WORKS OF ART IN ACHILLES TATIUS' LEUCIPPE AND CLITOPHON

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Achilles Tatius' standing as an author cannot be high. His characterisation is shallow except in the case of Melitce, his plot conventional within his genre except where he altogether outstrips his peers in absurdity. Leucippe's miraculous escapes from death are on a par with those of Ruth Roland and Pearl White in the early film serials. On the most charitable interpretation Achilles Tatius invites us to laugh with him rather than hoping that we shall not laugh at him. Yet in a dispensable appendage to his novel, namely the descriptions of works or art, he attained absolute mastery. If Homer's shield and Theocritus' cup deserve respect, so too do the paintings and artifacts of Achilles Tatius. It is unfortunately impossible to discover whether he portrays works actually seen, but most extant specimens of ancient art suggest that the least he did was to refine them considerably in his own imagination. The effect conveyed is rather that of late renaissance paintings, with impressionist touches added here and there.

The lengthy opening ἐκφρασεις of Europa's abduction by the bull may be justified by factors outside Achilles Tatius' love of art, for the myth has a definite local relevance to Sidon, the setting of Clitophon's narrative, and the combination of love and violence foreshadows the key elements in the plot of the novel, which is, like the temple painting, divided into land and sea sections. But the discussion here will dwell on art for art's sake. Although the landscape and the seascape must be visualised as a vast background (1. 1. 6 ἐν δὲ τῷ τοῦ λειμώνος τέλετι; 1. 1. 9 ἐν μέση τῇ θαλάσσῃ) and the living beings consequently as tiny in proportion, Achilles Tatius has skilfully made the painting suggestive of movement, not static like so many familiar landscapes with figures. Of the gambolling dolphins and the Cupids at play he says that one can see them moving (1. 1. 13), Europa's garments bellying in the breeze are the painter's breeze (1. 1. 12), but the rest of the description is so animated that such comment by the author would be superfluous: the girls rushing in alarm towards the shore but stopping short in fear of entering the water (1. 1. 8); the bull bending its leg as it swims (1. 1. 9), or allowing itself to be steered by the pressure of Europa's hand (1. 1. 10); the waves rising into crests and dashing into foam on the rocks (1. 1. 9). The girls' emotions are conveyed by facial expression and gesture, as with countenances pale and distorted, gaping eyes, and lips parted to utter a cry, they thrust their arms towards the bull they dare follow no longer (1. 1. 7). Yet when all is said and done the scene is less one of horror than of alluring eroticism: the girls' garlanded hair flows loosely about their shoulders, their tunics are raised by a girdle to reveal their legs (1. 1. 7); the outlines of Europa's body show through her clothes: βαθὺς ὀμφαλὸς γαστήρ

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...the deep-set navel, the long slight curve of the belly, the narrow waist, broadening down to the loins, the breasts gently swelling from her bosom (and confined, as well as her tunic, by a girdle...)." (S. Gaselee's translation of the Loeb edition).

2. '"...his leg was pressing against the table which neither stood nor fell, but displayed the unstable balance of an impending fall"'. (Loeb translation.)
prompted Evanthes to pair his Andromeda and Prometheus paintings (3. 6. 3–4). In sharing his visual impressions with the reader at some length, Achilles Tatius is simply indulging his taste for vivid description. Thematically these pictures are irrelevant to the plot and structurally they contribute nothing. But the author has succeeded brilliantly in conveying the plastic quality of the Andromeda painting, from the rough texture of the hollow rock (3. 7. 1) in which the smooth, statuesque heroine is bound (3. 7. 2), her wrists drooping like fruit on a vine (3. 7. 4), to the monster’s scaly, prickly body seen writhing just beneath the surface of the water (3. 7. 6), or the protruding eyes and bristling hair of the Gorgon’s head (3. 7. 8). The natural beauty of Andromeda’s eyes is marred by her anxiety, so that Achilles Tatius compares it to that of violets just beginning to wilt (3. 7. 3). Dimension is important in the gruesome complementary painting, with the eagle’s beak digging about for Prometheus’ liver in a deep wound while its claws press more lightly into his thigh (3. 8. 2). The foreshortening of Hercules’ arm, which is viewed from behind as he draws his bow, is duly pointed out by Achilles Tatius, who is here impressed, also, by the sense of movement (3. 8. 5–6). It extends even to Prometheus’ dividing his gaze between his wound and Hercules (3. 8. 7). His agony has been graphically portrayed in facial and bodily contortions, but perhaps the most telling feature, from the artistic point of view, noticed by Achilles Tatius is that the tension of the leg is seen even in the toes (3. 8. 3–4).

Achilles Tatius responds with sensitivity to small objets d’art such as Hippias’ rock crystal goblet (2. 3. 2) or Calligone’s necklace (2. 11. 2–3). An integral part of the former is the life-like vine decoration, the clusters of which fascinatingly change their hue, as if visibly ripening, when wine is poured in. In the case of the necklace Achilles Tatius blends minute description of colour with personification and striking comparison to produce a thing of supreme beauty: ηρίζον δὲ πρὸς ἀλλήλους οἱ λίθοι. ύπακινθος [feminine here, of course, not masculine: the stone, not the flower] μὲν βόδον ἢν ἐν λίθῳ ἀμέθυστος δὲ ἐπορφύρετο τοῖς χρυσοῖς πλησίουν, ὕπες ότ τρέις ἦσαν λίθοι, τὴν χροὶν ἑπάλληλοι συγκείμενοι δὲ ἦσαν οἱ τρεῖς μέλαινα μὲν ἡ κρήτης τοῦ λίθου, τὸ δὲ μέσον σῶμα λευκών τῷ μέλαιναι συνεφαίνετο, ἐξῆς δὲ τῷ λευκῷ τῷ λοιπόν ἐπιρρίπτει κορυφοῦμενον ὁ λίθος δὲ τῷ χρυσῷ στεφανούμενος ὀφθαλμόν ἐμμεττὸ χρυσοῦν. Looking back to the description of Calligone’s dress just above, one may appreciate Achilles Tatius’ feeling for the ensemble of

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3. “In the necklace the gems seemed at rivalry with one another; there was a jacinth that might be described as a rose crystallized in stone (i.e. in colour) and an amethyst that shone so brightly that it seemed to be gold; in between were three stones of graded colours, all mounted together, forming a gem black at the base, white streaked with black in the middle, and the white shaded off into red at the top; the whole jewel was encircled with gold and presented the appearance of a golden eye.” (Loeb translation).
a woman's attire, as the "golden eye" is a fitting accessory to the unusual gold decoration of the dress.4

Many descriptions of things other than works of art, if studied in detail, would re-inforce the view of Achilles Tatius' forte which has been expressed above. But perhaps a few summary observations on Hippias' garden will suffice. There is the elaborate interplay of trees and creepers culminating in the shifting chiaroscuro of τῶν δὲ φυλλῶν ἀνωθεν αἰωρομένων, ὥπ' ἦλιῳ πρὸς ἄνευν συμμιγεὶ ὧχραν ἐμφραίρεν ἢ γη τῆν σκιάν (1. 15. 2–4).5 This in turn is balanced by the very merging of the colours of flowers and birds (1. 15. 8), which have just been painstakingly depicted as separate entities. Achilles Tatius builds upon them later in his series of comparisons between them and parts of Leucippe's face (1. 19. 1–2). However contrived it may appear to the reader, it is at least in keeping with the starry-eyed Clitophonus' frame of mind.

Regrettably it is impossible to contradict the generally hostile view of Achilles Tatius' work, whose weaknesses have been specified above. Occasionally he responds to a scene with a sense other than that of sight. One should read especially his fine description of a sacrifice, with perfumes and flowers mingling their sweet fragrances (2. 15. 2), or of the multifarious sounds of a storm at sea (3. 2. 2–3). But clearly it is his highly developed visual faculty that most often arrests and stimulates the imagination. Though insufficient for his chosen genre as far as modern taste is concerned, his talent is of an exceptionally high order within a very narrow range.

4. This daring metaphor recalls one of the most curious features of Achilles Tatius' novel, namely his recurrent observations about his characters' eyes. The most conspicuous example is the first meeting of Thersander and Leucippe (6. 6–7). Here the stages of the action are punctuated by the precisely described behaviour of their eyes, the thread being provided by the state of Leucippe's eyes, while Thersander's pass from being dazzled to being made subservient to his sinister intention. Eyes are important, also, in Clitophonus' relationship with Leucippe (1. 4. 2–5). There is a mystical flavour about Clinias' disquisition on the power of eyes (1. 9. 4–5), later expanded with added poetic richness as an 'editorial' comment from the author himself (5. 13. 4). For an interesting analysis of vision prompted by Clitophonus' enraptured first view of Alexandria, Achilles Tatius' own city, see 5. 1. 4–5.

5. "The leaves higher up were in gentle motion, and the rays of the sun penetrating them as the wind moved them gave the effect of a pale, mottled shadow on the ground." (Loeb translation).
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