Ancient Painted Panels

Terminology and Appearance

The subject of ancient Greek and Roman panel painting, designated in ancient testimonia as the most pre-eminent form of artistic expression,1 has found relatively little favor among ancient art historians in recent decades.2 This has been due, no doubt, to the very slim physical evidence of the format that has survived to the present day. With the exception of finds from Egypt, including the well-known mummy portraits, only the faintest hints of the long tradition of panel painting remain.3 Many investigations of ancient painted panels,

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1 Pliny (Nat. 35.37) goes so far as to say that only panel painters are deserving of glory: Sed nulla gloria artificum est nisi qui tabulas pinxere. Pliny’s statement is reinforced by the overwhelming attention paid to panel painters in his history of Greek painting in Book 35 of the Natural History, stretching from the late 5th-century painter Apollodorus of Athens through the end of the Hellenistic period and beyond (Plin. Nat. 35.60, passim). Pliny’s emphasis on panel painters is largely in line with the notices on the history of painting in Cicero Brut. 70 and Quintilian Inst. 12.10. On ancient art writing in general Pollitt 1974, esp. 9-111 remains comprehensive.

2 Due to its importance in the ancient literary tradition, the study of panel painting, and specifically the attempt to recover the composition of Greek panel paintings on the basis of their imitation in Roman wall painting and mosaic via the practice of Kopienkritik, was popular in the early to mid-twentieth century, particularly in German scholarship. See for this practice in particular Rodenwalt 1909; Pfuhl 1923; Lippold 1951; Lauter-Bufe 1969. See however more recent discussions of the development and display of Greek panel painting, employing both contemporary Greek and later Roman evidence, in Moreno 1987, 13-28 and Scheibler 1994, 94-100; 167-73.

3 For the Egyptian material see e.g. Seipel 1998, and Mathews 2001, 163-77, the latter solely on panels proper rather than the mummy portraits. Non-Egyptian examples of panel painting are rare. For the famous Archaic Pitsa tablets see e.g. Orlandos in EAA VI.200-6, s.v. Pitsa; and for the painted marble panels from Roman Campania, von Graeve 1985, 227-56.
moreover, have been primarily interested in reconstructing their stylistic or iconographical qualities. The various physical formats and modes of display of painted panels have been comparatively neglected.\footnote{Prominent exceptions are: Van Buren 1938, 70-81; Ehlich 1953; Moreno in \textit{EAA VI.171-4}, s.v. \textit{pinakes}; 1987, 13-16.}

The study of the materials and formats of ancient art is worthwhile, however, and there are two extant sources, which may give us a clearer idea of the broad range of physical forms and modes of display of painting on panel in antiquity, at least in the final two centuries BCE. These are, on the one hand, descriptions of painted panels, or \textit{πίνακες}, in a set of inscriptions detailing temple holdings on the island of Delos under the second Athenian administration, and on the other hand, Roman wall paintings which take the form of a picture gallery, at the so-called Villa della Farnesina. Individually, each is among the most informative pieces of evidence for the appearance of ancient painted panels to have survived; when considered together they are more eloquent still. That is, although the Delian temple inventories and Roman paintings are not specifically related, their correspondence affords not only a more definite idea of the visual forms of the inscriptions’ verbal definitions, but also an indication of the degree to which these paintings participated in the long tradition of Hellenistic artistic culture.

Temple inventories are attested in inscriptions at Delos prior to the beginning of the Independence period in 324 BCE, but it was only after 166 BCE, when the island was handed back to the Athenians by Rome, that such inventories began to document objects in non-precious materials, including statues and paintings.\footnote{See e.g. Hamilton 2000, 8-11; cf. 40-3 on the changes to the inventories in the second Athenian period at the Temple of the Athenians and the Poros Temple, and 465-79 for a general index of objects in the inventories; cf. Prêtre 1999, 389-96. By my count, twenty-one total inventories from the second Athenian period refer to \textit{πίνακες}. They are: \textit{ID 3.1400} (Mus. Del. Γ 39a-b); \textit{ID 3.1403} (Mus. Del. Γ 518); \textit{ID 3.1412} (Mus. Del. Γ 679a-x); \textit{ID 3.1413} (Mus. Del. Γ 523); \textit{ID 3.1414} (Mus. Del. Γ 680); \textit{ID 3.1416} (Mus. Del. Γ 506); \textit{ID 3.1417} (Mus. Del. Γ 308); \textit{ID 3.1423} (Mus. Del. Γ 527, 529); \textit{ID 3.1426} (Mus. Del. Γ 505); \textit{ID 3.1438} (Mus. Del. Γ 226); \textit{ID 3.1440} (Mus. Del. Γ 603, 605); \textit{ID 3.1441} (Mus. Del. Γ 307); \textit{ID 3.1442} (Mus. Del. Γ 500); \textit{ID 3.1443} (Mus. Del. Γ 366); \textit{ID 3.1444} (Mus. Del. Γ 521, 528, 604); \textit{ID 3.1445} (Mus. Del. Γ 587); \textit{ID 3.1446} (Mus. Del. Γ 524); \textit{ID 3.1449} (Mus. Del. Γ 515); \textit{ID 3.1450} (Mus. Del. Γ 234, 252); \textit{ID 3.1452} (Mus. Del. Γ 512); \textit{ID 3.1470} (Mus. Del. Γ 112).} The \textit{πίνακες} of the Delian inscriptions were examined in an article from 1913, but the author, René Vallois, treated only part of the epigraphic material, which had not yet been fully published.\footnote{Vallois 1913, 289-99. The pertinent inventories were only fully published in 1935, in volume 3 of the \textit{Inscriptions de Délos}.} Furthermore,