Philostratus Illustrated: The Reception of the *Imagines* in Renaissance Art and Culture

PhD thesis

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father Frank L. Williamson and my friend Dott.ssa Maria Fossi Todorow.
Philosophy Illustrated: The Reception of the Imagines in Renaissance Art and Culture

PREFACE

The Imagines of Philostratus the Elder and his grandson Philostratus the Younger, is the only book surviving from antiquity that deals solely with the appreciation of painting. The thesis describes and analyses the ways in which the Imagines has been rediscovered, translated, read and interpreted by humanists, artists and their patrons, from the time of the first printed edition in 1503 to the beginning of the seventeenth century when its popularity with artists diminished. A desire to re-visit the Classical past was generated not only by Philostratus’ vivid descriptions of paintings, but also by the example of a luxurious villa setting and the aristocratic lifestyle it suggested. The thesis is not designed as a catalogue of works of art that illustrate Philostratus’ descriptions; rather, it provides a discussion on the transmission of an artistic taste for the antique that took place from the Renaissance onward. To investigate this, the thesis visits a group of villas in Italy and France where such a transmission of taste occurred when ideas from Philostratus, Pliny and Vitruvius created a new architectural philosophy. The decoration of these villas reveals evidence of the ways in which the Imagines was projected onto the Renaissance imagination. A thorough interrogation of the iconographical programmes the Imagines engendered in these Renaissance villas has


2 This thesis will follow the tradition of referring to Philostratus the Elder as the main creator of the Imagines and using his name as proxy for the text he wrote eg. “illustrating Philostratus”. Reference to “Philostratus’ descriptions” refers to the entire collection of descriptions published by both Philostratus the Elder and Philostratus the Younger and will be used instead of alternatives such as “the descriptions of the Philostratoi”. The seventeen descriptions of paintings attributed to Philostratus the Elder’s grandson, called Philostratus the Younger, are written in imitation of the Elder’s original sixty-five ekphraseis and the two collections appear together, with few exceptions, in the manuscript tradition and since the first printed edition of 1503.
been neglected in the existing critical literature on Philostratus. Scholarly focus traditionally remains on the levels of language in the Imagines and its place in the development of Classical ekphrasis. Modern scholarship has been more concerned with assessing the identity of the author and the status of the author in the Second Sophistic, rather than following the re-emergence of the text at a later age. Publications that analyse the literary aspects of the text outweigh those that examine the history of its reception and practical use by artists. The latest study to be published on the Imagines is Le défi de l’art. Philostrate, Calistrate et l’image sophistique by Michel Constantini, Françoise Graziani and Stéphane Rolet with contributions from other scholars. Again, the focus is on literary theory and the Sophistic movement and little consideration is given to the relationship between the book and the art of the time, or the art it motivated within the Classical tradition. It is hoped that this thesis will make a contribution to the study of the Imagines and its influence upon later art and establish a profile for Philostratus as an antique source that inspired artists alongside the more recognized iconographical sources of Ovid and Lucian.


Structure of the thesis

Adhering to a chronological progression, the first chapter introduces the author and the text, presenting an overview of the transmission of the Imagines from the late Roman era to the fifteenth century, with a discussion on its use in Byzantine education. The examination of the re-emergence of Classical mythology in early-Renaissance painting sets the context for the main body of the thesis which deals with the reception of the Imagines in sixteenth-century European art, architecture and culture. Chapters Three to Five analyse the levels of narrative in the text and set the work in the context of sixteenth-century Renaissance Europe, relating Philostratus to the theory and practice of artists as evidenced by works of art that relate directly to the Imagines.

The resulting definition of the Imagines as a vivid evocation of a Hellenistic art gallery that inspired Renaissance artists to ‘re-create’ antiquity, allows a reconsideration of Philostratus’ descriptions within the genre of ancient ekphrasis pertaining to works of art. I would hope to arrive not only at a better comprehension of the works of art and architecture discussed, but also to provide a look at the values of which these works were a synthetic expression. This part of the thesis includes unpublished material on the Renaissance decorative scheme for the Canonica di San Martino al Montughi in Florence, Italy.

The final section of the thesis traces the ways in which the Imagines were adapted to suit the tastes of the Baroque through the lavish illustrated 1614 French translation by Blaise de Vigenère, which changed the way ancient ekphrasis and the art it described, were perceived. The use of Philostratus’ Imagines by Rubens and Poussin provides a context against which to consider the declining reliance upon textual sources from antiquity at a time when the archaeological discoveries at Pompeii and Herculaneum were supplying new evidence of the Classical past.

The main analysis will trace the reception of the Imagines throughout Europe and the methods by which Philostratus reached the attention of patrons and painters. This is also a thesis about the text itself and the forces of inspiration therein that lead to material creation; one art inspiring and giving birth to another.