

The Shield of Achilles, or Homer's View of Representation in Art

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It is a well-known fact that Homer's descriptions of representational artifacts often allow for effects which could hardly be achieved by means of actual craftsmanship. To illustrate the point, let us try to reduce such a major work of Homeric art as the Shield of Achilles to a real piece of craftsmanship.

Even if the black colour of the ploughed field or of the grapes, which suddenly emerges on a shield of gold, can possibly have been produced by the Minoan use of niello on gold,¹ a similar explanation would consequently be required for the rest of the colour and light effects mentioned in the description of the shield — the dark colour of blood, the whiteness of sheep, the youths' tunics glittering with oil, the blaze of torches, and so on.² Furthermore, even if these and similar effects can be accounted for by certain techniques of combining metals that result in "painting in metal",³ one should still have to explain the remarkable fact that the figures on the shield are described not as stationary, as would naturally be expected of reliefs on gold, but as moving. Thus, in what is supposed to represent a scene of siege, the besieged, who at the beginning of the episode are depicted as arming themselves for an ambush, then proceed as if to leave the city, to arrive at the site of the ambush, to attack a herd with the shepherds and join battle; the besiegers, in turn, originally pictured as taking counsel together near the wall, proceed as if to ride towards the enemy and join battle; finally, the shepherds, playing pipes at their first appearance, are eventually attacked and slain by the besieged.⁴ Again, even if a plausible interpretation of this scene along the lines of primitive art cannot be ruled out (one may think, for example, of a series of scenes rather than of a single scene),⁵ there is no explana-

¹ *Il.* 18.548-49, 561-62, see T.B.L. Webster, "Greek Theories of Art and Literature down to 400 B.C.", *CQ* 33 (1939), 177 n. 14; D.H.F. Gray, "Metal-Working in Homer", *JHS* 74 (1954), 1-15.

² *Il.* 18.538, 583, 529, 588, 596, 492.

³ Gray (above, n. 1), 3.

⁴ *Il.* 18.509-540, cf. also 503-506, 573-86. Cf. F. Frontisi-Ducroux, *Dédale. Mythologie de l'artisan en Grèce ancienne* (Paris 1975), 74, according to whose opinion the succession of events on the shield is "plus temporelle que spatiale". Cf. also M.W. Edwards, *The Iliad: A Commentary V* (Cambridge 1991), 207-208.

tion for the fact that the figures on the shield are described not only as moving but also as making sounds — the flutes and lyres utter the “loud sound”, the boy sings his song “with delicate voice”, the river murmurs, the cattle bellow, the dogs bark.⁶ The result is an impossible blend of colours, movements and sounds which can hardly be thought of in terms of a real piece of craftsmanship.⁷

In view of this and similar descriptions,⁸ it has been suggested that Homer drew no distinction between art and reality.⁹ Yet a closer examination of the manner in which Homer describes the shield disproves this suggestion. Although the siege-scene which transforms itself into the battle-scene is explicitly described in terms of movement, the same scene has among its figures the gods Ares and Athena, of whom the poet does not forget to say that they were “both wrought in gold, and golden was the vesture they had on”. In another scene a boy appears in the vineyard playing a pleasant melody on the lyre and singing a sweet Linos-song with delicate voice — but the vineyard itself is “wrought fair in gold”, its vines hang on silver poles and it is surrounded with a ditch of cyanus and a fence of tin. The herd which hurries to the pasture “with lowing” is made of gold and tin and is followed by golden shepherds, the dancing scene

⁵ Cf. the examples adduced in Webster (above, n. 1), 176 and in F. Boas, *Primitive Art* (New York 1955), 73-75.

⁶ *Il.* 18.459, 569-71, 576, 575, 580; cf. Frontisi-Ducroux (above, n. 4), 74-75.

⁷ See H. Schrade, *Götter und Menschen Homers* (Stuttgart 1952), 80: “Es ist wie gesagt möglich ... daß der Dichter bestimmte Kunstwerke vor Augen gehabt hat; es ist auch denkbar, daß diese Werke in einem für die Zeit sehr bemerkenswerten Illusionismus gebildet gewesen sind. Aber es bleibt unvorstellbar, daß der Illusionismus der Beschreibung und der Illusionismus der vorauszusetzenden Kunstwerke übereingestimmt haben”. Frontisi-Ducroux (above, n. 4), 74, though admitting that “il est certes possible de confronter l’oeuvre d’Héphaïstos à des modèles réels”, states at the same time that “la convention de description ... est constamment rompue au cours de l’évocation du chant xviii”.

⁸ It is true of course that the hunting-scene on Odysseus’ brooch in which “a hound in his forepaws held a dappled fawn and gazed on it as it writhed”, though admitting of a degree of illusion unparalleled in the material evidence of the time, is much more conceivable as a real work of craftsmanship than the moving and audible images on Achilles’ shield (*Od.* 19.228-29), just as the golden youths with torches in their hands illuminating the palace of Alcinoüs are much more like real statues than the golden handmaidens of Hephaestus in *Iliad* 18, which are endowed with understanding, voice, strength and competence in women’s work (*Od.* 7.100-101; *Il.* 18.417-20). Yet, as we shall see below, the figures on Odysseus’ brooch are interpreted as living, in a sense, and the golden dogs of Alcinoüs do guard the house as if they were real dogs (*Od.* 7.91-94), demonstrating beyond any doubt that the practice of transferring to objects of art the functions and properties of natural objects is not characteristic of *Iliad* 18 only. Only the descriptions of the *Shield of Heracles* probably suggest a different attitude, see n. 18 below.

⁹ See especially Schrade (above, n. 7), 79-85.

with the youths whose tunics are “glittering with oil” is compared to a piece of craftsmanship wrought by Daedalus.¹⁰ The moving figures of men are only “like living mortals”, and the black field of gold is only “similar” to the real field.¹¹ These and similar remarks leave no doubt that Homer was fully aware of the artificial character of the images on Achilles’ shield.

The manner in which Homer’s artistic images appropriate the functions and properties of their prototypes has given rise to the suggestion that there must have been a magic connection between the image and its prototype, a connection that caused the image to behave as a magical substitute.¹² Yet interpretation of the Homeric images of art in terms of magic, attractive as it may be, proves unwarranted. Consider, for example, the following description of the golden handmaidens in the house of Hephaestus:

... and handmaidens moved to help their lord, golden handmaidens similar to living maids. In them is understanding at their hearts, in them are voice and strength, and they have learnt skills from the immortal gods.¹³

Hephaestus’ handmaidens not only possess general human characteristics such as voice and strength, they are also endowed with what can be called the standard womanly virtues, namely, understanding and knowledge of domestic skills.¹⁴ And yet, if we try to substitute any one of them for a real woman, it will become clear that no such substitution is feasible. A fact of utmost importance is that these statues, as well as all other images of art in Homer, are anonymous.¹⁵ It goes without saying that this anonymity is sharply at variance with the very idea of magical substitution: anonymous images simply have no prototype for which they can be substituted. In this, they fail to fulfill the essential condition that makes magical substitution possible.

Thus, there is no reason to suggest that Homer drew no distinction between art and reality or that he treated images of art in terms of magic. Consequently,

¹⁰ *Il.* 18.509-540, 561-72, 573-86, 590-98.

¹¹ *Il.* 18.539 ... ὠμίλειν δ’ ὥς τε ζωοὶ βροτοὶ ἡδ’ ἐμάχοντο: 18.548 ἦ δὲ μελαίνετ’ ὄπισθεν, ἀρηρομένη δὲ ἔφκει.

¹² Schrade (above, n. 7), 81-83; Webster (above, n. 1), 176-78; Frontisi-Ducroux (above, n. 4), 101-102.

¹³ *Il.* 18.417-20; the English translation by A. Lang, W. Leaf and E. Myers.

¹⁴ As represented, for example, in *Il.* 9.390, 13.432; *Od.* 2.117, 7.11, 13.289, 15.418, 16.158, 20.72. That the golden statues owe their human properties to their anthropomorphic character rather than to the fact that they are self-moving automatons becomes clear by comparing the self-moving tripods in the same episode (*Il.* 18.373-77): though both groups of artifacts are self-moving, the tripods are totally devoid of the human properties with which the self-moving statues are endowed.

¹⁵ This fact is given due attention in N. Himmelmann, “Über bildende Kunst in der homerischen Gesellschaft”, *Abhandlungen der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz* 7 (1969), 22.

the only way to account for the peculiar behaviour of these images is to admit that Homer entertained a special doctrine of representation in art, according to which images of art were seen as artificial and real at one and the same time. Consider the famous hunting scene of Odysseus' brooch: "golden as they were, the hound was gazing on the fawn and strangling it, and the fawn was writhing with his feet and striving to flee".¹⁶ The golden animals on the brooch are represented both as figures of gold and as living animals.

This compares well with the ploughing scene on the Shield of Achilles: "And the field grew black behind and was like a ploughed field, though it was of gold".¹⁷ Note that the "likeness" of the field of gold to the real ploughed field includes its blackness, an effect which, as we saw, probably surpasses what could be achieved by the artisan's technique. In the scene of fighting, the men "hurled together and fought, like living mortals", but this is the scene which, as we also saw, treats the figures as actually moving, so that it is not out of the question that their "likeness" to living men embraces this movement as well. Finally, the "likeness" of Hephaestus' golden handmaidens to real women certainly includes not only the voice and strength but also understanding and knowledge of the domestic skills.¹⁸ It follows that the likeness of the artistic images to natural objects encompasses the functions and properties of their actual

¹⁶ *Od.* 19.230-31 οἱ χρύσειοι ἔόντες ὁ μὲν λάε νεβρὸν ἀπάγχων. / αὐτὰρ ὁ ἔκφυγγεῖν μεμαῶς ἤσπαιρε πόδεσσι.

¹⁷ *Il.* 18.548-49 ἡ δὲ μελαίνειτ' ὄπισθεν. ἀρηρομένη δὲ ἔῶκει. / χρυσεῖη περ εἴουσα.

¹⁸ By contrast, the description of the Shield of Heracles by "Hesiod" almost completely stays within the limits of artistic illusion. Thus, while he also describes such effects as the black colour of snakes' jaws, of blood and of grapes of vine (*Aspis* 167, 173-74, 300), the noise of teeth gnashing (235), the sound of echo (279), and the like, "Hesiod" differs from Homer in that his figures are consistently represented as frozen forever. That this difference is far from accidental can be seen from the following description of a chariot race: "The charioteers standing on their well-woven cars urged on their swift horses with loose rein; the jointed cars flew along chattering and the naves of the wheels shrieked loudly. So they were engaged in an unending toil, and the end with victory came never to them, and the contest was ever unwon" (306-311; tr. H.G. Evelyn-White); cf. Edwards (above, n. 4), 208. Again, although "Hesiod" reminds us of Homer in that he emphasizes that the figures on the Shield of Heracles are like living beings (189 ὡς εἰ ζωοὶ περ ἔόντες, 244 ζωῆσιν ἴκελαι), this likeness never oversteps the limits of a purely artistic representation: the snakes are described "as though there were spots" upon them (166 στίγματα δ' ὡς ἐπέφαντο ἰδεῖν), the Muses who are beginning a song are only "like clear-voiced singers" (206 λιγὺ μελπομένης εἰκυῖσαι), the dolphins only "seem to be swimming" (211 νηχομένοις ἴκελοι), and the men who "were reaping with sharp hooks the stalks which bended with the weight of the ears" are conceived of by the poet only "as if they were reaping Demeter's grain" (290 ὡς εἰ Δημήτερος ἀκτῆν. sc. ἤμων).

prototypes. In other words, the images of art were seen by Homer as, in a sense, living.¹⁹

To be sure, the idea of the “living artifact” is quite compatible with the primitive view of representation in art²⁰ and also, even more significantly, with the archaic Greek tradition — the living statues of Daedalus immediately come to mind in this connection.²¹ Whatever the source of this doctrine, there can be no doubt that it afforded images of art a special status with respect to reality. Given the anonymous character of these images, it is reasonable to suppose that the representation of “a man” would always be envisaged as, in a sense, an actual man, whose existence does not depend on the existence of any real person whatsoever. Indeed, by virtue of the fact that there is no reality by which to evaluate the representation of “a man”, the representational artifact can never be judged as either true or false in relation to reality. A man of gold is no more “true” or “false” than a man of flesh and blood: the only thing that can be said of such a man is that he simply exists side by side with real people, just as Pandora, the woman-artifact, is simply a woman whose autonomous existence extends even to her receiving a name of her own.

There is reason to suppose a close connection between the vitality of Homer’s images of art and their anonymous character. Indeed, the only concept of representation in art that would correspond to the idea of the “living artifact”

¹⁹ This is the conclusion reached in the majority of the studies dealing with Homer’s attitude to the fine arts, see Webster (above, n. 1), 176-78; Schrader (above, n. 7), 81-82; Frontisi-Ducroux (above, n. 4), 75; Himmelmann (above, n. 15), 17-23. Although the majority of the artifacts spoken of by Homer as in some sense “alive”, as indeed the majority of the representational artifacts spoken of by him at all, are described as made by a god, this is not to say that the attitude would be different in the case of “human” artifacts. Note indeed that the statues of Daedalus, human though he was, were treated in the archaic Greek tradition in the same vein as Hephaestus’ artifacts are treated in Homer, whereas the images of “The Shield of Heracles”, presumably a late poem, are much less “alive” than those found in Homer — although they are also thought of as made by Hephaestus (see n. 18 above). What matters here is the idea of the representational artifact as such rather than its divine or human origins.

²⁰ See e.g. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, tr. C. Jacobson (New York 1963), 260-61: “Thus, the chests of Northwest Coast art are not merely containers embellished with a painted or carved animal. They are the animal itself, keeping an active watch over the ceremonial ornaments which have been entrusted to its care. ... The final product is a whole: utensil-ornament, object-animal, box-that-speaks. The ‘living boats’ of the Northwest Coast have their exact counterparts in the New Zealand correspondences between boat and woman, woman and spoon, utensils and organs”.

²¹ See Webster (above, n. 1), 177-78; Frontisi-Ducroux (above, n. 4), 95-117; J.J. Pollitt, *The Ancient View of Greek Art* (New Haven and London 1974), 63-64; E. Panofsky, *Idea. A Concept in Art Theory*, tr. J.J.S. Peake (New York 1968), 14-15.

without at the same time exceeding the limits of art proper, is the treatment of images of art as typical and generic rather than as individual and specific. Only an image that concentrates within itself the most permanent and essential characteristics of its prototype, while at the same time eliminating everything momentary and accidental, can independently confront its prototype with no danger of becoming its magical substitute.²² Both representation of the specific in the light of the generic in archaic Greek art²³ and the late development of the portrait genre in Greece²⁴ can be accounted for along these lines.

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²² It is significant in this connection that the εἰδωλα of living men created from time to time by the Homeric gods (*Il.* 5.449; *Od.* 4.796), are in fact only insubstantial forms with no option for materialization and thus, in contrast to the artifacts, with no chance of becoming “golems” existing side by side with their originals.

²³ See J.J. Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* (Cambridge 1972), 6: “Greek artists tended to look for the typical and essential forms which expressed the essential nature of classes of phenomena in the same way that Platonic ‘forms’ or ‘ideas’ expressed essential realities underlying the multiplicity of sense perception. A geometric statue of a horse is an attempt to get at the ‘horseness’ which lies behind all particular horses”.

²⁴ On this subject see B. Schweitzer, “Studien zur Entstehung des Porträts bei den Griechen”, in B. Schweitzer, *Zur Kunst der Antike. Ausgewählte Schriften II* (Tübingen 1963), 121-58; originally published in *Abhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie, Phil.-hist. Kl.* 91 (1940).