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Pliny's Art History and the Problem of Attribution

Pliny, like Pausanias, has had a long career as a mine of information for archaeologists and art historians, interested in understanding the provenance of the visible remains of Classical art. But new approaches to Pliny's own historiographic methods and the place of art history in the wider frame of his research has yet to be fully integrated into art historical scholarship on the ancient world. Although contemporary art history concerns itself with the problematic relationship between text and art object, in the early days of discovery and cataloguing, finding possible matches in the Natural History meant hacking facts out of the text, trusting to its accuracy, and ignoring the seepage of authorial intent or narrative strategy into the work. Contemporary successors to these pioneers in the study of ancient art have become more cautious about the neatness of early identifications; at the same time, there has been a growing awareness of the influence of Pliny's work on formative figures in the development of the discipline of art history, Vasari and Winckelmann. While many of the more hopeful identifications from Pliny's lists of artists and works are now regarded as questionable, art historians still have to negotiate the complex legacy of Pliny's Natural History.

Attribution is a serious problem for Pliny in his chapters on art history because of the nature of his organisational schema. The figure of the individual artist is the organising principle that supports the progress of Pliny's narrative; it is the material object to be listed and catalogued alongside and among the pigments, metals and rocks that make up the rest of the information content of Books 33-37. Each artist is named, and a list of his most famous works appended. Bearing this in mind, there are more reasons than straightforward accuracy for attributing a particular work to a particular person. My paper will focus on two related passages in Book 36: the first is Pliny's famous description of the Laocoon, which was the basis of the identification of one of the most pivotal discoveries in the history of criticism of ancient art. The second is a passage in which Pliny lists sculpture groups in Rome that are uncertainly attributed to either Scopas or Praxiteles (HN 36.IV.27-29).

The principle of listing artworks by named artist almost inevitably leads to a process of tidying up, where anonymous works are attracted towards famous names – and we can see traces of this process in Pliny's difficulties with Scopas and Praxiteles and the array of unattributed statuary in Rome. Similarly, works which are the product of more than one artist have difficulty finding a place in Pliny's schema, which privileges a neat correspondence between single object and single named author. Despite these dangers, Pliny manages to present an exhaustive array of material, stretching the limits of his system in order to incorporate the range of what he knows. His struggle to attribute each object to a named artist and to avoid anonymous works produces an image of an active and thoughtful author not usually associated with the Natural History, an art historian already grappling with the problems of attribution that later scholars were to demand his help in solving.