

Understanding the reception of literature as an ancient phenomenon means grasping the social, cultural, and political stakes of interpreting images as well as texts and, what is more, perceiving how the ancients’ actual practices of reception and interpretation integrate the two. In this paper I argue that Petronius’ gallery-scene (*Satyricon* 83-90) sheds valuable light on this problematic as it applies to the hybrid, hellenophile culture of imperial Rome.

Ecphrasis (the literary description of art-objects) is a clear target of Petronian satire in the gallery-scene. Scholars approaching the episode from an aesthetic point of view have regarded its ecphrastic focus primarily as an example of Petronius’ interest in questions of representation. This emphasis, however, has tended to exclude the scene’s broader concern with the interplay of Greek and Roman culture informing the perspectives of Encolpius and Eumolpus, a concern intimated, for example, by simultaneous references to famous Greek painters and allusions to Vergil’s *Aeneid*. As the theorist W. J. T. Mitchell has shown, the opposition between texts and images often figures essential social, cultural, and political oppositions that animate Western societies, particularly the relationship between a dominant, speaking self and a silent, excluded other (Mitchell 1994, 1986). Through Mitchell, we see that Petronius satirizes a view of narrative paintings from and of the Greek past as in need of explication by Latin-speaking subjects in the present, i.e., of a discourse and practice that would increase their “legibility.” Mitchell shows how Petronius appeals to the interests of elite, Hellenophile Romans in ridiculing figures who are deficient simultaneously in their assimilation of both Greek and Roman cultural traditions as they attempt ecphrasis. Conversely, Petronius illuminates Mitchell in drawing out the implications of his theory not only for synchronous individuals or social groups, but for the present attempting to “read” the silent past.

Encolpius’ strong identification with the work of the canonical Greek artists is apparent in his expressions of wonder, awe, and worship upon entering the gallery (83). An imperfect identification, however, with the cultural traditions of Greece is suggested by the scene’s flawed reminiscences of the Greek novel (Elsner 33), while the bathetic manner in which the scene recalls the reactions of Vergil’s Aeneas to the paintings on Dido’s temple of Juno in Carthage (*Aen.* 1.456-92; cf. Conte 16) renders Encolpius’ Roman qualifications suspect as well. As Encolpius identifies with Greece through his verbalized “reading” of images, his prior reading of the *Aeneid*, canonical version of originary conflict between Greece and the forefathers of Rome, enmeshes him in the web of Petronian satire. Eumolpus, too, professes to be an avid philhellene, and yet, for all that he favors Greek culture over Roman, he admits to having taken full advantage of the Roman imperial bureaucracy to seduce the Pergamene boy (85-87; cf. Connors 93; Rimell 64). Eumolpus’ information about two of the artists he mentions, Lysippus and Myron, is simply wrong (Slater, *Reading Petronius* 171), and his poem on the sack of Troy (89), ostensibly an ecphrasis of a painting in the gallery, is far less concerned with heightening a viewer’s appreciation of a painted scene than of milking a mythical topic’s possibilities for poetic display (cf. Slater 97). In the “*Troiae Halosis*,” Eumolpus, like Encolpius, falters as a philhellenistic “reader” of paintings, in part through his immersion in things Roman, and particularly through a wish to display his status as a reader of Vergil.

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