CHAPTER 4

Hellenistic Court Collecting from Alexandros to the Attalids

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This paper’s focus is on Hellenistic regal collecting, especially that of the Attalid dynasty ruling the kingdom of Pergamon from the late 3rd century BCE down to 133 BCE, when the last dynast, Attalus III, willed the kingdom to Rome and a sizeable bulk of his goods went onto the Roman auction market (Plinius, *naturalis historia* xxxiii.149). The personalities are Attalos I (ruled 243–197 BCE), Eumenes II (ruled 197–59 BCE) and his brother Attalos II, Eumenes’ co-ruler, then sole autocrat 159–138). Attalid regal collecting (overview, Schalles, 1990) is a trope of all scholarship on Hellenistic collecting, especially regal collecting (magisterially surveyed by Kunze, 1995) and a set-piece for basic sourcebooks on collecting (e.g. Bounia, 2004: 92 no. 27 on Attalos I). The court collecting practices of Attalid Pergamon are the “museum” behaviours best documented for us among the Hellenistic courts, which all amassed art and luxury artifacts but whose court cities are badly or not at all preserved. Sources on palace holdings of the Makedonian Antigonids, Egyptian Ptolemaioi, Anatolian and Middle-Eastern Seleukids, and on other individual despots’ holdings often frustrate, because much comes from histories of Roman commanders taking palatial art booty in profusion but without specifying particular works, artists, schools. By contrast, Pergamon and its palace citadel are relatively well preserved and very thoroughly excavated; more than for many other dynasts, inscriptions and texts specify art holdings with precision. Though the dossier we need is limited, it fortuitously gives precious testimony to varied aspects of the Attalids’ amassing of artistry. My subject is restricted to the Pergamon citadel proper, in this essay’s short space, justified by that placement thereof of residential palace and appended sanctuaries which can fairly be closely linked to dynastic tastes and others’ perception of them.1 That we know the citadel buildings’ plans here lets us discuss display in its contexts, whether assured location or plausibly hypothesized. (Comprehensively on citadel, palaces, temple, porticoes, Hoepfner, 1996: 52–60; see also Grüssinger et al., 2012). Pergamon matters too because demonstrably formative to Roman practice. Republican generals were intimately allied with the Attalids in the destruction of almost all rival kingdoms of the East, and could learn from them as from other dynastic exemplars how to live with and look at art; kings split with Roman commanders the art booty of captured cities (below), and Aemilius Paullus even went on tour around Greece in 187/6 BCE with an Attalid prince to admire its artistic landscape (Livius xlv.27–28). The prince, younger brother of Eumenes II and Attalos II, lived up as well to a family legacy: one further reason that we can justify a special attention given to Attalid collecting, among that of the other Hellenistic kingdoms, is because those rulers were distinctive for a focused attention on the arts whose display at home and abroad constituted what Schalles (1985) called their Kulturpolitik (Gruen, 2000; Etienne, 2003; Mielsch, 1995), and second for their patronage of the writing of art history. The last ruler, Attalos III, himself worked in bronze, perhaps for art not artifacts, to pass the time (Iustinus, *historiarum Philippicarum* xxxvi.4.3). Strabon (xiii.4.4) even singled out for special mention Attalid predilection to beautification of their capital evidenced in public *anathemata* (votive art displays).

At the Attalid citadel compound, the kings lived with gods – the palace quarter, for which we know amassed statuary, was only across a narrow road from the sanctuary precincts that yield our archaeological evidence for ‘collected’ old masterpieces, and replicas; so, the citadel sanctuaries can have been seen as documenting regal taste as much as did palace holdings. Both exhibit (below) collectionism, a rubric that can cover owned and gifted acquisitions alike. Very valuable to this project is Jeremy Tanner’s 2006 work on Pergamon (221–29) in his *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece: Religion, Society and Artistic Rationalisation*. This work is important for

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tackling the issues raised by Hellenistic collections of old art at Pergamon with their inscribed labeling, and probes deeply into the Hellenistic elite’s habits of viewpoint and its views on artists; however, Tanner did not work with the full archeological and textual record for what stood on the citadel besides the bases for *spolia* that are his focus. Text and remains combined document close proximity of now old masterpieces to bravura work in a range of novel styles that served to elevate both the new and the old by comparison and contrast, at Attalid Pergamon as in many other Greek locations. That productive tension was already a natural-by-product of sanctuary displays accumulated for several hundred years by the time of the Successor Kingdoms.

This essay prefaces its discussion of specifically Attalid practice with sections orienting the reader in the sociology and economics of art and fine artifact acquisition among both dynasts and non-royal elites in the early Hellenistic period. The evidence for Hellenistic kings’ practices that I review has been often cited elsewhere; my commentary aims to draw attention to the behaviours which such evidence suggests. Image amassing among sub-regal populations grand or ordinary must have been at least partly a refraction of regal practices that go back in our evidence to Arkhelaos I of Makedonia (413–399 BCE). While this paper cannot essay a full synthesis, some generalizations are in order. Greek houses well into the 4th century BCE had, to our knowledge, contained as works of artistry only fine furniture, precious metal drinking vessels, and, for imagery, painted ceramics, adding figural mosaic floors by the mid-4th century. Monumental art display and patronage was limited to communal space, at sanctuaries and in civic sites like *agorai*. But from the mid-late 4th century onwards private persons documentably started to install, domestically, often-excavated terra-cotta statuettes, marble and bronze statues, and surely also paintings not now preserved. The householder at Priene who had ten marble statuettes and thirty-five figural terracottas (Burn, 2005: 106), the profuse under-life-sized marbles from houses all over the Hellenistic city of Delos (as Harward, 1982; Sanders, 2001), the numerous very high quality Hellenistic small bronze statues, when private not public (i.e. votive), demonstrate production of collectible artistry across the class spectrum for a collector society. This emphasis on self-fashioning by means of domestic display and of luxury (*tryphe*) occurred, as so often in comparable world cultures, in an age of steadily increasing aggregate wealth due to commerce and warfare. It was headed by individuals rich on a scale never before reached, because suddenly the East Greek world was controlled everywhere by kings, after the campaigns of the long-established dynasty of Makedonia, led by Philippos II and Alexandros.

Alsop’s seminal 1982 project, *The History of Art Collecting and its Linked Phenomena*, is important to this little paper: there, as in most literature on Greco-Roman collecting, the Attalids’ project is a showpiece, with Attalos I as “history’s earliest documented founder of an art-collecting dynasty” (Alsop, 1982: 191–193, quotation at 191). This publication greatly excited the great art historian Ernst Gombrich himself, who immediately wrote (1982) a lengthy, enthusiastic review. We still await any further accounting of pre-modern collecting on Alsop’s scale, brought up-to-date with current method and theory. Alsop dug deep into the complex of phenomena that accompany collectionism in the world cultures, the “by-products of art” (Alsop, 1982: 1): collecting, art history writing, celebrity for artists, art markets and high prices, faking, and other behaviours make “an integrated, loosely interacting cultural-behavioural system with frequent and far reaching effects on art itself” (Alsop, 1982: 8). Where I part company from Alsop is when he often implicitly distinguishes collecting from patronage of new works, and above all from art that had a use. Collecting by persons or institutions in any culture in which the display of urbanity is valuable social currency, generally and in regards to the visual arts in particular, is sociologically very useful indeed. Selecting, amassing and commissioning, and the appreciative viewership which saner collectors expect to find somewhere, live in the realm of self-fashioning and the building of cultural capital. Collecting for exhibition by persons of power, in the case of Hellenistic kings (or any elites Greek or Roman), could not help but be useful to the way they legitimized their power by self-styling as benefactors to the community, givers of pleasure culturally as well as by other more mundane means. Since Alsop’s day, we’ve seen intensive discussion of the way in which our own museums, supposedly devoted to beauty and information, institutionalize culture too to shape social structures, and also critique of how production of ‘art for art’s sake’ is so easily drawn to complicity with such museums. But no-one in the Greco-Roman world would have seen anything to denigrate in such transactions between makers, audiences, owners, valuable functions.

This Hellenistic world indeed saw Alsop’s “by-products of art” in a lively trans-Mediterranean art market, significant for the commodification of high culture and its imitations, and in the originally Classical (5th to 4th century BCE) cult of celebrity artists past and present, with their works commanding mind-boggling high prices. Not only art-history and art-criticism came to be, in the early Hellenistic period, developments in which scholar-artists at the Attalid Mouseion played a critical part: breathless reportage for popular circulation about particular spectacular monuments, in particular, regal ones, emerged as