichten in der antiken Kunst*, Mainz am Rhein, 2005, 125–128; and Thomas, *Art, Science, and the Natural World*, 233–235.

62 See Aristotle *Hist. an.* 590b12–21; Antigonus *Mir.* 92; Pliny *HN* 9.185; Plutarch *Mor.* 979a (=*De soll. an.* 27); Aelian *NA* 1.32; Oppian *Hal.* 2.253–421.

63 Aristotle *Hist. an.* 590b12–21.

64 For the former suggestion, see, e.g., Hesiod *W&D* 524–525, Antigonus *Mir.* 21, and Oppian *Hal.* 2.241–245; for the latter, see, e.g., Aristotle *Hist. an.* 591a4–7, Plutarch *Mor.* 978f (=*De soll. an.* 27), Athenaeus 7.316e-f.

65 See Albert Bates, 'Review of Thomas (J.J.) *Art, Science, and the Natural World in the Ancient Mediterranean, 300 BC to AD 100*', *Classical Review*, 73: 1, 2023, 268–270, citing Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.120–130.

66 For the postulated Hellenistic archetype, see Meyboom, 'I mosaici pompeiani', and Thomas, *Art, Science, and the Natural World*, 235–245.

67 See especially the fragmentary fish mosaic from Room A of Palace IV in Pergamon.

68 See Thomas, *Art, Science, and the Natural World*, 235–242 and Thomas, 'The Ptolemy Painting? Alexander's "Right-Hand Man" and the Origins of the Alexander Mosaic', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 35: 1, 2022, 306–321.

69 See Thomas, *Art, Science, and the Natural World*, 242–243.

70 See, e.g., Ovid *Hal.* 31–37 (*fraude, similis, fallit*); Philo *On Drunkenness* 172 (*homoiousthai*), Plutarch *Mor.* 916b = *NatQ* 19 (*exomoiōsin, homoioun*), 916f (*homoiotēta, exomoiousthai*), Lucian *Dialogues of the Sea Gods* 4.3 (*homoion, mimoumenos, eoikōs*); Oppian *Hal.* 2.233 (*homoiïoi*), 236 (*apatēisi*), 239 (*doloio*), 298 (*paneikelon*), 305 (*dolomēta*); Pseudo-Diogenianus *Popular Proverbs* 7.73 (*exomoiountas*); Aelian *NA* 1.32 (*sophisma*); Nonnus *Dionys.* 1.280 (*indalma*).

71 For *mimēsis/imitatio* and *eikōn/imago* in Graeco-Roman aesthetics, see Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*. For *apatē/fraus*, see Grethlein, *The Ancient Aesthetics of Deception*. *Sophisma* and *dolos/dolus* were less popular as aesthetic terms, and have therefore received less critical attention, but they are nevertheless evidenced in Pausanias 10.18.5 (*sophisma*), Philostratus *Imag.* Praef. 2 (*sophizetai*) and Aesop *Fables* 530 = Phaedrus *Appendix* 5–6 (for the story of *Dolus* copying a statue of *Veritas*).

72 See Pliny *HN* 9.87 (for the *similitudo* of the octopus), and, e.g., 34.38, 35.23 (for the *similitudo* of statuary and painting). For the aesthetics of *similitudo*, see Pollitt, *The Ancient View of Greek Art*, 430–434.

73 See Philodemus *Rhet.* vol. 2, p.75, 32–34 Sudhaus.

74 See Lucian *On the Dance* 67, with Karin Schlapbach, *The Anatomy of Dance Discourse: Literary and Philosophical Approaches to Dance in the Later Graeco-Roman World*, Oxford, 2017, 91–92.

75 See Emily Kneebone, *Oppian's* Halieutica: *Charting a Didactic Epic*, Cambridge, 2020, discussing the octopus-crayfish-eel battle at 231–239.

76 Ἰουλυπόδων δ᾽ οὔπω τιν᾽ ὀΐομαι ἔμμεν᾽ ἄπυστον/ τέχνης, οἳ πέτρῃσιν ὁμοίϊοι ἰνδάλλονται,/ τήν κε ποτιπτύξωσι περὶ σπείρῃς τε βάλωνται./ ἄνδρας δ᾽ ἀγρευτῆρας ὁμῶς καὶ κρέσσονας ἰχθῦς/ ῥηϊδίως ἀπάτῃσι παραπλάγξαντες ἄλυξαν./ ἀλλ᾽ ὅτε χειρότερός τις ἐπισχεδὸν ἀντιβολήσῃ,/ αὐτίκα πουλύποδές τε καὶ ἰχθύες ἐξεφάνησαν,/ μορφῆς πετραίης ἐξάλμενοι, ἐκ δὲ δόλοιο/ φορβήν τ᾽ ἐφράσσαντο καὶ ἐξήλυξαν ὄλεθρον.

77 *Apatē* was also a popular term for describing the immersion of audiences in vivid poems. In this respect, the octopus becomes a cipher for Oppian himself, who likewise deceives his readership with visual illusions, conjured by the vividness of his words (*enargeia*), as Roman rhetoric would have it.

78 οὐδέ ἑ μῆτις ἐπιφροσύνης ἐσάωσε/ πετραίης· εἰ γάρ ποτ᾽ ἀλευόμενος περὶ πέτρην/ πλέξηται, χροιήν τε πανείκελον ἀμφιέσηται,/ ἀλλ᾽ οὐ μυραίνης ἔλαθεν κέαρ, ἀλλά ἑ μούνη/ φράζεται, ἄπρηκτον δὲ πέλει κείνοιο νόημα.

79 For *mētis*' association with divine and mythological craftspeople, see Vernant and Detienne, *Cunning Intelligence*, 57–105 (Prometheus), 177–186 (Athena and Hephaistus), 141, 281, 300 (*daidala*). The eel goes on to mock the octopus as 'cunningly skilful in guile' (*dolomēta*, *Hal.* 2.305). Nonnus calls the octopus 'shifty with cunning intelligence' (*aiolomētis*, *Dionys.* 1.279).

80 Aelian *NA* 1.32: εἰ δὲ καὶ τρέποιτο τὴν χρόαν κατὰ τὰς πέτρας, ἔοικεν αὐτῷ τὸ σόφισμα συμφέρειν οὐδὲ ἓν τοῦτο· ἔστι γὰρ συνιδεῖν ἐκείνη δεινὴ τοῦ ζῴου τὸ παλάμημα.

81 Oppian *Hal.* 2.408–418. Compare Aelian *VH* 1.1. Artemidorus *The Interpretation of Dreams* 2.14.6 notes that dreaming of the octopus is advantageous for criminals, given its ability to lurk unseen through camouflage.

82 Oppian *Hal.* 2.418.

83 For Oppian and Aelian's shared sources, see Rudolf Keydell, 'Oppians Gedicht von der Fischerei und Aelians Tiergeschichte', *Hermes*, 72: 4, 1937, 411–434; and Emily Kneebone, 'Oppian and Aelian in dialogue', *Philologia Antiqua*, 13, 2020, 85–97.

84 See, e.g., the painted frieze of fish from the *viridarium* of the House of the Centenary, Pompeii (first century CE), which depicts the octopus and eel in an exclusive duel (Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli and Ida Baldassare, ed., *Pompei. Pitture e mosaici*, 10 vols., Rome, 1990–2003, IX, p.1008, fig. 201).

85 See Thomas H. Corcoran, 'Roman Fishponds', *The Classical Bulletin*, 35: 4, 1959, 37–43 and James Higginbotham, *Piscinae: Artificial Fishponds in Roman Italy*, Chapel Hill, 1997.

86 For the basin, see Pugliese Carratelli and Baldassare, ed., *Pompei. Pitture e mosaici*, VIII, p.88, fig. 28.

87 As identified by Antero Tammisto, *Birds in Mosaics: A Study on the Representation of Birds in Hellenistic and Romano-Campanian Tesselated Mosaics to the Early Augustan Age*, Rome, 1997, 417, cat. Fig. SCI, 1, 2. The parrot-on-basin motif self-consciously imitates that of Sosus' doves. For the parrot in Roman culture, see Frederick Jones, *The Boundaries of Art and Social Space in Rome: The Caged Bird and Other Art Forms*, London, 2016, 99–114.

88 Ovid *Am.* 2.6.1: *imitatrix ales*.

89 This fantasy of artistic deception of course extended to other media, such as painting (cf. the anecdote about Parrhasius' curtain) and statues (cf. the ekphrastic epigrams on Myron's cow).

90 Pliny *HN* 36.184. For Sosus' 'unswept room', see Kristen Seaman, *Rhetoric and Innovation in Hellenistic Art*, Cambridge, 2020, 110–131; and Thomas, *Art, Science, and the Natural World*, 191–202.

91 Statius *Silv.* 1.3.53–57.

92 Philostratus' sophist regularly performs such a deceived response to the *Imagines*' paintings: see Zahra Newby, 'Absorption and Erudition in Philostratus' *Imagines*', in *Philostratus*, ed. Ewen Bowie and Jaś Elsner, 2009, 322–342; and Grethlein, *Aesthetic Experiences*, 18–38.

93 Philo *Spec.* 1.29: συνεργοὺς τῆς ἀπάτης… ὑπαγάγωνται τοὺς ὁρῶντας καὶ τὰς ἡγεμονίδας αἰσθήσεις ὄψιν καὶ ἀκοὴν… συναρπάσωσι τὴν ψυχὴν ἀβέβαιον καὶ ἀνίδρυτον αὐτὴν ἀπεργασάμενοι. For Philo's aesthetics of *apatē*, see Grethlein, *The Ancient Aesthetics of Deception*, 122–127.

94 Philostratus *Imag.* Praef. 4: ψυχαγωγῆσαι ἱκανὸν καὶ αἰτίας ἐκτός. For Philostratus the Younger's proem, see Ruth Webb, 'The *Imagines* as a Fictional Text: *Ekphrasis, Apatē* and Illusion', in *Le défi de l'art: Philostrate, Callistrate et l'image sophistique*, ed. Michel Costantini et al., 2006, Rennes, 113–136, esp. 114, 131; Michael Squire, 'A Picture of Ecphrasis: The Younger Philostratus and the Homeric Shield of Achilles', in *Gaze, Vision, and Visuality in Ancient Greek Literature*, ed. Alexandros Kampakoglou and Anna Novokhatko, Berlin, 2018, 357–417, esp. 368–377; Grethlein, *The Ancient Aesthetics of Deception*, 202–203.

95 Horace *Sat.* 2.6.65–76.

96 Petronius *Satyr.* 29.1–3 (painting of dog), 70.4–7 (amphorae trick).

97 Philo *On Drunkenness* 172–175.

98 Philo *On Drunkenness* 172:...οἷα τὸν χαμαιλέοντα, τὸν πολύποδα· τὸν μέν γέ φασι τὴν χρόαν ἀλλάττοντα τοῖς ἐδάφεσιν ὁμοιοῦσθαι καθ᾽ ὧν εἰωθεν ἕρπειν, τὸν δὲ ταῖς κατὰ θαλάττης πέτραις, ὧν ἂν περιδράξηται...

99 Philo *On Drunkenness* 175. The examples suggest Philo is looking back to Theophrastus: see Sharples, *Theophrastus of Eresus, Commentary, Vol.* 5, 90–91.

100 The first of the sceptic modes is traditionally that different animals perceive differently, but Philo focuses on animals as the *objects*, rather

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than the subjects, of perception: see Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, *Modes of Scepticism*, Cambridge, 1985, 46–50. The Stoics used the octopus to model the eight parts of the soul (the five senses, plus speech, the sexual urge, and the commanding faculty, cf. Aetius 4.4.4 (= Hans von Arnim, ed., *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, 3 vols., Leipzig, 1903–1905, 2.827)), which might give the New Academics' deployment of the polyp as an argument against Stoic epistemology a polemical charge.

101 Aristotle *Hist. an.* 590b20–21. For the octopus' failure to grip the slippery eel, see also: Oppian *Hal.* 2.267–283; Antigonus *Mir.* 92.

102 See Pliny *HN* 9.92 and Aelian *NA* 13.6 with n.53.

103 Plutarch *Mor.* 916b-f (=*NatQ* 19). See also *Mor.* 96f (=*De amic. mult.* 9). For discussion, see Michiel Meeusen, 'Matching in Mind the Sea Beast's Complexion. On the Pragmatics of Plutarch's *Hypomnemata* and Scientific Innovation: The Case of *Q.N.* 19 (916BF)', *Philologus*, 156: 2, 2012, 234–259.

104 We might recall the octopus-simile at *Od.* 5.432–435, where the octopus' suckers retain particles of stone.

105 For the sceptic dilemma posed by the rhetoric of naturalism and its interrogation by Philostratus, see Albert Bates, 'Philostratus Visualises the Philosophical: *Imagines* 2.23, Hercules *Furens*, and the Cataleptic Impression', *American Journal of Philology*, 142: 1, 2021, 137–175.

106 See, e.g., K. Sara Myers, 'Ovid's *Tecta Ars*: *Amores* 2.6, "Programmatics and the Parrot"', *Echos du Monde Classique*, 9: 3, 1990, 367–374, and '*Psittacus redux*: Imitation and Literary Polemic in Statius, *Silvae* 2.4', in *Vertis in Usum: Studies in Honour of Edward Courtney*, ed. John F. Miller et al., Munich, 2002, 189–199, with further bibliography.

107 For *ekphrasis* as *mise-en-abyme*, see Shadi Bartsch, *Decoding the Ancient Novel: The Reader and the Role of Description in Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius*, Princeton, 1989, 40–79; Andrew Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis*, Lanham, 1995, 4–5; Jaś Elsner, 'Introduction: The Genres of Ekphrasis', *Ramus*, 31: 1–2, 2002, 1–18, with further bibliography.

108 The parrot is depicted by the window in *cubiculum* m from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor, c. 50–40 BCE. Identified by Phyllis Williams Lehmann, *Roman Wall Paintings from Boscoreale in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Cambridge, MA, 1953, 117.

109 See Verity Platt, 'Ecology, Ethics and Aesthetics in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*', in *Ecologies, Agents, Terrains*, ed. Christopher P. Heuer and Rebecca Zorach, special edition of *Journal of the Clark Art Institute* 17, 2018, 219–242, esp. 219–222.

110 Pliny *HN* 35.65–66, Seneca *Controv.* 10.5.27–28. The passage has been well discussed by Helen Morales, 'The Torturer's Apprentice: Parrhasius and the Limits of Art', in *Art and Text in Roman Culture*, ed. Jaś Elsner, Cambridge, 1996, 182–209, esp. 184–188; Jeremy Tanner, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece: Religion, Society and Artistic Rationalisation*, Cambridge, 2006, 242–246; Squire, *Image and Text*, 386–389, and '*Veritas repraesenta*? Zeuxis, Parrhasius, and the Nature of Pictorial Representation in Pliny's *Natural History*', in *The Nature of Art: Pliny the Elder on Materials*, ed. Anna Anguissola and Andreas Grüner, Turnhout, 2021, 261–276; Patrick R. Crowley, 'Parrhasius' Curtain, or, a Media Archaeology of a Metapainting', in *Classics and Media Theory*, ed. Pantelis Michelakis, Oxford, 2020, 211–236.

111 Pliny *HN* 35.95: *pinxit et heroa nudum eaque pictura naturam ipsam provocavit*. For further rhetoric in Pliny, see Sorcha Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture: Art and Empire in the* Natural History, Oxford, 2003, 102–137.

112 Callistratus *Descriptiones* 6.1–3: πρὸς τὴν φύσιν ἀμιλλωμένης τῆς τέχνης...Ἡμεῖς μὲν οὖν ἀφασίᾳ πληγέντες πρὸς τὴν θέαν εἰστήκειμεν τὸν χαλκὸν ὁρῶντες ἔργα φύσεως μηχανώμενον καὶ τῆς οἰκείας ἐκβαίνοντα τάξεως.

113 For 'ecocritical art history' (a discipline largely concerned with post-industrial European and American art), see: Alan Braddock, 'Ecocritical Art History', *American Art*, 23: 2, 2009, 24–28; Alan Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, ed., *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, Alabama, 2009; and Timothy Stott, 'Ecocritical Art History', *Art History*, 43: 3, 2020, 640–645, surveying recent contributions. Platt, 'Ecology, Ethics, Aesthetics', has broken ground in applying such thinking to classical art history. More popular has been ecocriticism's application to Graeco-Roman literature, especially pastoral: see Christopher Schliephake, ed., *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity*, London, 2017. Surveying the state of 'ecocriticism' in text-based classical scholarship: Ruben Post, 'Environment, Sustainability, and Hellenic Studies', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 2022, 142, 317–333, and Christopher Schliephake, 'Profile: Ecocriticism and Ancient Environments', *Classical Review*, 72: 2, 2022, 393–396.

114 For such spontaneously generated images, see Pliny *HN* 36.14 and 37.5 with Verity Platt, 'Of Sponges and Stones: Matter and Ornament in Roman Painting', in *Ornament and Figure*, ed. Dietrich and Squire, 241–278. On Pliny's interest in the nature of art, see also Platt, 'The Matter of Classical Art History', *Daedalus*, 145: 2, 2016, 69–78; 'Ecology, Ethics, Aesthetics'; Anguissola and Grüner, ed., *The Nature of Art*; Anna Anguissola, *Pliny the Elder and the Matter of Memory: An Encyclopaedic Workshop*, 2022, London, 11–58.

115 Aristotle *Poet.* 1448b5–9.

116 Cicero *Nat. D.* 2.37 (= von Arnim, ed., *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, 2.1153).

117 For the Protogenes-sponge anecdote, see Pliny *HN* 35.102–103 with Platt, 'The Matter of Classical Art History', 'Of Sponges and Stones', 'Ecology, Ethics and Aesthetics'. As Platt shows, Protogenes' sponge makes its image of drool through an indexical impression that points beyond Platonic notions of *mimēsis* towards Stoic theories of *typōsis*.

118 Media theory has shown much interest recently in reappraising the embodied 'art' of cephalopods: see, John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, Chicago, 2015, esp. 96–101; Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater*, Durham, NC, 2020, esp. 71–111.

119 Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution*, Oxford, 2012.

120 According to the IUCN Red List (https://www.iucnredlist.org), the common torpedo is now 'vulnerable', the nursehound 'near threatened' and the dusky grouper 'endangered' in the Mediterranean.

121 Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds*, esp. 1–13. See also Sy Montgomery, *The Soul of an Octopus: A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness*, London, 2015; Anna Fitch, *Natural World: The Octopus in My House*, BBC, 2019; James Reed and Pippa Ehrlich, *My Octopus Teacher*, Netflix, 2020.

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