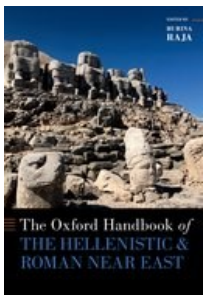

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CHAPTER

5 Art in Hellenistic Syria

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Abstract

Syria produced considerable art during the Hellenistic period. Greek and local artists created works that absorbed Hellenistic influences from the Mediterranean and merged these with local traditions. Especially the cities of the north Syrian Tetrapolis were centers of Greek art. Several artists in Hellenistic Syria and their relations to Greek centers such as Rhodes can be tracked. Interestingly some of these artists also worked abroad. Influences from the Mediterranean triggered the creation of local sculpture, but other art also appeared in Syria such as delicate mosaics, elaborate wall decoration, fine toreutics, early glass, and local figurines. The Greek influence was widespread because royal patronage and court culture encouraged adoption of Greek models. Even so, more traditional artworks continued to use local traditions, local materials, and well-established techniques of producing art.

Keywords: art, artists, sculpture, mosaics, wall decoration, toreutics, glass, figurines

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Visual Art in the Hellenistic Period

In antiquity, the term "art" (Greek *techne*) did not have the same meaning as today (Pollitt 1974). While the modern use has an inherent notion of independent artists who seek to express their own individuality, the Greek term referred to craftsmen who used their skills to please their customers. Even so, the individuality of certain artists and their contribution to artworks were acknowledged and artists were known by their names.

The Hellenistic period is defined as the time between the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC) and the Battle of Actium (31 BC). It began with the emergence of the Hellenistic kingdoms and ended with the dissolution of the last of the major Hellenistic kingdoms, the Ptolemaic kingdom, through Rome's intervention. Syria was the

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core region of the Seleucid realm with Antioch in northern Syria as its capital. During the third century BC, the Ptolemies ruled over large parts of the southern Levant, until the Seleucids took over this part as well. Most parts of Syria remained under Seleucid control until the first century BC.

Any modern epochal division can of course be contested: politically, in Syria, the Seleucid kingdom ended with the establishment of the Roman province of Syria in 64/63 BC. Culturally, Greek influence in Syria was already strong before the Hellenistic period, and Hellenism in Syria goes well into the early Islamic period (Bowersock 1990). This chapter covers the period 323–31 BC and focuses on monumental sculpture, mosaics, wall decoration, and selected minor arts. These genres of art were part of elite and official representational culture and to a large extent were embellishments found in public spaces, sanctuaries, and domestic buildings.

The choice of art genres that are discussed here is eclectic and has a strong classicist, colonial, and Western bias. Covered is the artwork that was heavily influenced by Greek artists, and this came with Greek political dominion. The author is fully aware of that and of a marginalization of more local, “indigenous” art. But
p. 70 because of the importance ↳ of these genres for elite cultural discourses in the Hellenistic Mediterranean, this approach is deemed appropriate.

Artists of Hellenistic Syria

In Hellenistic Syria, several artists are known by name. Some of them were native to Syria; others were attracted by the Hellenistic court of the Seleucid kingdom. Most of the evidence stems from the metropoleis of northern Syria and the coastal cities. None of the artworks known from literature or inscriptions have come down to us.

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Figure 5.1. Tyche of Antioch by Eutychides. Roman copy of an early Hellenistic work, Vatican Museums, inv. no. 2672 ©Wikipedia (Jastrow).

The most famous sculpture in the round in Hellenistic Syria is the Tyche of Antioch made by Eutychides, a Greek sculptor from Sicyon in the Peloponnese (fig. 5.1) (Meyer 2006). This sculpture was highly influential for the iconography of the goddess Tyche and had long-lasting impact, being copied and the type transformed for many centuries (DNO 2551–2553). Many replicas of the statue make it one of the best-documented artworks of the period. The statue depicted the divine personification of the city in its topographic layout with mountain and personified river; it was created in the early third century BC for the newly founded city of Antioch, the capital of the Seleucid empire. Although we know of other artworks of Eutychides, we have no information that any of them was commissioned for another city in Syria.

Another famous artist of the late classical to early Hellenistic period, Bryaxis from Caria, was active close to Antioch. At about the same time as Eutychides, he created the monumental acrolith cult statue of Apollon for the sanctuary at Daphne (DNO 2347–2355; Linfert 1983; Flashar 1992, 70–77). This statue is difficult to trace, but tetradrachms of a special issue of Antiochus IV minted in 166/165 BC in Antioch or in Daphne probably depicted this masterpiece (fig. 5.2) (Houghton et al. 2008, 62 and 65, no. 1401). Apollon was the dynastic god of

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the Seleucids. Bryaxis also made a statue of King Seleucus I, but we have no information about where it was erected (Plin., *HN* 34.73, DNO 2359).

Figure 5.2. Tetradrachm of Antiochus IV, 166/165 BC; Obv.: Laureate head of Apollon to r.; Rev.: Apollon with kithara to r.; Giessener Münzhandlung 71, Munich 1995, no. 393.

The third foreign artist known to be in Hellenistic Syria is a certain Hermocles of Rhodes, who was active around 300 BC, and according to Lucian, he made a bronze statue of Combabos in the sanctuary of Atargatis in Hierapolis (Lucian., *Syr. D.* 26; DNO 2629). Combabos was a mythical figure who was involved in the foundation of the sanctuary, together with the Seleucid queen Stratonike I. She was the wife of Seleucus I, and the king had given permission to erect the statue of Combabos, underlining the royal patronage of the work (Lightfoot 2003, 384–417).

It is remarkable that only these three Greek artists are known to have worked in Hellenistic Syria. All of them were active in the early Hellenistic period and all of them were active in northern Syria within a royal Seleucid context. Bryaxis was already a famous artist and had worked in several places in the eastern Mediterranean before coming to Daphne. Eutychides became famous through the Tyche he made for Antioch.

p. 71 In addition to the artists active in Syria, we have some information about artists stemming from Syria and working abroad. Most remarkable in this context is that there seems to have been a strong connection to Rhodes, which during the Hellenistic period was one of the centers of visual arts (Goodlett 1991, 669–681; Moreno 1994, 359–413). Technon from Sidon was a bronze sculptor active in the first half of the third century BC, and he worked on Rhodes (Lindos and Kamiros), its Peraia, and places close by (Loryma and Nisyros) (DNO 2660–2663).

A considerable group of artists came from Tyre and worked on Rhodes. Their activity stretched from the
p. 72 second half of the second century BC to the first century BC and ↳ involved artists named Artemidoros, Menodotos, Charmolas, and Talestes (Dow 1941, 351–360; Lippold 1950, 377–378; Goodlett 1991, 677–678; Badoud 2010, 125–143).

Also active in Rhodes was a group of artists in the early first century BC. They originated from Antioch, probably Antioch at the Orontes (although this is not completely certain). Agathokles (DNO 3871–3872), Satyros (DNO 3873–3874), and Troilos (DNO 3875–3878) were sculptors and bronze workers who had been attracted by the famous workshops in Rhodes and they seem to have been quite productive, as attested by inscriptions identifying their works.

The artists originating from Hellenistic Syria and working abroad suggest that Hellenistic Syria was no backwater of Hellenistic art production but had local artists in some of the major cities of northern Syria and Phoenicia. These artists were mobile, making their fortune in Rhodes. The artists produced primarily

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sculpture, but we also know of a certain Aristobulos from Syria, who was a painter worthy of note and probably worked in the early Hellenistic period (Plin., *HN* 35.146; DNO 3042). We have no information about his output or where he was active.

Monumental Sculpture

Monumental sculpture in the Hellenistic period was usually made of stone, preferably marble, or bronze. Since bronze was already being recycled in antiquity, very few bronze sculptures from the Hellenistic period were uncovered in Syria, although we have to assume that it was the preferred material for sculpture (Wenning 1983, 118; Erlich 2009 29–40; Gergel 1991, 231–251; Fleischer 1991, X).

p. 73 Marble was not local to Syria, so all the marble for statues was imported from marble production centers in the eastern Mediterranean such as Greece and Asia Minor. The knowledge for working marble was a skill that was not necessarily available at local workshops used to working in limestone or basalt. An exceptional unfinished Hellenistic marble sculpture from Akko shows the result when an unskilled workshop tried to work marble and ended up with stylistic features known from carving local limestone sculpture (Erlich 2009, 12). Therefore, when marble was imported, artisans generally came with it, bringing their sculpting skills and knowledge of Greek forms and styles. Because marble is so heavy, most sculptures did not travel far from the coast and therefore larger amounts of marble sculpture are restricted to coastal cities. A widespread distribution of marble products in the Near East is a phenomenon only of the Roman period (Fischer 1998).

Marble sculptures had been imported to Phoenicia since the classical period, e.g., to the sanctuary of Eshmun in Bustan es-Sheich near Sidon (Stucky 1993). We know that sarcophagi came to Sidon—for example, the famous, late classical *Klagefrauensarkophag* or the already early Hellenistic "Alexander Sarcophagus" (von Graeve 1970; Fleischer 1983). There is not much other evidence for imported marble sculpture during the early Hellenistic period, but later in the Hellenistic period, Antioch, and also other sites further away from the Mediterranean coast such as Dura Europos and Mesopotamia, yielded some evidence for Hellenistic marble sculptures (Najbjerg 2001, 182–184, nos. 49–50; Invernizzi 2009). The head of a woman with a mural crown from Susa even has an inscription, mentioning the sculptor, a certain Antiochos, son of Dryas (Invernizzi 2017, 278 n. 23). The prominent positioning of the signature of the artist on the head of the sculpture—a placement that in a Greek context would be uncommon—suggests explicit pride in owning a marble sculpture that was made by a Greek artist (Pfrommer 2009, 124). These marble sculptures belong to the second and first centuries BC. Also created in the second century BC is the marble head of Alexander the Great from Beth Shean, as were several other marble objects found in the southern Levant, but again mostly on the coast (Wenning 1983, 105–118; Tal 2009, 85–90). In northern Syria, fragments of a Hellenistic acrolith statue in Parian marble were uncovered at the temple of Jebel Khalid (Clarke 2015, 148–149).

In general, there is not much marble sculpture from the Hellenistic period in Syria, and with few exceptions most of it is restricted to coastal sites. Non-marble stone sculpture from the Hellenistic period is difficult to track because these sculptures, of which quite a large corpus is preserved in several regions of Syria, are hard to date. It seems that only in the late Hellenistic period did such sculptures become common, and Michael Blömer in his study on north Syrian sculpture even suggests that local sculpture is a phenomenon of the Roman period, implying that such sculpture became more commonplace only under Roman influence (Blömer 2014, 183; see also Bolelli 1986, 324–329; Erlich 2009, 13–27; Clarke 2015, 149–151). But again, regional differentiation is necessary, since on the Phoenician coast there is a tradition of producing reliefs and sculptures in local stone, as can be seen in Umm el-Amed or in Bustan es-Sheich (Dunand and Duru 1962, 143–180; Stucky 1993, 72–75;
p. 74 see also Frede 2002, 64–65). These sculptures often ↳ blend Greek and local styles; sometimes as in Umm el-Amed Egyptian iconography or in Bustan es-Sheich, Cypriote influences can be detected as well. In other cases, the sculptures are purely Greek in style—for example, the Nike from Dor, attributed to the third/second century

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BC (Stewart and Martin 2003, 125). Marisa in Idumaea has yielded some quite remarkable local chalk sculptures from the Hellenistic period that are difficult to date and to interpret, merging Hellenistic and local features (fig. 5.3) (Erlich 2009, 14–22).

Figure 5.3. Hellenistic head made of chalk from Marisa (subterranean complex 169), IAA registration no. 3567/02 169-19-380, Maresha excavations, Ian Stern and Adi Erlich, photo by Maria Bukin.

Some of the sculptures display a very schematic and abstract style with reduced depiction of facial features. In northern Syria, the royal sculptures of late Hellenistic Commagene with its most famous site Nemrud Dag are an exception not only in their monumentality but also in their iconography, being influenced by Greek and Iranian models (Brijder 2014; see also Kropp 2013, 83–87; Versluys 2017).

In Iraq el-Amir in Transjordan, the Qasr al-Abd, a Hellenistic palace built around 200 BC, was decorated with monumental reliefs of animals (Will and Larché 1991). The reliefs were executed in limestone and they are

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remarkable because the building belonged to the Jewish priestly family of the Tobiads. Jews during this period
p. 75 were supposed to be ↳ reluctant to depict living creatures, especially anthropomorphic figures, but animals in some contexts were accepted (Lichtenberger 2009b, 71–97). The Tobiad family sided with the Ptolemies against the Seleucids and the Qasr al-Abd was heavily influenced by Ptolemaic art and style, and this political dependence probably explains the adoption of the motifs. Hellenistic monumental reliefs are very rare in Hellenistic Syria. Other examples of monumental Hellenistic sculpture are the second-century BC reliefs from Ashrafiye close to Pella in Transjordan (Thiel 2007, 354–359).

In general, the preserved evidence for sculpture in Hellenistic Syria remains sparse. Most of the marble sculpture of the early Hellenistic period seems to be restricted to coastal centers and to northern Syria and from there only later reached deeper into mainland Syria and Mesopotamia. Difficulties working with marble (and the lost bronze) sculptures possibly triggered the production of local limestone and basalt sculptures in Syria in the late Hellenistic period although it needs to be emphasized that monumental sculpture was produced in some areas such as Phoenicia before the Hellenistic period.

Mosaics

During the Hellenistic period, tessellated mosaics became common in the Mediterranean. Although Syria is a center of mosaic production in the Roman period, Hellenistic mosaics are very rare, occurring mainly in the southern Levant (Dunbabin 1999, 160–161 and 187). One of the earliest mosaics stems from mid- to late second-century BC coastal Dor, where a polychrome mosaic with comic masks and a floral design was uncovered (Stewart and Martin 2003, 132–141). Attributed to the second/first century BC are black and white mosaics that were found at Tel Anafa in the hinterland of Tyre (Herbert 1994). Combined with the mosaics in Tel Anafa were *opus signinum* floors, and this technique is typical for the Punic realm, suggesting that in the hinterland of Tyre some kind of local (Punic-Phoenician) influence can be traced (Erlich 2009, 88–90; see also Vassal 2006, 39–44 and 106).

Polychrome mosaic floors are also known from the Hasmonean palaces in Jericho dating to the first century BC but their quality is not very high (Ovadiah and Ovadiah 1987, 77, no. 111). Toward the end of the Hellenistic period, the palaces of Herod the Great yielded many mosaics and *opus sectile* floors, some of them influenced by an eastern Hellenistic tradition, others by upcoming western (Roman) models (Lichtenberger 2009a, 43–62). A similar combination of eastern Mediterranean polychrome mosaics and western black and white mosaics is encountered in late Hellenistic Commagene, where such mosaics have been unearthed in Arsameia at the Nymphaios and in the palace of Samosata (Bingöl 1997, 106–110; Kropp 2013, 107–109).

Mosaics had no local pre-Hellenistic tradition in Syria and therefore the few mosaics that are extant rely on Mediterranean models. The Tel Anafa *opus signinum* might be a special case, placing the floors in a particular
p. 76 Punic-Phoenician cultural milieu. In the ↳ Hellenistic period, mosaics are rare in Syria and until now are not known to exist before the second century BC.

Wall Decoration

Wall paintings and stucco friezes are part of the interior decoration of domestic and public buildings and also used in sepulchres. A characteristic of Hellenistic wall decoration is the combination of wall painting and stucco, well known from the so-called First Pompeian Style (“Masonry Style”), an architectural style that was widespread in the eastern Mediterranean (Ling 1991, 12). These wall decorations usually lack figurative scenes and display geometric and architectural, sometimes floral, decor.

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A study of Hellenistic wall decoration in Hellenistic Syria is still a research desideratum, but in several places fragments have been found; they offer the typical "Masonry Style," often in combination with lavish stucco work. In the southern Levant there is a good bit of evidence for "Masonry Style" wall decoration in private and public contexts of the second and first centuries BC. The main areas of influence, and from where the inspiration stems, seem to be Alexandria and Carthage. Fragments of "Masonry Style" have been unearthed at Jericho, Tel Anafa, Ptolemais-Akko, and Marisa; Petra, Beth Shean, and coastal sites such as Anthedon and Berytos have also yielded such evidence (Rozenberg 2008, 298–309; Kidd 2018, 29–32; Ashkenazi et al. 2021). Remarkable is the occurrence of "Masonry Style" in the Hellenistic sanctuary of Zeus Olympios in Gerasa, attesting to the use of such decoration also in public contexts (Rozenberg 2008, 306–309). In the late Hellenistic period, the palaces of Herod the Great provide a wealth of stucco and painted wall decoration in "Masonry Style" and in the upcoming so-called Second Pompeian Style (Rozenberg 2008).

In northern Syria only a few remains of Hellenistic wall paintings have been found (and published), most notably in Jebel Khalid on the Euphrates. In the "Acropolis Palace" and in the housing area, many fragments of "Masonry Style" decoration have been uncovered. They date to the second and first centuries BC and in the housing insula even parts of a figurative frieze were uncovered. It has been suggested that the wall decoration is influenced by eastern Mediterranean models as attested in Macedonia and Delos (Jackson 2009, 231–253; 2016, 259–268). The late Hellenistic palace in Samosata in Commagene yielded a substantial number of fragments of wall decoration that can be related to the so-called Second Pompeian Style (Bingöl 1997, 111–118).

The most important paintings from Hellenistic tombs in Syria stem from Marisa, where several tombs of the third century BC have been explored (Jacobson 2007; Erlich 2009, 61–85). The hypogea from Marisa are of an Alexandrian type and so is the wall decoration. The mid-third-century BC "Tomb I" has a hunting scene and exotic animals as well as Ptolemaic eagles. These tombs are important evidence for Ptolemaic influence in third-century BC Palestine. Until now, no other Hellenistic tombs with notable wall paintings have been uncovered in Syria.

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So-called Minor Arts

Any choice of art genre is eclectic and dependent on the definition of art. In this contribution, the focus has hitherto been on ancient genres of art that are monumental or large scale and often can be connected with artists who signed their artworks, such as sculpture, painting, and mosaics. However, in antiquity, other artworks were sometimes signed, such as toreutics, glass, and coins and thus regarded as art.

Work in precious materials with clear provenance from Hellenistic Syria is rare, but Achaemaenid Iran had a long tradition of such production, and a considerable number of such objects have survived to the present (Pfrommer 1993). Some of the objects can be related to Seleucid court art and therefore it can be assumed that these objects were available also in Hellenistic Syria. Two first-century BC rhyta in Malibu even display signatures of artists (Pfrommer 1993, 186–187, no. 71 and 190–191, no. 73). The language of the signatures is Aramaic but the habit of signing is Greek, underlining the adoption of Greek artistic habits. Exquisite jewelry is also well documented in Syria although there is no proof yet that such objects were indeed produced in Syria (Pfrommer 1990).

Glass was fabricated in Egypt and the Near East in the pre-Hellenistic periods. Thanks to the rich deposits of silica-based sand at the Levantine coast, the region was a center of glass production. Vessels typical of the second century BC were mold-made, hemispherical bowls with a flat or ribbed surface. By the end of the Hellenistic period, in the mid-first century BC an important technological innovation arose in the southern Levant: the invention of glass blowing (tube blowing) which made glass production much more efficient and industrial (von Saldern 2004, 218–223). It is this milieu from which in the early Roman period extraordinary

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glass workshops emerged in Phoenicia such as the one owned by Ennion (Lightfoot 2014). His mold-blown products were traded throughout the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

In Hellenistic Syria, no signed coins were minted, but it needs to be emphasized that many Hellenistic coin types, especially the royal and civic tetradrachms on large flans, displayed an artistic and technical quality that clearly allows for a qualification as artworks (fig. 5.2). Seleucid royal portraiture often had an expressive style giving the impression of an individual character sketch and some of the die cutters can be regarded as artists. Related to the production of coins is the cutting of seals. Seals were used in official and private contexts for administrative and legal issues and some of the seals offer artistic depictions. Although it is difficult to assign seals to specific Syrian workshops, large assemblages of Hellenistic seal impressions (bullae) have been unearthed in Doliche, Kedesh, Beth Shean, and Marisa, and Mesopotamia has also yielded large complexes in Seleucia on the Tigris and Uruk (Schreiber 2023). Some of the seals are artistic masterpieces cut in stone; others are at least reflections of the artistic landscape belonging to the visual program of Hellenistic Syria (Herbert 2008, 257–272).

Terracotta figurines are a group of mass-produced artifacts that are not necessarily regarded as objects of high
p. 78 artistic quality, although, for example, late classical and ↳ early Hellenistic so-called Tanagra figurines have quite some artistic appeal, combining advanced techniques of multi-mold production with sophisticated formal types. Mold-made figurines have a long tradition in Syria, starting in the Bronze Age and continuing at least into the Byzantine period. In the pre-Hellenistic period, figurines were usually plaquettes from a single mold (or hand-made). Double or multi-molded figurines were produced under Greek influence. Figurines were often used in private worship within houses, tombs, and sanctuaries. Because of the long tradition of producing and using such objects in Syria, the motifs as well as the formal and stylistic models were often strongly persistent. Therefore, coroplastic artifacts in Hellenistic Syria sometimes display characteristics that are only slightly Hellenized. Important assemblages of Hellenistic figurines were found, for example, in well-excavated sites in the southern Levant such as Marisa and Kharayeb (close to Tyre) (Chéhab 1951–1954; Erlich 2009, 41–60). Again, a mixture of local, Greek, and Egyptian artistic influences can be detected in these objects. In northern Syria, fewer Hellenistic figurines have been reported so far, with some from Dura Europos. In northern Syria, figurines seem to have been influenced strongly from Mesopotamia, where places like Uruk and Seleucia on the Tigris yielded such objects (Downey 2003, 8–21).

Hellenistic Syrian Art?

When looking at art in Hellenistic Syria, it is clear that there is not one characteristic Syrian art but that a regional and chronological differentiation is necessary. A challenge in looking at Hellenistic Syria is that the south is much better explored than the north, with more excavations undertaken in the south. This situation distorts the picture, giving the impression that the south is richer in art than the north. Such an impression clearly is false, since from literary sources we know of the importance of the cities in the north, particularly of the so-called Tetrapolis. These cities were important urban centers of the Seleucid kingdom.

Thus, there is more archaeological evidence for Hellenistic art in the south. However, it is obvious that most textual evidence for the early Hellenistic period indeed relates to northern Syria and is based on royal (Seleucid) patronage. During the early Hellenistic period the southern Levant was under Ptolemaic rule and therefore the third-century BC evidence in the south is markedly influenced by Ptolemaic culture.

In the second century BC an increase in Hellenistic artworks can be detected in Syria, but it is the late Hellenistic period that provides the most evidence. It seems that the late Hellenistic period is the formative period—at least in the archaeological record—for the rich artistic culture that later characterizes Roman Syria.

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Finally, it needs to be emphasized that art in Hellenistic Syria was often the result of merging local traditions with influences from the western Mediterranean, but also with a mix of Egyptian, Cypriote, Mesopotamian,
p. 79 and Iranian material culture. This blend ↳ of cultural influences was the result of a well-connected Hellenistic world and of the positioning of Syria in the center of the vast Seleucid kingdom.

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