CHAPTER SEVEN

THE IMPACT OF THE GALLERY OF HEROES

While a great deal of attention has been devoted to the Forum of Augustus, there has been no corresponding attempt to estimate its actual impression, the success of the Princeps’ scheme. Nor is the reason far to seek. As with other questions involving the reaction to the mainly upper-class actions and utterances of different sorts that make up the great majority of our written evidence about Antiquity, it is indeed extremely difficult to estimate the impact of the Forum Augustum, the realisation of the Princeps’ educational intention, on the public consciousness of the inhabitants of Rome.¹ As so often, we are at a loss when attempting to assess the mood of any but those who were members of the upper classes. Nevertheless, a general consideration is in order. In an important study perhaps less noticed by non-archaeologists than it deserves, it has been established most convincingly that the Augustan era invented new methods for the mass manufacture of

¹ A good indicator of the difficulty is Elsner 1995, 167–72: in his discussion of the reaction of the viewer to the Augustus from Prima Porta, all we hear is what the viewer would have seen and how he would have reacted. Beard and Henderson 2001, 170 assign their own reactions to the imaginary Roman viewer: ‘No matter how breathtaking a monument on this scale could never have avoided accusations of bombast and aggressive hyperbole…. Far graver ironies are raised by the train of Roman heroes in the colonnades…’, also quoted, not with disapproval, by Davis 2006 24–5; cf. also above, ch. 5 n. 177. The rather ambitious booklet of Hölsher 1984 also admits (8) that since we do not have explicit sources as to viewer reaction we must deduce it from other indications, viz., we are back at the (divined) intentions of the commissioners (or artists) of the monuments. His argument (10–12; see also 21, repeated at Hölsher 1994, 140–3) that since the summ viri of the Forum were representatives of the great families of the nobility these were also the intended spectators of the statues seems to me to run counter not only to some evidence presented below, but also to plain common sense. By the same logic the nobility would be the intended audience of all aristocratic displays, from funeral processions to speeches. Likewise Clarke 2003, 19–28 does not succeed in discussing his avowed theme, ‘The Ara Pacis Augustae and the Ordinary Viewer’, but instead treats us to ‘What an ordinary viewer would have noticed’ (24). More in a vein of scholarly restraint is a writer who has devoted most of his energies to the Ehrenstatuen: Schmeyer 2000, 271 concedes that we know little about their notice by the Roman public. An excellent analysis of Roman political response to statues is that of Gregory 1994; unfortunately, he has nothing to say about the Forum of Augustus.
portrait statues, thus producing some 25,000–50,000 sculptural portraits of the Princeps alone. Such a production line must have been aimed at the widest segments of the population in all parts of the Empire, and these were expected to appreciate what they saw. The very considerable effort invested must have been commensurate with the hopes for the success of the endeavour.

It appears that an express assertion of such a policy can be detected in an utterance of Augustus’ closest friend and collaborator. Agrippa did not only contribute much to the public display of works of art in Rome, but also delivered a speech divulging his opinion that these should be displayed in public rather than hidden away in the houses of the wealthy. One wonders whether this was a genuinely felt opinion, commendable and modern even by present-day taste, or a popular measure designed to endear him to the Roman plebs. In the former case it may be seen as an undertaking meant to educate—and given the practical character of Agrippa, hardly one that he would expect to be met with serious resistance. In the latter case, which perhaps may be the less likely one, we would learn an overlooked fact about the already existing cultural attitudes of the Roman masses. Although it goes without saying that the main purpose of the display of statuary in the Forum Augustum was not artistic, it seems nevertheless that the sentiment aired by Agrippa was well in line with Augustus’ intentions.

We shall be concerned here with the impact of Augustus’ Gallery of Heroes rather than with that of the entire complex of which it formed part. One direct viewer reaction for which we have evidence is, as one would expect, an elite utterance, and one very close in time to the open-

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2 Pfanner 1989.
4 The suggestions of Blankenhagen 1954 and of Frazer 1993 as to the influence of the form and dimensions of the Forum of Augustus on the Templum Pacis, Forum Transitorium and Forum of Trajan relate to the general plan rather than to the feature that is our main concern here. Scheithauer 2000, 63 n. 312 adduces three sources relating to a statue of Augustus, assuming that this was a statue in his Forum. Mart. 8.44.7 colosson Augusti is taken by Friedlaender ad loc. to refer rather to Domitian’s colossal equestrian statue (Stat. s. 1.1); Suet. Tib. 55.2 says that Tiberius accused Agrippina of wanting to take refuge at a statue of Augustus (ad statuam Augusti)—but this statue must remain unspecified; especially since eventually nothing of the sort occurred at any statue; lastly, in Suet. Nero 12.3 there is no hint as to which statue of Augustus Nero wished to have the cithara granted him by the judges be taken.