SKENOGRAPHIA IN BRIEF

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From its two root words, sken- and graph-, skenographia literally means “scene painting”, which reflected its earliest use. We know that in the first century BC Vitruvius used it in a context which scholars sometimes translate as “perspective”. It remains hotly debated whether the “perspective” described by Vitruvius is what we call “linear perspective”. It also is unclear what the nature of skenographia was at the time of its birth in the fifth century BCE and where precisely it was placed on the skênê or “stage building”. The textual sources are few and widely scattered in date and no uncontested material remains of skenographia exist to supplement that information.

I begin chronologically with our earliest mention of skenographia in the fourth century BCE. Aristotle (Poetics 1449a18) says: “Three actors and skenographia with Sophocles.” That places the beginning of skenographia

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1 This essay is a very much abbreviated discussion of skenographia from my project on optics and illusionism in classical art. It has much fuller arguments than I am able to present here. I am grateful to the two editors, George W.M. Harrison and Vayos Liapis, for their unstinting support. It is with deep gratitude that I thank T.E. Rihll and Susan Woodford for their comments and suggestions. All URLs were accessed in January 2011.

2 Definitions of “linear perspective”—from informal to obtuse—exist. “Linear perspective” may informally be defined as a system of depiction that follows geometric rules to convert a three-dimensional scene to two-dimensions and that reflects “what we see” rather than “what really is”. More formal definitions refer to horizon lines and picture planes among other aspects. The “classic” example of linear perspective, taught to most every American school child, shows a road or railroad tracks receding into the distance with the two sides gradually converging on a single vanishing point, even though in reality the two sides are parallel and therefore cannot meet. Moreover, linear perspective applies not only to physical aspects of the setting, but also to every element within a scene including the figures. For a technical treatment, see Willats 1997, especially Chapter Two (“Projection Systems”). For a consideration of the philosophical aspects, including Damisch and Lacan, see Iversen 2005. For the history of linear perspective, see Veltman 2004, especially 82–92 for antiquity. Finally, gargantuan is the only word to describe the amount of scholarship on linear perspective; whereas that on skenographia is merely huge. I make no attempt to be complete even for recent references.

2 My translation. Pollitt (1974) 236–240 provides the best compilation of the literary references in the original Greek and Latin with translations, as well as discussion. Also good on the textual tradition is Camerota 2002. Beer (2004) 26–29 suggests that skenographia is not literally “scene-painting” but rather a verbal description of the setting. He can maintain
in the fifth century BCE.³ Other later sources (Vitruvius 7, praef. 11) agree on the date in the fifth century BCE, but substitute Aeschylus for Sophocles.

The next citation comes from Polybius in the second century BCE who paraprases Timaeus: “To glorify history he [Timaeus] says that the difference between it and declamatory writing is as great as that between real buildings and structures [τὰ κατ’ ἀλήθειαν ψιχικῆς καὶ κατεσκευασµένα] and the appearances of places and compositions [διαθέσεων] in skenographia.”⁴ κατεσκευασµένα is sometimes translated as “furniture” and other times as “structures”, which I prefer.⁵ Most movable furniture could well have been “real” and just placed “on” stage. It would not need to be painted. The “structures” could then refer to things that are large and cumbersome like buildings and hence good candidates for facsimiles rather than the real thing. Next, Pollitt translates διαθέσεων as “subjects” rather than “compositions” like other translators. Neither choice is entirely satisfactory. Nor do Aristotle, Timaeus, and Polybius tell us precisely what skenographia is.

Our next citation chronologically comes from Strabo in the first century BCE who (5.3.8 [236C]) likens the Campus Martius with its monuments to a “skenographia”: “And the works which are located throughout the area and the land itself ... and the brows of the hills which, in rising above the river and reaching up to its channel, present to the sight a scene painting [σκηνογραφικὴν ὑπὶ ἐπιθεικύμενα]—all these provide a view which it is difficult to ignore.”⁶ Strabo uses skenographia, in modern terms, as a painted backdrop with a landscape dotted with buildings.

Vitruvius at the end of the first century BCE is one of our fullest and most problematic sources. He says (1.2.2):

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³ Some scholars think that the line is a later interpolation and not Aristotelian. Brown (1984) credits G.F. Else (in 14 n. 2) with first suggesting this idea. Against whom, see Ley 1989.

⁴ The Greek of the last part of this sentence is important: “Ἠλίθην μὲν τὰ κατ’ ἀλήθειαν ψιχικῆς καὶ κατεσκευασµένα τῶν ἐν ταῖς σκηνογραφίαις φανοµένων τόπων καὶ διαθέσεων”. Polybius 12.28a 1.4–2.1. My translation.

⁵ LCL [W.R. Paton] and Scott-Kilvert for “furniture” and Pollitt (1974) 236 No. 2 as “structures”.

⁶ Translation from Pollitt (1974) 236 No. 3.