

BOOK REVIEW

Perspective in the Visual Culture of Classical Antiquity. By ROCCO SINISGALLI. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Hardcover, \$99.00/£60.00. ISBN 978-1-107-02590-5.

This is an odd book, by turns fascinating and exasperating. It takes its place in a long line of attempts to ascertain whether or not the ancients knew what has come to be called since the Renaissance linear, or geometrical, perspective—in the author’s words, “a science that represents objects in space upon a plane, projecting them from a point of view” (1). Sinisgalli answers in the affirmative, emphatically, and, by means of a plethora of complex (and often confusing) diagrams, hopes to demonstrate that such a system was indeed employed by Roman painters.

Chapters treat the relevant passages in the ancient authors (Lucretius, Vitruvius, Ptolemy) and the impact of the representation of perspective in surviving wall paintings from Rome and the Vesuvian region. The most innovative and most compelling chapter is, however, the first—devoted largely to an analysis of the relevance of Euclid’s *Catoptrics* (*De Speculis*) to the perspective problem. Here Sinisgalli makes a significant contribution to ongoing debate, one that may well set discussion on a new footing. For Euclid’s treatment of mirrors, unlike his *Optics* (long prominent in discussions), appears to offer, according to Sinisgalli, a compelling model for the representation of images on a plane that display coherent and consistent spatial and scale relationships. Thus, the *Catoptrics*, it is argued, constitutes an aspect of Greek science that has heretofore not played a role in the voluminous bibliography devoted to the perspective question. The experts on perspective, and perhaps more importantly, the historians of science, are sure to have their say in the matter; whatever the verdict, Sinisgalli has reconceived this fundamental representational problem’s history in a profound manner.

Yet the whole is less persuasive than its parts. The genuine insights offered by the *Catoptrics* seem to have unleashed a fascination with mirrors that distorts much of what ensues. At times, translations take their cue from this and their tendentiousness seems patent (cf. e.g., 92-4 on Vitr. 7.3.10); in addition, the diagrams are presented as if self-evident proofs of the author’s interpretations. Simi-

larly, the discussion of surviving Roman paintings not only fails to persuade, but would seem to contradict the very idea that the artisans who produced them knew and understood the significance gleaned by Sinisgalli from Euclid—indeed, his diagrams and analysis of the “Room of the Masks” (Ch. 4) would seem to suggest that even if these artists grasped the means to deploy such a Euclidean “mirror perspective,” they failed to employ it consistently, and thus undermining a major aspect of its express purpose. The recent discussion of Stinson (*AJA* 115 (2011)) offers a positive account of the multiple perspective “systems” at work in these paintings, an account that is, while less intellectually ambitious, perhaps more adequate as a solution.

The bibliography displays some astonishing lapses (perhaps most notably the numerous relevant publications of Pierre Gros).

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