IMITATIO ALEXANDRI IN HELLENISTIC ART
Portraits of Alexander the Great and Mythological Images

ANNAM TROFIMOVA

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1. Alexander the Great

Cover: Part of a chariot with the head of a warrior. Greece (?). Early 3rd century BC. Bronze (see Fig. 130).

Back-covers: Phalar with gorgoneion. Eastern Mediterranean, Bosporan kingdom (?), 2nd century BC. Silver, gilding (see Fig. 156) (Photos: © The State Hermitage Museum).
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It is a cliché that Alexander’s face was the most influential in history and the most frequently honored in metal, stone, paint, and other media. Yet, amazingly, to my knowledge this is the first comprehensive study of the impact of his uniquely rich portrait tradition on the vast landscape of ancient divine and heroic imagery. Hitherto, scholars and critics have focused largely on this tradition’s importance for Hellenistic and Roman ruler portraiture, interspersed with occasional asides on its influence upon the private sphere. Their relatively infrequent ventures into the territory covered by this book have consisted largely either of studies of specific iconographic types (for example, the god Helios) and individual works (e.g., the so-called Aldobrandini Wedding), or of scattered, ad hoc observations about them.

Now, in a hundred and fifty densely packed, profusely illustrated, and well documented pages (the fruit of three decades of intensive involvement with the subject), Anna Trofimova, curator of Greek and Roman art at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, has both mapped out its topography and offered many challenging responses to its extensive array of problems. For these reasons alone, her book should be enthusiastically welcomed — but there are plenty of others. In particular, these include (but are not limited to) its inclusive illustration and detailed discussion of many unfamiliar works in the Hermitage and other Russian museums; and its sympathetic address to the extensive Russian literature on these objects and on the topic as a whole, largely unknown to most Western scholars (this writer included) because of the language barrier.

A brisk but informative Introduction sets the stage, proposing that this “Alexander component” filled Greek classical mythology with new content and brought individuality into the iconography of heroes and gods. Resembling a Warburgian Pathosformel but not identical with it, it was flexible, potent, and loaded with specific political, social, and ethical meanings. As a result, “from the late fourth or early third centuries BC a historical personality — the image of a human being — became a prototype” for heroic and divine images (ix). To unpack this unique and unprecedented development, a choice array of theorists — including Gombrich, Eco, Gadamer, Baxandall, and Foucault — is mobilized in a quest to define *inter alia* the key concepts of “type”, “pattern”, and “imitation”, and their source in this particular case, namely, Alexander’s portraiture. “What is a portrait, a portrait image, and a type? What are the components of the artistic language of portraiture? What are the specifics of the concepts of the individual and the ideal, the unique, the particular, and the archetypal?” (ix). What, in short, do these two
key genres – heroes and gods – borrow from Alexander’s vast and heterogeneous array of portraits, why, and to what effect?

Deferring these questions for the moment, Chapters 1 and 2 then proceed to summarize and discuss the scholarship on Alexander portraiture itself; the Greek and Roman literary accounts of it; and its surviving relics. The author’s coverage of the scholarship is both broad and deep; her stance towards it is independently critical; and her grasp of the ancient testimonia is encyclopedic. (One of the book’s great strengths is its diligent citation of the written sources at all appropriate points). As to the survivors, the familiar and oft-rehearsed – but still necessary – litany of types and monuments is enlivened by occasional unconventional asides such as this: “In contrast to earlier scholars, I am strongly inclined to believe that such depictions [i.e., the hunting scenes at Vergina and on the Alexander Sarcophagus] can scarcely be taken as historical ..., since the action occurs in the afterlife and the main personage is the heroized deceased” (32).

Chapters 3-5, the core of the book, showcase the three figures most often associated with Alexander in the ancient sources, and whom he is said to have emulated most fervently and consistently: Achilles, Herakles, and Dionysos. After thoroughly discussing their particular places in the Greek imagination, and the evidence for Alexander’s relationship and involvement with each of them, she turns to the monuments, both Greek and Roman. Each figure – the peerless warrior, the laboring superhero, and the inspired, almost messianic divinity – contributed to and illuminated the formation of a particular aspect of Alexander’s character and thus his image. The ongoing dialectic between their imagery and his portraits (continuously evolving through the end of antiquity) permeates and reciprocally enriches all of them, often to the point that when bodies and contexts are lost, heads cannot be securely identified as either one or the other: Alexander? Achilles? Alexander-Achilles? Achilles-Alexander? and so on. One does not have to agree with all the author’s positions (for example, on the identities of the Pasquino and “Eubouleus”, or the precise extent of the “Alexander component” on Roman mythological frescoes, Dionysiac sarcophagi, and other monuments) to appreciate both the value and fruitfulness of the observations and ideas advanced in these three chapters.

Chapter 6 turns to the deities of the heavens: Helios, Apollo, and the Dioscuri. Since Alexander honored Helios for allowing him to conquer the lands of the east, and Hellenistic folklore held that the sun never shone on those he failed to conquer (this must have been news to their inhabitants), it was natural that the imagery of the sun god and the Macedonian Roi Soleil should soon merge. Apollo followed suit, as did the Dioskouroi, with whom Alexander had been compared even in his lifetime, in the notorious outburst of flat-tery in Sogdiana that preceded the disastrous proskynesis debate. The chapter closes with the Dioscuri from Monte Cavallo and three little-known bronzes in the Hermitage, an ancient Etruscan one (Etruria looms large in this chapter) and two stunning eighteenth-century French ones, dubbed “Europe” and America – but “The Dioscuri” or “Alexander taming Bucephalus” would fit them just as well.

Chapter 7 tackles the thorny question of the Alexander-like physiognomies and coiffures occasionally found on both the Giants and Olympians of the Perga-
mon Altar. The proposed explanation for this puzzling phenomenon is typically thought-provoking and challenging. Maybe the ambivalent, two-faced Stoic portrait of the conqueror was the catalyst, whether directly via the philosophy of the frieze's designer or mediated through “a well-known topos of early Hellenistic rhetoric: discussions of what elevated Alexander – valor or fate; [and] whether he owed his power to prudence or fortunate imprudence. … We are clearly not talking of the direct influence of these works on the program of the … frieze. Yet there is an obvious analogy between the debates over Alexander’s fate that became a commonplace of ancient philosophy and an artistic cliché that entered the arsenal of figurative art and found embodiment in the images of Pergamene art. Thus the Macedonian’s facial features become a characteristic of different personages at times opposite in meaning. In the Gigantomachy, for the first time in Greek art, the image of Alexander is perceived in a unity of opposites. The portraits of the conqueror are imitated in the faces of both victors and vanquished and … a type appears that combines the features of Alexander, a Giant, and Achilles” (131-132).

A final, brief chapter discusses Alexander’s contribution to the representation of water deities: powerful entities over some of which (Aornus, Acesines) he famously triumphed, and which “in the court art of the Hellenistic rulers … occupied a special place, expressing in allegorical form the political creed of the monarch” (133). As a result, the River Orontes, Tritons, and others soon display the pathos typical of Alexander’s portraits and even, on occasion, his anastole.

In conclusion, imitatio Alexandri “was neither local nor sporadic, but general in character and was a natural stage in the formation of a universal artistic language of the Hellenistic era… Since Alexander’s image was revolutionary not only for art, but also for people’s world-view, it influenced conceptions of human beings, heroes, and gods, of the nature of power, of virtues and of the limits of human potential, [and] his individual features became a personification of epochal changes” (141). In short, since images change the way in which people see, Alexander’s not only transformed the world – both real and imagined – but also endowed it with unexpected new meaning.

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The literature of classical studies lacks a special research devoted to the *Imitatio Alexandri* – the influence that portraits of Alexander had on the visual art of the Hellenic era. It is generally acknowledged that images of the King inspired the emergence of new tendencies in the representation of rulers, gods and heroes and acted as a source for new iconographic motifs, and stylistic prototypes. This phenomenon has been studied fairly well only within the bounds of a single Hellenistic genre – the royal portrait\(^1\). Elsewhere researchers have quite often been obliged to limit themselves to merely noting the similarity, although faces bearing a resemblance to the portraits of Alexander and also Alexander-like types can be found everywhere – in funerary art, in cult and votive statues of gods and heroes, in small-scale plastic art, in private portraiture and architectural ornaments and utensils. More often than not it is unclear whether the artist borrowed Alexander’s features deliberately or by chance, and their significance and meaning are not clear either\(^2\). Yet an analysis of this phenomenon may shed light on the question of what actually we should call a “portrait of Alexander”. The elements of his iconography identified back in the nineteenth century (the anastole, turn of the head and heroic facial type) are present in an enormous number of works. In the Hermitage’s sculpture collection, for example, there are a great many heads of this sort: Alexander-Helios (A604), Alexander-Autumnus (A112), Alexander-Achilles (A585) and so on. Today it is evident that these works include not only portraits but also imitations, that is to say, depictions of ideal personages executed under the influence of the iconography of the King. How can the portraits of Alexander be separated from their imitations? More than a century of studying led to the pessimistic conclusion that this is a particularly difficult matter and that we probably lack adequate methods of research\(^3\). In actual fact the problem is due not only to the shortage of information, the absence of precise foundations for dating and the paucity of data about the provenance of the works. This state is characteristic for the art of the Hellenistic art as a whole. The main reason for the difficulties lies in the uncertainty of the definitions of the ancient portrait as a genre, of Alexander’s portrait image and type, specifically and of its role in the art of the Hellenistic age.

The topical relevance of the present study is determined by issues of both a special and a general, theoretical nature. The subject has been little researched in art history and is of vital importance for further work on the assessment of new portraits of Alexander and imitations of them that are constantly being brought into scholarly circulation. The study of this subject area makes it possible to take a
step forward in tackling one of the key questions in the history of Hellenistic art – the use of classical stereotypes in the formation of the artistic idiom of the Hellenistic era. The conclusions and generalizations drawn in the course of the research led to better defining the concepts of the “pattern” and the “imitation”, which are among the essential categories in the study of ancient art applicable to the portrait, that in this regard is still not sufficiently researched as a genre.

The interpretation of these categories became an important task of art historians in the twentieth century, when they were studied extensively with reference to both general and particular questions: the development of statuary art and ancient painting, the iconography of mythological subjects, the evolution of styles and local schools, the relationship between the art of the centre and the periphery. Despite the prevailing idea of a considerable gap between the immense quantity of empirical data and the degree to which they have been systematized, it should be noted that from the 1960s onwards the question of typification, the categories of “pattern” and “imitation”, were a focal point for the attention of leading historians and theoreticians of art. The works of the Anglo-Austrian scholar Ernst Gombrich revitalized the use in reference to ancient art of the concepts of “innovation”, “stereotype” and “mimesis” – “imitation”. According to Gombrich, art is a chain of experiments, a continuous reaction of one work to another, of an artist’s oeuvre to that of his predecessors. The purpose of art is a mimetic process, constant development. At the basis of ancient art is the separation and correlation of artistic and semantic concepts, such as the opposition of mortals and gods. So, even at the level of the repertoire, the iconography of Greek art is dominated by subjects that involve a conflict – battles, hunting, pursuit, single combat.

One of Gombrich’s most important tenets states that in the visual arts artistic form cannot be separated from the purposes of a work and the social circumstances. Greek art is characterized by a continual striving to generalize everything, to find the highest order – archetypal poses, the formulae of drapery and movements. At all its historical stages the art of Antiquity was associated with types. In the realm of iconography this is a set of figurative formulae that the artists repeat – falling, running and standing figures. In the words of another outstanding historian of ancient art, Andrew Stewart, the chief peculiarity of Greek culture is «its supreme sensitivity to the tension between everyday appearance and categorically ideal».

Remembering the unique form of Greek social structure, the polis, we note that, as Mary Douglas rightly pointed out, following A. Stewart, «In societies where there is a strong emphasis on group identity, the human body often becomes a metaphor for the experience of the social body».

As one of the main means of expression, in ancient art, the human body functioned as an extremely important semantic and formal-stylistic element. The problem of typifying the body found reflection in the study of movement, space and composition, and tendencies of ancient art, and in the study of key aspects of anthropomorphism, such as nakedness.

Beside a human body – as the most important incarnation of ancient Greek ideal – the main form of typification in Greek art was the myth. Since the artistic repertoire (especially before the Hellenic era) consisted almost entirely...
of subjects from mythology, in other words, depicting one and the same set of personages in one and the same set of situations, the history of art can be viewed as a process of continuous metamorphoses of artistic stereotypes in parallel with the evolution of artistic forms. And while the storyline – the mythological version of life – remained unchanged, the evaluation of the event and also the artistic interpretation of the myth did change, at times radically, depending on the work’s function, time and place of creation.

How precisely did the artist’s attitude to the personage express itself? First and foremost in the choice of subject, in the subtlest nuances of composition and in the personage’s movements and gestures. As a rule an artist followed iconographic tradition. That is to say, he copied previous patterns. Compositional schemata and figurative templates fixed the main situations in the hero’s life outstanding and his qualities. In contrast to vase-painting, where the artist presented events sequentially and narrative, a sculptor focused attention on the one deed, or one aspect of the personage’s character, that interested him. But in either case, the basis of the image was undoubtedly the myth that was very familiar to the artist and the viewer.

The process of typification as the vector in the development of Greek art also manifested itself in the form of the succession of artistic styles – a conglomeration of lasting formal structures that expressed the world-view of Greek society at different historical stages (the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic eras). A change of style implies a new artistic idiom; the artistic style is seen as the “language of the era”. A change of style, irrespective of the chronological framework, signified the innovative rethinking of a stereotype.

While researches into the iconography of mythological subjects have not only produced an enormous stock of factual material, but also given shape to several schools with the a theoretical-methodological base (Positivism, Formalism, Structuralism), within the bounds of our theme matters are not so simple with the portrait genre. As will be examined below, recent decades have seen considerable successes in the development of a theory of the ancient portrait. But, in my view, the question of typification in the portrait requires further work. On the one hand, the portrait genre by definition presupposed individualization of the appearance; on the other hand, it was completely subordinated to the principles that set the art of Ancient Greece apart from all later historical stages, since the Greek portrait was founded upon the type. Today the main physiognomic types that were established in ancient physiognomic treatises and found embodiment in the ancient portrait have been fairly well studied.

I would point out that this is just one aspect of typification, albeit a substantial one. The iconic series that made up the formal language of the portrait will undoubtedly become a subject for future researches. In the present work this question is examined through the example of the influence that the portrait image of Alexander the Great exerted on the depiction of mythological personages in Hellenistic art. Such a phenomenon, unprecedented in its nature, inevitably necessitates further refinement of the answers to certain questions: what is a portrait, a portrait image and a type? what are the components of the artistic language of portraiture? what are the specifics of the concepts of the individual and the ideal, the unique, the particular and the archetypal?
To achieve this aim a number of tasks are tackled in the course of the study: to gather, describe and classify Hellenistic works depicting mythological personages with an iconography in which the clear influence of Alexander's portraits can be established; to identify the main mythological images in Hellenistic art that borrowed features and style from the depictions of Alexander; to trace the development of the iconography of these personages and to determine the role of the “Alexander” component; to assemble and analyse data from various sources that reflect the influence of Alexander's image on conceptions of the gods and heroes in religious practices, histories and ancient literature; to give a definition of the term *Imitatio Alexandri* as applied to the mythological images in Hellenistic arts and to define the concept “Alexander type” and to characterize its role in the formation of the artistic idiom of the Hellenistic era.

The chronological boundaries of the study are set by the material. The main period examined is from the Late Classical era to the end of Hellenism; i.e. from 338 BC, the year of Alexander's birth, to 31 BC, the date of Augustus's victory at Actium, which the majority of historians take as an epoch marking the start of the Roman period. Since we are dealing with the evolution of iconography and style in the depictions of Greek mythological personages, reference is also made to the artistic tradition of earlier times, going back as far as the Archaic period, beginning in the first half of the sixth century BC. In a number of instances, when an image has “cultural longevity” – presents an enduring stereotype – it is traced through the history of art in later periods, right up to the end of Antiquity.

The monograph analyses ancient sculptures, both monumental works and small-scale plastic art, marble and bronze heads, bronze, marble and terracotta statuettes, relief compositions, frescoes, mosaics, depictions on coins and works of glyptic art, as well as applied art – paintings on vases, relief decorations on bronze and silver utensils, ancient arms and armour. These objects come from various parts of the Greco-Roman world and the Hellenistic East: Greece, Macedonia, Asia Minor, Italy, Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Bactria, Pisidia, the northern Black Sea area, Rome and Roman provinces. The research also adduces data from archaeological excavations: grave goods, evidence of funeral rites, material evidence of rituals and cults, and epigraphic data. Much attention is devoted to an analysis of the written tradition – the works of Alexander's historians and ancient authors' statements about gods and heroes in historical, philosophical, mythographic and poetic works.

The study employs both traditional methods of research (stylistic analysis, historical analysis, Kopienkritik) and new ones that came into the study of ancient art in the twentieth century from other disciplines (semiotic analysis, structural analysis and hermeneutics).

The theoretical basis of the study includes a number of conceptual approaches developed in modern scholarship in the field of art theory and history:

- Ernst Gombrich's doctrine about the historical determinacy of the visual experience and the multidimensionality of a work of art's semantic field; the concept of the mimetic nature of visual art, imitation as its goal and means, the theory of the development of art within a framework of schema and correction, innovation and stereotype;
- Umberto Eco's theory of iconic signs, according to which the iconic sign
reproduces the conditions of perception and not the properties of the object represented, while the codes used in the interpretation of the sign are not universal, but culturally determined; the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer, who advanced the theory of "effective history" that consists in the act of interpretation being determined by previous history (tradition) and that act being included in the tradition. According to Gadamer, the experience of art is the "experience of truth"; interpretation consists in construction, and not reconstruction.

The "contextual analysis" of works by Andrew Stewart, who sees art as a species of social practice and advances the idea of the social formative of the image of Alexander; Stewart's development on the basis of this material of Max Weber's theory of charisma, Michael Baxandall's "Bouguer principle" and Michel Foucault's concept of the "technology of power".

In the course of the study, it becomes obvious that a sustained influence of Alexander iconography can be detected in a considerable volume of material in terms of quantity, quality and geographical spread, in a variety of spheres, in various kinds of art throughout the entire Hellenistic period and, in some instances, until the end of Antiquity. This indicates that the phenomenon is not local, but general in character and belongs among the category of regular patterns in the historical, cultural and artistic development of the Ancient World. The *Imitatio Alexandri* in the iconography of heroes and gods reflects a change in conceptions of these personages in a period of religious, political and social changes. The image of Alexander had a substantial and unprecedented influence on the Hellenistic era. The "Alexander component" filled the Greeks' classical mythology with new content and brought individuality into the iconography of heroes and gods. From the late fourth or early third century BC; a historical personality – the image of a human being – became a prototype for a divine image.
“I am not ashamed to admire Alexander,” Arrian wrote, (Arrian, Anab. 7.30; 1.1 – trad. E.J. Chinnock, 1893) “indeed, there is no other single individual among Greeks or barbarians who achieved exploits so great or important in regard to either number or magnitude as he did.” (Arrian, Anab. I, 12, 4).

Research into portraits of Alexander is one of the most popular and diverse themes in classical studies, with a history going back over a hundred years. People of various generations and schools, eminent classical scholars from Germany, France, Britain, the USA and Russia have turned their attention to portraits of Alexander. The undying interest in this figure, the accumulation of material and the development of the theory and method of the study of the art of Antiquity led to this subject area, investigated in breadth and in depth, turning into an independent field within the history of Hellenistic art. In all modern surveys of Hellenistic art, the portraits of Alexander are examined as a separate phenomenon that had a considerable influence on the content, form, style and repertoire of art. Research into them is therefore significant not simply as part of a range of iconographic studies devoted to outstanding figures of Antiquity, but because an understanding of this phenomenon is important for our conception of Hellenistic art as a whole.

Despite the large number of papers and monographs (the historiography of portraits of Alexander numbers over 70 works), it is evident that this subject is far from exhausted. As we shall see below, further investigation only leads to an increase in the number of questions. Researchers’ opinions on works, datings and the criteria for defining portraiture remain contradictory; there is no agreement on the role depictions of Alexander played in the history of the ancient portrait or on the assessment of their significance for the evolution of art in the Hellenistic era. It seems to me that there are several reasons for this situation – some of a general character, others of a subjective nature. In the first place there is the need to develop a method of research appropriate to the subject. The question of methods of historical-and-artistic interpretation is important for any art historian, but for classical art studies in the past few decades it has become one of the main issues. As the reader will know, the immediate material for the classical art scholar is not the original, but its manifold reflection in copies, the descriptions of works of art in passages of literature and history, depictions on coins, data from archaeological excavations and so on. The question of the transmission of information contained in a work of art and, inversely, the ascent to the original is here especially pressing. Without an appropriate method it is
impossible to understand the artistic idiom of an ancient work of art, and the less the amount of data and the more complex the object, the greater effort has to be made to decipher it. The history of research into portraits of Alexander clearly demonstrates the development of the method within the framework of the main stages in the history of European art studies – from "criticism of copies" (Kopienkritik) in the iconographic studies of the late 1800s and early 1900s to structural analysis and semiotics at the turn of the twenty-first century. In classical studies it is hard to find another subject where research would require the use of such a broad methodological spectrum.

The second substantial factor consists of problems that are in general characteristic for historical researches into the Hellenistic era and above all the problem of sources. Of all the areas in the history of ancient art this problem is most acute for Hellenistic studies, as is vividly demonstrated by, among other things, the example of research into portraits of Alexander. A rich, but poorly documented stock of material has survived down to the present. Of the numerous pictorial works only the Battle of Alexander and Darius has survived in the form of a Roman mosaic copy of an early Hellenistic painted original. Other pictures are known to us only from descriptions and the repetition of individual motifs, figures and compositions in frescoes, reliefs, vase paintings and glyptic works. Sculptural portraits have survived mostly in Roman copies; there is not a single firmly dated Greek original. The criteria of portrait likeness and dating are subjective since they are based on a reading of literary descriptions, and also on a hypothetical reconstruction of the style of Alexander’s portraitists. It is customarily considered that three sculptural types (the Azara herm, Dresden and Erbach Alexanders) derive from works created in Alexander’s lifetime; the remainder of the heads are Roman copies of Hellenistic portraits. The only reliably authentic source is coins of the Diadochi bearing a profile portrait and inscription Alexander. The portraits of Alexander appeared on the coins, however, after the death of the great conqueror as a demonstration of legitimate inheritance, as a sign of continuity of the policies pursued by the founder of the empire. Thus the coins say far more about how Alexander’s name was used by this or that ruler, about the position that his figure occupied in the ideology of the Hellenistic monarchies. The depiction of Alexander on coins is a symbol, an image very far removed from the real appearance of the model.

The formation of a consistent picture is hindered not only by the complexity of the material, but also by the complexity of context that any researcher into the Hellenistic period encounters. In comparison with any other stage in ancient history – Classical Greece, Republican or Imperial Rome – there is far less clarity in the evaluation of the historical processes. This statement also applies to the history of art in the Hellenistic era. The leading specialists in this field are still debating a number of “substantial” questions, including the definition of what should form the foundation for the periodization of Hellenistic art, the applicability of the concept of "stylistic evolution", the differences between regional artistic schools, how the development of art correlates with the political history and what the relationships are between Hellenic and Eastern elements. The “non-linear” development of styles, the variety of genres and artistic tendencies, the wealth of the figurative language and the complexity of reflection (i.e. references to Classical models) number among the specific
peculiarities of this period. The stylistic eclecticism of the works, the mobility of craftsmen, the moving of works of art and numerous copies of compositions in different kinds of art make it exceptionally difficult to determine the place and time when a work was created, especially in cases where there is no “external” data at all about the find.

As well as the peculiarities of the Hellenistic era as a distinctive stage in the history of the ancient world, the complexity of researches into portraits of Alexander was also affected by the specifics of studying the ancient portrait as a genre. It is no coincidence that this topic long since became a centre of attention for specialists tackling theoretical questions in the study of ancient art.

The main defining element in the theory of the portrait is the concept of likeness, along with the categories of individual and typical. The best description of the discrepancy between modern and ancient conceptions of the portrait was given by Brunilde Ridgway: “By ‘likeness’ we shall here mean the intentional reproduction of a person’s features so that the resultant portrait could be taken for no other’s. This definition is based on modern standards of faithfulness to a model, and is naturally colored by one’s familiarity with still photographs or moving pictures, from which we can expect a high degree of accuracy. Yet it does not preclude a certain range of variation, from the extreme ‘realism’ of a caricature to the idealization of an official painting…

During Roman times, portraits of emperors were circulated to the provinces as official images of authority, and the face, more or less idealized according to the particular propaganda trends of the period, was sufficiently recognizable to be identified at a considerable remove in time and, in most cases at least, even by us today. We have therefore been led to assume that this situation prevailed also in the Hellenistic period… But is this a reasonable assumption? This question was taken further in a paper by Anne Marie Nielsen. She points out that “verisimilitude is no concern of the Greek portraitist; he is concerned with the message behind the features…. This meaning is hard to grasp for us… this situation of the Alexander iconography, contaminated by myth and tradition, may be illustrated in the case history of the Rondanini Alexander.” The identity of that work in Munich still remains an open question: for more than two centuries the statue was considered a generally acknowledged portrait; today, though, researchers are inclined to believe that it is a depiction of Achilles or Ares.

In the following decades works appeared that made a substantial step forward in working out a theory of the ancient portrait. The focus of research shifted from the category of likeness to the function of a work and its context, and also to the mythological component of the portrait image. According to Toin Hölscher, “Alexander’s features” were not his personal physical peculiarities, but rather sprang from the iconography of ideal personages in the Classical era, while the image of the king was created on the basis of conceptions about Greek gods and heroes. J.J. Pollitt came to the conclusion that portraits of Alexander represent rather an idea than a person. In depicting Alexander, Lysippus creates an artistic image of an “inspired hero” that becomes a widespread stereotype in the visual arts of the Hellenistic era. R.R.R. Smith introduced the term “role portrait”, examining the genre from the viewpoint of the public function of the portrait in Hellenistic society. More recently, Andrew Stewart formulated the idea that “in
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In conclusion, a very important circumstance influencing the historiography of the portraits has been the outstanding role that Alexander played in the European consciousness in the Modern Era. In the course of the past two centuries his figure acquired great significance in the development of the philosophy of history and social ideology. It could be said that interest in Alexander gradually turned into a cult and – after Antiquity – the twentieth century became the true era of Alexander. In the past century the assessment of his personality and deeds was determined not only by advances in academic scholarship, it mirrored changes in world-view and understanding of history, the emergence of hopes and ambitions of generations and their individual members. Every scholar sees his own Alexander, the German historian Ulrich Wilken observed23; since ancient times this image has become a universal symbol, as Alfred Heuss put it24 – like a glass which each person can fill with their own wine.

The first wave of fascination came in the 1800s and early 1900s. Historical scholarship at that time was represented by the works of Johann Droysen25, Eduard Meyer26, Julius Kaerst and Ulrich Wilken with their apologia for Alexander and the idea of an absolute monarchy embracing all civilized nations – in contrast to their predecessors, who considered Athenian democracy the ideal for society. It was at this time that the first researches devoted to the iconography of the Macedonian ruler appeared. Individual works were published in the iconographic studies and general works of Salomon Reinach29, Wolfgang Helbig30, Adolf Furtwängler31, Franz Winter32, Paul Arndt33 and Ennio Quirino Visconti34, where Alexander occupied a place among Greece’s outstanding figures. A small monograph published by Friedrich Koepp in 1892 represented a first attempt to sum up the evidence. Koepp compared references by ancient authors to Alexander’s appearance, reports about artists who depicted the king and the main portraits, and charted the main features in the iconography of the king. Already at that time the scholar raised the issue of imitations – i.e. the influence of mythological and portrait images – and made the first attempt to explain the phenomenon. Pointing to the similarity between the Alexander type and giants, tritons and other “demons”, Koepp observed that “the Greek artists should have transferred the type developed in portraits of Alexander – a semi-barbarian – to beings hostile to the Hellenic gods and to a certain extent un-Hellenic… But this likeness is, as we have seen, not at all restricted to the lowly demons, but also extends to heroes like Heracles and indeed to gods like Helios and Apollo”36.

Charles Eugène de Ujfalvy engaged in a search for Alexander’s “real” appearance37. The French scholar attempted to reconstruct the King’s physical looks on the basis of texts and works of art. The question of the role played by portraits in the artistic evolution of the era was raised in essays by Oskar Wulff and Oskar Waldhauer. Wulff came to the conclusion that “the statue of Alexander with a spear was the model for a new type of monumental portrait of rulers in the guise of heroes”38. Waldhauer pointed out that in the portraits of Alexander a new treatment of the image of the ruler arose, one that was demanded by the age: “Alexander, the suffering mystic soul”39.

Numerous finds of Alexander-like heads and statuettes made in Alexandria