

*CIRCVMMLITIO:*

PLINY, PAINTERS, AND POLYCHROMY

by

BRADLEY BRENT CAVEDO, JR.

(Under the Direction of Mark Abbe)

ABSTRACT

This thesis reevaluates the meaning of the contested Latin term *circumlitio* in Pliny the Elder's anecdote (35.133) about the fourth-century BCE Greek painter Nicias and the contemporary sculptor Praxiteles. Analysis of both visual and textual evidence reveals that the term refers to the thorough covering of the marble surface of the statue with the encaustic wax painting carried out by Nicias and not the color of the paint layer, as often emphasized in modern translations.

INDEX WORDS: *circumlitio*, Polychromy, Encaustic Painting

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M.A., The University of Georgia, 2016

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty at The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2018

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May 2018

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank Dr. Mark Abbe, my thesis advisor, who has been an inspiring and enlightening guide through the field of Art History. I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Alisa Luxenberg, Dr. Nicolas Morrissey, and Dr. Thomas Biggs, who were crucial to the development of the ideas expressed in this thesis and invaluable to the revision and precision of the text. I will be forever grateful to the Art History faculty at the Lamar Dodd School of Art for the intellectually and personally edifying experience of this program. This degree would not have been possible without the support of Dr. Lindsey Harding, Dr. Michelle Ballif, and the Writing Intensive Program at The University of Georgia.

I would like to express my gratitude for the ongoing support offered by Dr. Liane Houghtalin. I would like to thank Dr. Naomi Norman for her wisdom and guidance. I would also like to thank Dr. Mario Erasmo for his enthusiasm and encouragement.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends. In particular, I would like to thank Kevin Perry, Jordan Dopp, and Kathryn Woodruff.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the midst of his biography of the celebrated fourth-century BCE Greek painter Nicias, Pliny the Elder shares an anecdote about the preeminent contemporary sculptor Praxiteles that provides a rare glimpse into the intimate collaboration between a sculptor and painter,<sup>1</sup>

*hic est Nicias, de quo dicebat Praxiteles interrogatus quae maxime opera sua probaret in marmoribus: “quibus Nicias manum admovisset;” tantum circumlitioni eius tribuebat. (NH 35.133)*

This is the Nicias, about whom Praxiteles used to say when asked which of his own works in marble he most approved: “the ones to which Nicias had applied his hand;” so much he attributed to his *circumlitio*.<sup>2</sup>

Since the seventeenth century, antiquarians, philologists, and art historians have interpreted and translated this passage, and the term *circumlitio* in isolation, in various and conflicting ways to support differing aesthetic notions of Greek and Roman sculptural polychromy.<sup>3</sup> Attention has focused on Pliny’s use of the term *circumlitio*, which the Oxford Latin Dictionary defines simply as an “anointing round about” or “coating or covering,” in his authorial explanation of Praxiteles’ response, “so much he attributed to his *circumlitio*.”<sup>4</sup> Whereas translations such as “polychromy” emphasize modern priorities of color and reflect conflicting reconstructions of the coloration of

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<sup>1</sup> On Nicias, see Vollkommer 2001, 135-137; Reinach 1921, 286 ff.; Brunn 1889, 110 ff. On Praxiteles, see Vollkommer 305-319; Corso 2004; Ajootan 2006; Pasquier and Martinez 2007. On Pliny, see Ferri 1946; Pollitt 1974; Isager 1991; Carey 2003; Tanner 2006, 246-364. For commentary on the text of Pliny, see Gallet de Santerre et al. 2002 (34), Croisille 1985 (35), Rouveret et al. 1981 (36). On Book 35, see also Isager 1991, 114-143.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. The Oxford Latin Dictionary, 1972, defines *tribuo* “to divide; to grant, bestow, award; to allocate, devote, apply; to ascribe credit, attribute; to place value, pay regard; to give credit.” Senses of the verb such as “ascribe credit,” “place value,” and “give credit” take the dative case (indirect object) with the direct object, e.g. the “value” or “credit,” understood.

<sup>3</sup> Retuersward 1960, 9-27, makes a note of the works that discuss the term *circumlitio* in his survey of the bibliography of polychromy from 1763 (Winckelmann) to 1954.

<sup>4</sup> OLD, 322, s.v. *circumlitio*. Pliny uses the term in one other instance, in the plural, *circumlitiones*, *N.H.* 24.40, to describe the topical treatment of the lips with liquid pitch. Seneca the Younger uses *circumlitio* in *Epistulae* 86.6 in a passage where he describes *opus sectile* marble inlay bordered by a *in picturae modum variata circumlitio*, “a *circumlitio* varied in the manner of a painting.”

ancient statuary, reevaluation of the term in light of ancient artistic practice and intertextual analysis reveals that the meaning of the term need not have anything to do with color.

The noun *circumlitio* itself comes from the verb *circumlinere*, which, as discussed below, signifies the action of thoroughly covering the surface area of a three-dimensional object, usually with a liquid, such as paint or wax.<sup>5</sup> Translations and interpretations of *circumlitio* since 1667 have reflected disparate reconstructions of the coloration of ancient statuary and have ranged widely: from a simple, unpigmented wax polish, to a thin, pigmented varnish, to the limited coloration of hair and accessories (with the flesh left unpainted), to highly realistic, fully painted polychrome treatments.<sup>6</sup> Such interpretations tend to reduce *circumlitio* to a narrow understanding of ancient painting technique and make assumptions about its alleged aesthetic aims, while overlooking both Pliny's educated rhetorical posture and the Roman reception and adaptation of this anecdote about a Classical encaustic painter.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> OLD, *s.v.* *circumlino*, “to smear or anoint around (with); to paint round, decorate.” Interestingly, Pliny as well as the other authors discussed below primarily use this verb in the perfect-passive-participle form, i.e. “having been coated,” suggesting that *circumlitio* signifies the process itself.

<sup>6</sup> Reinach 1921, 293, n. 5, “Il n'y a pas de mot qui corresponde à ce qu'était la *circumlitio*. Il faut se garder de le rendre par *patine* qui traduit γάνωσις, teinte donnée à toute la statue. La *circumlitio* consiste en la mise de couleurs dans des parties accessoires de la statue : cheveux, draperie, etc. On sait que cette polychromie statuaire commence avec les *korès* de l'Acropole pour atteindre son apogée avec le sarcophage d'Alexandre et qu'on a relevé des traces de peinture sur l'*Hermès* de Praxitèle;” “There is no word that corresponds to *circumlitio*. We must be careful not to render it by patina which translates *ganosis*, a hue given to the whole statue. *Circumlitio* consists of putting colors in accessory parts of the statue: hair, drapery, etc. We know that this sculptural polychromy begins with the *kores* of the Acropolis to reach its apogee with the sarcophagus of Alexander and the traces of paint left on the the Hermes of Praxiteles.”

<sup>7</sup> Croisille 1985 translates the passage, 92, “C'est ce Nicias, dont Praxitèle disait, quand on lui demandait lesquels de ses ouvrages en marbre il plaçait le plus haut: “Ceux où Nicias a mis la main”, si grande était l'importance qu'il attribuait à son procédé de coloration des détails,” “It is this Nicias, of whom Praxiteles said, when asked which of his works in marble he placed the highest: “those where Nicias put his hand,” so great was the importance he attributed to his process of coloration of the details” and explains, 239-240, “...il s'agit de couleurs passées sur des statues, mais non pas uniformément; c'est un procédé ornemental qui consiste à peindre certaines parties, comme la chevelure, le drapé...Il ne s'agit donc pas d'une patine (γάνωσις) appliquée sur l'ensemble, mais de περιαιλοιφή,” “...it has to do with colors put on statues, but not uniformly: it is an ornamental process that consists of painting certain parts, like the hair, the drape... it is not therefore a patina (γάνωσις) applied on the whole, but a περιαιλοιφή.” *perialoiphē* is from *perialeiphō*, “to smear all over, anoint,” Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1368.



## TRANSLATIONS OF *CIRCUMLITIO*

In 2010, the prominent classical archaeologist Vincenz Brinkmann and his colleague Oliver Primavesi, a professor of Greek philology, published the evocatively titled volume *Circumlitio: The Polychromy of Antique and Mediaeval Sculpture*, which suggests that the English “polychromy” is a translation of the Latin *circumlitio*.<sup>8</sup> The use of the term “polychromy,” itself an English-from-French portmanteau of two Greek-derived morphemes, as a translation of the Latin term *circumlitio* reveals an emerging enlightenment interest in the reconstruction of the original multi-colored appearance of ancient statues.<sup>9</sup> This maximal interpretation of *circumlitio*, however, perpetuates the acute focus of modern scholarship on sculptural polychromy and does not capture either the etymology of the term, its potential aesthetic implications, or the possibility that the term is not limited to sculptural polychromy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Brinkmann, Primavesi, and Hollein 2010. The passage is mentioned in Brinkmann’s introduction, 12, “Pliny reports that Praxiteles, whom he actually considers the greatest of all sculptors, had commissioned Nicias – i.e. a prominent painter colleague – with the polychromy of his works. He thus suggests to the reader that Antique sculpture was painted in colour as a matter of course.” It is also discussed briefly in a chapter by Primavesi who translates the passage “It is this Nicias of whom Praxiteles to say, when asked which of his own works in marble he regarded most highly, “the ones to which Nicias has set his hand”- so much value did he assign to the latter’s *circumlitio*” (27 and see below). The passage is translated the same way by Brinkmann in Østergaard and Nielsen 2014, 97, where no translation or interpretation of the term *circumlitio* is offered, although Brinkmann explains that the anecdote “illustrates this interdependence of art forms in Late Classical times. The great sculptor Praxiteles likes those of his works best that have been... painted by Nicias, the most famous painter of the time.”

<sup>9</sup> Østergaard 2010, writing in *Circumlitio*, 83, points out that Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy “coined” the term “polychromie.”

<sup>10</sup> The literal meaning, discussed below, is itself both the subject of dispute and object of oversight. Pollitt 1974, 253 n.7, in his entry on the Greek term *skiagraphia*, which he defines as “painting which seeks to simulate our normal optical experience of how light falls on objects, the technique which in later European art is called *chiaroscuro* or simply “shading,” suggests “the Greek equivalent of *circumlitio* may have been *skiagraphia*.” In the same note, however, he also proposes the possibility that “Pliny’s use of the term in connection with painting on sculpture may simply be an error, or as Brunn suggested, it may refer to the clear separation of the different parts of a statue through color.” While perhaps not an error, an alternative explanation is offered by Tanner 2006, 239, who points out that Pliny often shifts from “art-historical discourse to a more technical register.” It is possible that Pliny’s use of *circumlitio* is an example of such a shift, but his choice of *circumlitio* rather than *circumlitus* suggests otherwise.

Since the philologist Carlo Roberto Dati first translated *circumlitio* in the mid-seventeenth century, scholars have often cited Pliny's anecdote or the term in isolation as textual evidence for their own aesthetically motivated notions of classical sculpture.<sup>11</sup> In his 1667 work *Vite de Pittori Antichi*, which adapts Pliny's anecdotal biographies of Classical artists into contemporary Italian, Dati translated *circumlitio* with the Italian *lisciatura* as a final smoothing or cleaning up of the marble surface.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in his 1685 commentary on Pliny's *Natural History*, the classicist Jean Hardouin translated *circumlitio* with the French *vernir* as a delicate anointing of the marble surface with color intended to bring out the brightness of the marble.<sup>13</sup> Such minimal translations of *circumlitio* as polish or varnish reveal the priorities of the contemporary white marble aesthetic and hardly account for Nicias' encaustic painting, which is the central aspect of the anecdote.

Although it continues to be increasingly recognized that the art historian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann recorded evidence of -and even advocated for-

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<sup>11</sup> The discussion of polychromy underwent several periods of varying evaluative standards between the Renaissance and twenty-first century; translations of *circumlitio* tend to occur during periods of increased discussion. Østergaard 2010, surveys the historiography of polychromy and groups the periods as: "The Loss of Colour I: The *Rinascita* of Antique Form," "The Loss of Colour II: Neo-Classicism," "The Rediscovery of Colour, ca. 1800-1900," "Consensus and Silence: 1900-1939," "Low Point: 1939-1959," "New Beginning: 1960-1980," and "Breakthrough: ca. 1980 to the Present."

<sup>12</sup> Dati 1667, 20, "dove *circumlitio*, a mio credere, vale una certa lisciatura, e ultimo rinettamento, che ragguagli, e tolga via ogni scabrosita del lavoro," "where *circumlitio*, in my opinion, means a certain smoothing and final cleaning up which levels out and takes away each roughness from the work." Dati discusses *circumlitio* in a section on *subtilitas* (discussed below), which he understands as "finishing." This understanding of the relationship between sculpture and painting as well as the interpretation of *circumlitio* with the feminine noun *lisciatura* is consistent with contemporary Renaissance ideas of *disegno* as masculine and *colore* as feminine. Sohm 1995, 793-794 discusses several words related to the verb *lisciare*, including *liscio*, "make-up," and states that "like cosmetics, a moral dimension was frequently attached to artistic techniques described as *lisciato*." This "moral dimension" corresponds with Dati's idea that *circumlitio* simply perfects the marble work of art, rather than elevating the marble from mere substrate to work of art.

<sup>13</sup> Hardouin 1685, 229, *Marmora coloribus tenuissimis illinebant, qui repercussu claritatem marmoris excitare<n>t, custodire<n>tque a pulvere & sordibus. Galli dicunt vernir*, "They varnished marbles with the most delicate colors, which by reflection brings out the brightness of the marble and protects it from dust and dirt. The French call it *vernir*." *Vernir*, or "varnish," however, which means to glaze or brighten the substrate, is quite distinct from the ancient encaustic wax painting described by Pliny.

ancient sculptural polychromy in certain periods of classical antiquity in his pioneering 1764 work *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, his interpretation of *circumlitio* nevertheless privileged sculpture over painting.<sup>14</sup> In his discussion of Pliny's *circumlitio* anecdote, Winckelmann dismisses the relevance of Seneca's *circumlitio* passage and asserts that *circumlitio* signifies the retouching of the sculptor's clay model carried out by the painter.<sup>15</sup> This linguistically flawed interpretation, which is based on Winckelmann's stated belief that marble sculpture is complete when the sculptor takes away his hand, posits that the medium being "smeared around" by the painter is clay, and ignores the context of encaustic painting.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the antiquarian and art historian Ennio Visconti had rejected Winckelmann's clay model interpretation and instead suggested that *circumlitio* referred to painting applied to parts of the statue, translating the term with the Italian *tinta* and *vernice* in his 1785 text.<sup>16</sup> In a discussion of the term *circumlitio* in his 1814 *Le Jupiter Olympien ou L'Art de la Sculpture Antique*, Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, one of the earliest advocates of full polychromy, offers his interpretation that *circumlitio* signifies the process of dyeing the stone through encaustic painting, and suggests that Seneca's phrase "in the manner of

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<sup>14</sup> On the changes in editions of Winckelmann's text concerning sculptural polychromy, see Primavesi in Brinkmann and Primavesi 2010, 24-77.

<sup>15</sup> On Seneca's *circumlitio*, see below and note 4 above. Winckelmann 1764, 688-689, "Der Freund des Bildhauers... , der ein Kunstverständiger ist, kann in dessen Modelle ihm nutzlich sein; und ich glaube das *circumlitio* das Nachfahren und das Nachhelfen eines Modells bedeute, welches mit dem Modellierstecken geschiehet," "The friend of the sculptor ... who is an artist, can be useful in his models; And I think the *circumlitio* means the descent and the help of a model, which happens with the modeling tool." On Winckelmann, see Borbein 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Visconti 1785, 72, note C, "Plinio parla della *circumlitio* (lib. XXXV, 4o ), che davasi da pittori alle statue, e che variamente interpretata, pur sembra che debba intendersi d'una tinta o d'una vernice. Forse variavasi così il colore d'alcune parti della statua, come per esempio delle armi o del panneggiamento, e tale operazione richiedeva il discernimento d'un valente maestro. ...L'opinione di Winckelmann (Storia delle arti, lib. IX, cap. 1 1 1 ) che intende in quel luogo un semplice ritocco del modelli, non sembra potersi sostenere." "Pliny speaks of *circumlitio* which was applied by painters to statues, and is variously interpreted, although it seems to be intended as a coloring or varnish. Perhaps the color of some parts of the statue was varied, as for example the weapons or drapery, and this operation required the judgment of a talented master... The opinion of Winckelmann that he intends in this place a simple touch-up of the models does not seem able to be sustained." On Visconti, see Haskell and Penny 1981.

a painting” explains the process of painting marble statues.<sup>17</sup> Although Visconti did account for the role of the painter, and Quatremère even advocated for the encaustic painting of marble sculpture, each of their translations of *circumlitio* exhibits a distinctly neoclassical conception of both the aesthetic aims and artistic process of ancient statue painting.<sup>18</sup>

Translations and interpretations of *circumlitio* from the second half of the nineteenth century reflect the breadth and variety of theories of polychromy produced during the “Great Polychromy Debates.” In his 1863 work *Der Stil*, the architect Gottfried Semper, who proposed that the development of sculptural polychromy followed the development of architectural polychromy, explained that the “refined painted finish,” or *circumlitio*, was carried out by master painters and referred to any painted surface.<sup>19</sup> In his 1872 work *Die Polychromie vom künstlerischen Standpunkte*, the German painter Eduard Magnus acknowledged that the term *circumlitio* was used in many ways and added his translation with the German word *Patinierung*, “patination.”<sup>20</sup> In his 1884 *Technologie und Terminologie der Gewerbe und Künste bei Griechen und Romern*, the classical archaeologist and philologist Hugo Blumner, on the other hand,

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<sup>17</sup> Quatremère de Quincy 1814, 49, “il me semble au contraire que, puisqu'il s'agit ici de marbres teints de diverses couleurs, le mot *circumlitio* exprime simplement cette opération de teindre la pierre, qui la diversifiait de toutes sortes de façons, et était véritablement une manière de peindre, *in picturae modum*,” “on the contrary it seems to me that, since the marble is dyed in various colors, the word *circumlitio* simply expresses this operation of dyeing the stone, which diversified it in all sorts of ways, and was truly a way of painting “in the manner of a painting.”” On Quatremère de Quincy, see Ruprecht 2014.

<sup>18</sup> On Count de Caylus’ experiments with encaustic painting, see Müntz 1760. On the painting of sculpture in the subsequent period of 1840-1910, see Blühm 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Semper pushed his interpretation of Seneca’s passage to its limit in order to support his aesthetic conception of architectural polychromy as manifest in his reconstruction of the Parthenon, Semper 1863, *Der Stil*, 410, “This passage... is also of particular importance because it shows that *circumlitio* (which can only be the kind of glaze that, following ancient tradition, was applied to all marble art works, both statues and architectural members) was used to tint and occasionally modify the bright hues of the polychrome decoration.” On Semper, see Mallgrave 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Magnus 1872, 54, “Zu den vielen Bedeutungen, die man dem Worte Circumlitio zu geben versucht hat, machen wir also von unsrem Standpunkte auch noch den Vorschlag, dass man: eine Kunstliche wohlüberlegte Patinirung darunger verstehen wolle,” “Among the many meanings which we have tried to give to the word Circumlitio, we also propose from our own point of view the suggestion that one should understand: an artificial, well-considered patination.”

rejected the idea that *circumlitio* signified a total covering of the statue and insisted that only individual parts were treated with color.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in her 1896 work *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, the British archaeologist and art historian Eugenie Sellers Strong (citing an outdated source) identified *circumlitio* as signifying painting applied only to the hair and accessories of a statue, while the flesh parts were left unpainted.<sup>22</sup> In his 1898 *La Polychromie dans la Sculpture Grecque*, Maxime Collignon, although he acknowledged that Nicias is an encaustic painter, followed Sellers in asserting that *circumlitio* is distinct from *ganosis*, and signifies the painting of hair and accessories.<sup>23</sup> The various and conflicting translations of *circumlitio* produced in the nineteenth century share a polemical tone. Although these translations acknowledge the role of the painter, they overlook Praxiteles' role in the anecdote and fail to account for both the literal meaning of the term and the extant material evidence for ancient statue painting.

In the mid-twentieth century, Patrik Reuterswård methodically assembled and synthesized the incontrovertible evidence for polychromy on Greek and Roman marble sculpture in his 1960 work *Studien zur Polychromie der Plastik Griechenland und Rom*. Although he did not offer a translation of *circumlitio*, in his discussion of the development of polychromy in the

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<sup>21</sup> Blumner 1884, "ausserdem aber spricht der sonstige Gebrauch der Worte circumlinere, circumlitio dafür, dass darunter nicht eine Procedur gemeint sein kann, bei welcher, wie bei der ganosis, ganze grosse Flächen einer Statue mit der gleichen Substanz überzogen resp. getrankt werden, sondern nur eine solche, bei der gewisse einzelne Theile, Umbrisse grosserer Flächen, Ränder u. dgl. farbig behandelt werden." "Moreover, the other use of the words *circumlinere*, *circumlitio*, indicates that this can not mean a procedure in which, as with *ganosis*, whole large surfaces of a statue are covered with the same substance, but only such, in which certain individual parts, the larger-flat surfaces, margins, and the like, are treated in color." On Blumner, see Zimmern 1895.

<sup>22</sup> Sellers 1896, 157, "circuml. was admirably explained by Welcker (in Muller, *Handbuch*, p. 431), to consist in a painting of hair and accessories, intended to give relief to the statue to be in a word identical with *circumlitio* as understood in painting." Muller's *Handbuch* was published in 1830, before the discovery of the Treu Head and Alexander Sarcophagus. On Eugenie Sellers Strong, see Dyson 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Collignon 1898, 56, "La *circumlitio* est distincte du patinage (*ganosis*) dont il sera question plus loin; elle designe la peinture des accessoires, faite avec des tons solides." "*circumlitio* is distinct from patination (*ganosis*) which will be discussed later; it designates the painting of the accessories, made with solid tones."

fourth century BCE, Reuterswård casually explained that there is nothing unusual about Pliny's anecdote about a famous painter putting his hand to a marble sculpture by the preeminent sculptor of the era.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in a recent chapter from *Circumlitio* that reevaluates Winckelmann's early contributions to the study of polychromy, Oliver Primavesi discussed Pliny's anecdote about Nicias and Praxiteles in relation to the term that serves as his book's title. Primavesi suggested that *circumlinere* is "a close equivalent" of the Greek verb *enaleiphein*, "to anoint or paint" and thus *circumlitio* could be the Latin translation of a Greek term.<sup>25</sup> Although this is a provocative and tempting suggestion that is supported by ancient practices of Greek-to-Latin translation, it does not account for the step in translation, and thus interpretation, from one example of the Greek participle ἐναληλιμμένοι signifying a sculpture "coated" with a color to the Latin noun *circumlitio* signifying "polychromy."<sup>26</sup>

Primavesi's analysis of the term is emblematic of the reticence of modern scholarship, with its acute focus on sculptural polychromy, to appreciate Pliny's anecdote and his use of the term *circumlitio* in relation to his moralizing and rhetorical posture and within his narrative history of classical Greek encaustic painters. I will argue that the significance of the term *circumlitio* in Pliny's anecdote is not primarily concerned with the color of the paint layer, but

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<sup>24</sup> Reuterswård 1960, 83-84, "... braucht man nichts Absonderliches an der Angabe des Plinius zu finden, daß ein Maler von dem hohen Rang des Nikias sich zur Bemalung der Statuen des Praxiteles bereit gefunden habe," "...one need not find anything peculiar to the statement of Pliny that a painter of the high rank of Nikias had prepared himself to paint the statues of Praxiteles."

<sup>25</sup> Primavesi 2010, 28, "in a passage from Plato's *Republic* which was well known to and correctly understood by Winckelmann, a close Greek equivalent of (*circum*)*linere*, i.e., (*en*)*aleiphein*, refers precisely to the coating of marble sculptures with colours." Paul Shorey's 1969 translation of the passage in question reads, "It is as if we were coloring a statue and someone approached and censured us, saying that we did not apply the most beautiful pigments to the most beautiful parts of the image, since the eyes, which are the most beautiful part, have not been painted (ἐναληλιμμένοι) with purple but with black." It is noteworthy that Plato here uses the passive-participle form of the verb *enaleiphein* just as Pliny and other Latin authors use with *circumlinere* (discussed below).

<sup>26</sup> Authors of Latin prose typically translate Greek words into their Latin "equivalents," except in instances in which no such equivalent exists. In these cases authors, e.g. Seneca or Cicero, often acknowledge that they are employing a Greek word specifically for this reason; cf. Vitruvius' use of the Greek term *ganosis* below.

rather the nuanced, illusionistic effects of encaustic painting that were admired by other artists and connoisseurs, in this case Praxiteles, the artist who Pliny elsewhere states perfected the ancient process of encaustic painting.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Pliny *NH*, 35.122, *Ceris pingere ac picturam inurere quis primus excogitaverit, non constat. quidam Aristidis inventum putant, postea consummatum a Praxitele*, “It is not agreed who was the first to paint with wax and burn in a painting. Some think it was the discovery of Aristides, afterwards perfected by Praxiteles.”

## PLINY AND PAINTING

The primary audience of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* was the educated elite of the Roman imperial period, for whom education about art and art criticism was a sign of *humanitas*.<sup>28</sup> Pliny's selection of anecdotes about "first inventors" in the construction of a narrative history of art is, like his work as a whole, framed by his moralizing authorial persona to resonate with aristocratic Roman values, tastes, and opinions about art, literature, and culture.<sup>29</sup> Pliny wrote his thirty-seven book *Naturalis Historia*, a thorough scientific reference work in the first decade after the reign of the emperor Nero, when the new Flavian dynasty signaled a return to traditional, aristocratic Roman values of militaristic moderation.<sup>30</sup> In Book thirty-five, Pliny pivots from

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<sup>28</sup> Greek παιδεία, Rutledge 2012, 84, "If one did receive such education then we would expect one to claim greater authority in their ability to critique, although this claim to authority is offset by a cultural dynamic whereby in Roman society, at least in the political sphere, too much knowledge of art could prove an embarrassment. This appears merely a public pose, however, since self-styled art critics abounded among the Roman elite. We need only consider those discussions concerning the decline of art in Petronius (*Satyricon* 88), Vitruvius (7.5), and Pliny (*HN* 14.2-6) to appreciate that among Rome's educated art criticism flourished."

<sup>29</sup> Naas 2006, 201-211. This chapter takes its title from Pliny's statement at XXXV, 50, *omnia ergo meliora fuere, cum minor copia*, "all things were better then, when there was less abundance," which is a neat distillation of Pliny's moral and rhetorical posture in his discussion of the ancient use of minerals, materials, and colors. This quotation occurs in Pliny's discussion of the so-called "four-color palette" which he claims artists like Apelles, Aetion, Melanthius, and Nicomachus used in the High Classical period of the fourth century BCE. Aristocratic Romans of the late republic and imperial periods frequently referred to this period before Hellenism and increased contact with Greece to create narratives of moral decline that they could trace to their own day. In his introduction, Murphy, 2004, discusses the complexity of attempting to determine the 'real Pliny' behind the layers of rhetorical and moral posture adopted throughout the work, e.g., p. 9, "It is very difficult to recover a set of attitudes that are consistent and at the same time sufficiently individual to be regarded as evidence for the author's own views. Truth is local in the *Natural History*. To make a rhetorical, moral, or scientific point, Pliny will accept a story as true in one place while skeptically dismissing it in another."

<sup>30</sup> Tanner 2006, 238-239, "Pliny's 'moralising rhetoric' should be taken seriously... the appeal to science was more than a simple rationalisation of traditional Roman morality. In the context of Greek rationalist cosmologies, above all Stoicism, increasingly assimilated at Rome, *scientia* was a primary technology of morality, since it was through understanding the processes of Nature that man not only assimilated himself to the sacred through contact with cosmic reason, but also became able to adjust his attitudes, dispositions and conduct to a rational fit with Nature's providential course."



minerals and pigments to the origins of painting, which leads to an art historical digression through a chronology of famous Greek, and some Roman, painters.<sup>31</sup> The anecdotal nature of Pliny's art historical biographies is based in turn on the epigrammatic character of his now-lost Hellenistic sources by Xenocrates, Antigonus, and Duris, which capture characteristic artistic traits as perceived by the eye of other artists.<sup>32</sup> The educated Roman reception of these Hellenistic Greek sources privileges the aesthetics of Greek classicism, and thus Pliny's narrative emphasizes the artists of the Greek High Classical period before, as Pliny says, *cessavit deinde ars*, "then art stopped."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Murphy 2004, mentions this digression in his section "Intricacy as an Aesthetic," p. 38, "For instance, the *Natural History's* accounts of painting and sculpture, an extensive and detailed account that is a prime source of evidence for modern researchers, make their way into the encyclopedia as subordinate parts of Pliny's account of metals and minerals (books 34–7); a structural choice that carries more than a whiff of bravura."

<sup>32</sup> Tanner 2006 traces the rise of artistic treatises in the third century BCE that led to studies of sculpture and painting like that of Xenocrates. Pollitt 1974, 73, "The writing of critical histories of art seems to have begun among the Greeks in the Hellenistic period. Extant sources preserve at least two separate traditions - one, apparently originating early in the Hellenistic period, preserved in books 34–36 of Pliny's *Natural History*... Pliny fortunately took the time to prepare a bibliographical index for each of the books of the *Natural History*, and we are indebted to his indexes in book 33–36 for much of what we know about the development of art history and art criticism in Greece prior to the first century A.D. The value of the information (often demonstrably erroneous, occasionally absurd) contained in the *Natural History* depends on the source from which it is derived, and hence much of Plinian scholarship in modern times has devoted itself to disentangling and reconstructing the content of these sources." Sellers 1896, xvi–lxvii, thoroughly discusses the sources and their influence on Pliny. She credits Xenocrates with the chapters on painting, and Duris with the "anecdotal element" of Pliny.

<sup>33</sup> Pliny *NH*, 34.52. On the Roman reception and adaptation of the Classical and Hellenistic, see Holscher 2004. Rutledge 2012, 91, "To judge from Pliny, there was a distinct hierarchy of values and forms set out in works of this sort, one that served to give authority, legitimacy, and authenticity to particular artists and styles. Greek classicism, in particular, became the standard, though a remarkable amalgam of styles coexisted side by side in his day." Pollitt 1974, 74–75, "It is noteworthy that all the writers mentioned are Greeks. At some point either Pliny himself or an earlier Latin writer has translated these sources, including presumably much of their critical terminology, into Latin. It is for this reason, quite obviously, that Latin words form a major part of the present study. By analyzing those Latin terms that appear to represent translations from Greek, we can construct the critical terminology of the lost Greek writers to whom Pliny, and probably also Quintilian and Cicero, were indebted for much of their information."

Pliny's adaptation of his sources into a narrative history of painters reveals a Roman interpretation of artistic connoisseurship based on viewing famous works of art in Rome.<sup>34</sup> Pliny's translation, adaptation, and interpretation of these anecdotes encode concerns of artistic connoisseurship in pithy, acutely memorable formulae.<sup>35</sup> While there are numerous such anecdotes, two of Pliny's well-known examples, the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhassios and the visit of Apelles to Protogenes, most aptly reveal the spectrum of interpretation for the *circumlitio* anecdote. Both emphasize mimetic naturalism in the form of an artist's ability to trick the eye of the viewer and even compete with nature, as well as recognizable, highly individualized styles of artists that function as visual signatures to other connoisseurs.<sup>36</sup>

In his biography of the painter Zeuxis, who, according to Pliny, led the brush *ad magnam gloriam*, "to great glory," Pliny shares an anecdote about the *certamen*, "contest," with his rival Parrhassios.<sup>37</sup> When Zeuxis had painted grapes so realistically that birds flew into the painting,

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<sup>34</sup> Rutledge 2012, 226, "It may also be significant that we hear little of large collections (Pompey's excepted) until the advent of the principate. It is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that Pliny the Elder dates the recognition of the importance of public art exhibits to the foundation of the Augustan principate, although Pliny's assessment may well be skewed simply by the numerous programmatic displays assembled under Augustus and successive emperors." cf. Carey 2003, 83, "Elsewhere Pliny is again explicit about the link between the display of Greek art in Rome and Roman conquests. At 35.131, for example, a list of Nicias' works is simultaneously a list of Roman victories."

<sup>35</sup> Platt 2016, 280, "Such episodes have been profoundly influential on the post-antique reception of Greek and Roman art: the history of 'still-life' painting, for example, has been repeatedly conceptualized around the model of naturalism suggested by Pliny's famous account of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Nevertheless, the concept of the anecdote poses a problem for anyone attempting a history of artistic production: what kind of evidence does it actually provide? ... Yet it is clear from Pliny's *Natural History* that biographical anecdotes both reflected and influenced attitudes to the figure of the artist in antiquity, while shaping debates about the cultural, religious and ethical ramifications of image-making."

<sup>36</sup> Tanner 2006, 209-210, "This elite culture of viewing was characterised by an extensive formal aesthetic vocabulary, a knowledge of classical artists' names and of the history of classical (fifth and fourth-century) art... The personal styles of artists are clearly recognised and explicitly distinguished, and the correct attribution of works to painters and sculptors becomes a preoccupation of informed viewers and of art history writing."

<sup>37</sup> On Zeuxis, see Reinach 1921, 188ff. and Brunn 1889, 51ff.; on Parrhassios, see Reinach, 220ff. and Brunn 66ff.; on Apelles, see Reinach, 314ff. and Brunn 136ff.; on Protogenes, see Reinach 362ff. and Brunn 157ff. Pliny *NH*, 35.61, *Ab hoc artis fores apertas Zeuxis Heracleotes intravit olympiadis lxxxv anno quarto, audentemque iam aliquid penicillum -de hoc enim adhuc loquamur- ad magnam gloriam perduxit*, "Zeuxis of Heracleia entered the gates of art opened by him (Apollodorus) in the fourth year of the ninety-fifth Olympiad and led the already somewhat daring brush -for we are still speaking about this- to great glory."

Parrhassios painted a curtain over the grapes so truthfully represented that Zeuxis, proud of the judgment of the birds, asked for the curtain to be removed and his painting shown.<sup>38</sup> When Zeuxis realized his mistake, he conceded victory with noble modesty since, while he himself had fooled the birds, Parrhassios fooled him, the artist who had perfected realism.<sup>39</sup> Pliny's anecdote about Zeuxis and Parrhassios conveys not only the importance of the deception of the viewer, with animals included, but also the hierarchy of the viewers deceived, with artists and connoisseurs at the top.<sup>40</sup> This interpretation suggests that, just as Parrhassios tricked the artist who could trick birds, Nicias' *circumlitio* surpassed even that of Praxiteles, who, according to Pliny, perfected the technique of encaustic painting.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Pliny, *NH* 35.65, *descendisse hic in certamen cum Zeuxide traditur et, cum ille detulisset uvas pictas tanto successu, ut in scaenam aves advolarent, ipse detulisse linteum pictum ita veritate repraesentata, ut Zeuxis alitum iudicio tumens flagitaret tandem remoto linteo ostendi picturam atque intellecto errore concederet palmam ingenio pudore, quoniam ipse volucres fefellisset, Parrhasius autem se artificem*; "he (Parrhassios) is said to have come down into a contest with Zeuxis and, when that one (Zeuxis) brought forth grapes painted with such success, that birds flew into the scene, he himself brought forth a curtain painted so truly represented, that Zeuxis swelling with pride at the judgment of the birds demanded that the curtain finally be removed to show his painting and when he realized his mistake conceded the palm of victory with noble modesty, since he himself had fooled birds, but Parrhassios had fooled him the artist."

<sup>39</sup> cf. Isager, 1991, 136-140, discusses "natural likeness in art," and concludes "Pliny here, - as always - is consistent in his interpretation of Nature's role. He maintains that art reaches perfection when it best reflects Nature. This attitude is clearly the point of the several anecdotes cited here. Nature herself is the judge." Carey, 2003, 110, points out "*in scaenam* not only translates as 'towards the picture', but also as 'into the picture', a reading which results in a complete elision of art and Nature. In this version, the birds, having been deceived by the painted grapes, would fly not merely towards the painting, but into it (*ut in scaenam aves advolarent*); and in doing so institute a world, which far surpasses twentieth-century virtual reality, in allowing Nature to merge with its imitation."

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of naturalism in ancient art see Isager 1991, 136-140. Pliny includes other examples of art deceiving the eye of animals: in the sequel to the story of Zeuxis and Parrhassios (35.66), Zeuxis paints a boy holding grapes that birds fly up to and Zeuxis laments that if the boy had been perfect the birds would have been afraid; at 35.88 Apelles, competing with other artists to depict the best horse, calls for actual horses to judge the paintings and, of course, the horses neigh at Apelles' painting. Pliny concludes the anecdote with a remark that ever since this has always been a way of testing a trial of art.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Tanner, 2006, 247. Rutledge 2006, 68, points out that "connoisseurs had to take care lest they be charged with excess pretension (*HN* 34.6), ... Such connoisseurship was for Pliny closely tied to status, with the aspirant to high culture trying to distance himself from the man in the street although possessing no more real knowledge than the *hoi polloi*. Pliny's criticism of pretension though had already been anticipated in satirical form in Petronius' *Satyricon*, when the hapless nouveau riche pretender Trimalchio muddled the history of Corinthian bronze."

In his biography of the painter Apelles, who he says surpassed all those born before and after him, Pliny shares an anecdote about a funny thing that happened when Apelles travelled to Rhodes to see the works of the famous artist Protogenes.<sup>42</sup> When Protogenes was not home and his assistant asked by whom she should say the artist was visited, Apelles painted a single line on a panel and said *ab hoc*, “by this guy!” Having returned, Protogenes recognized the characteristic *subtilitas*, “fineness” of the line as Apelles’ and painted his own signature line with another color over Apelles’ in response.<sup>43</sup> After Apelles returned and cut this line with a third color, Protogenes conceded defeat since there was no more room for *subtilitas*. This anecdote indicates not only that the fineness of the line was a clear demonstration of an artist’s skill, but also that an artist’s highly individualized and recognizable line could serve as a visual artistic signature to other artists and connoisseurs, just as Praxiteles could recognize Nicias’ distinctive *circumlitio*.

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<sup>42</sup> Pliny NH 35.81-83, *Scitum inter Protogenem et eum quod accidit. ille Rhodi vivebat, quo cum Apelles adnavigasset, avidus cognoscendi opera eius fama tantum sibi cogniti, continuo officinam petiit. aberat ipse, sed tabulam amplae magnitudinis in machina aptatam una custodiebat anus. haec foris esse Protogenem respondit interrogavitque, a quo quaesitum diceret. ab hoc, inquit Apelles adreptoque penicillo lineam ex colore duxit summae tenuitatis per tabulam. et reverso Protogeni quae gesta erant anus indicavit. ferunt artificem protinus contemplatum subtilitatem dixisse Apellen venisse, non cadere in alium tam absolutum opus; ipsumque alio colore tenuiorem lineam in ipsa illa duxisse abeuntemque praecepisse, si redisset ille, ostenderet adiceretque hunc esse quem quaereret. atque ita evenit. revertit enim Apelles et vinci erubescens tertio colore lineas secuit nullum relinquens amplius subtilitati locum;* “A funny thing that happened between Protogenes and him. He was living at Rhodes, when Apelles sailed to there, eager to see his works known to him only by reputation, right away he headed for his studio. He himself was away, but an old woman was watching over a panel of great size set on an easel. She responded that Protogenes was away and asked by whom she should say he was visited. “By this guy!” Apelles said and taking up the brush drew a line in color of the highest slenderness across the panel. And when Protogenes returned the old woman showed him the things which had happened. They say the artist having inspected the fineness (*subtilitas*) said that Apelles had come, so perfect a work could not fall to another; and that he himself brought forth an even more slender line in another color on that one itself and going away told her, if the he should return, show him and add that this one is he whom he sought. And so it happened. Indeed Apelles came back and ashamed to be bested cut the lines in a third color leaving no more space for *subtilitas*.”

<sup>43</sup> Pollitt 1974, 443-444, s.v. *subtilitas*, “*Subtilis*, (from *subtexo*, “weave”; hence, “finely woven” or “fine”) is related in the terminology of art criticism to the Greek term λεπτός of which it seems to be, in certain cases, the Latin translation. Unlike *subtilis* λεπτός does not have any semantic connection through its etymology with the idea of weaving; but it was used, as early as Homer, to refer to the “fineness” of textiles... and the general association of the two terms in art criticism may derive from this common ground. In... the anecdote about Apelles’ and Protogenes’ contest in drawing fine lines, *subtilitas* also refers to draftsmanship.”

### PLINY'S *CIRCUMLITIO*

That Pliny's biography of the painter Nicias, where the *circumlitio* anecdote occurs, was set within his history of encaustic painters seems crucial.<sup>44</sup> This painting process involves the application of pigmented wax in thick, impasto-like strokes to create delicate effects of light and shadow.<sup>45</sup> At the beginning of his biography of Nicias, Pliny praises the artist for exactly this quality of his work and says he "took the greatest care that his paintings projected from their panels."<sup>46</sup> Pliny's use of the verb *eminere*, "to stand out," is often understood to describe the effects of light and shadow that result in the illusion of a painted figure standing out from its background.<sup>47</sup> In the context of encaustic painting, however, understanding *eminere* in the sense of "to stick out" or "to project," evidently refers to the three-dimensional effects of surface topography created by the layering of pigmented wax in the process of application.<sup>48</sup> This effect, as seen in surviving examples of encaustic panel paintings from mummy portraits excavated in

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<sup>44</sup> Croisille 1985, attributes the biographies of the following encaustic painters, including Nicias, to Xenocrates, 22, "la liste des passages xénocratiques est, là encore, assez facile à établir: les notices sur Pamphiles et Pausias, sur Euphranor, sur Antidotos et Nicias, sur Athenion, enfin sur Aristolaos et Nikophanes, contiennent des traits attribués à Xenocrate par la majorité des exégètes, avec néanmoins quelques différences entre eux," "The list of the Xenocratic passages is, again, easy to establish: The notes on Pamphiles and Pausias, on Euphranor, on Antidotos and Nicias, on Athenion, and finally on Aristolaos and Nikophanes, contain features attributed to Xenocrates by the majority of commentators, with some differences between them."

<sup>45</sup> On ancient encaustic painting see Koch 2000, 41 ff., Freccero 2002, Brinkmann 2007, 213, Liverani 2014, and Corso 1988, 427.

<sup>46</sup> Pliny *NH*, 35.131, *lumen et umbras custodit atque ut eminent e tabulis picturae maxime curavit*, "He watched carefully over light and shadow and took the greatest care that his paintings projected from their panels."

<sup>47</sup> Pollitt 1974, 252, "Nicias's particular achievement may have been the development of a method of applying light and dark shades of color around the outlines of his painted figures in such a way that they stood out strongly from the background. The Latin term used to refer to this achievement may have been *circumlitio*."

<sup>48</sup> OLD, 604 s.v. *emineo*, "to stick out" or "project" is in fact the primary meaning of the verb while the secondary meaning is "(of details in a painting, etc.) to stand out against a background, appear as if in relief." Cf. Isager 1991, 134-135, in a section discussing encaustic painting, understands this passage as "He also placed great emphasis on giving his paintings a relief-like character."

the Fayum [fig. 1], suggests an alternative interpretation with considerable implications for the meaning of *circumlitio*, that is, the three-dimensional appearance of the encaustic paint layer on a statue that imitates the surface topography of the materials it represents.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, Pliny's *circumlitio* anecdote also fits into a pattern within his narrative history of artists, in which Pliny associates the sculptor Praxiteles with both marble sculpture and encaustic painting.<sup>50</sup> Pliny claims that Praxiteles both perfected encaustic painting and was known for being more successful in marble than bronze.<sup>51</sup> Pliny's "quotation" of Praxiteles in his biography of Nicias, that he approved most of his own statues in marble "to which Nicias had put his hand," thus takes on the additional significance of being expressed by the preeminent sculptor associated with both marble sculpture and encaustic painting in Roman artistic, literary, and cultural memory.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, this "quotation" of a Greek sculptor is another instance of Pliny's translation, adaptation, and interpretation of Greek art, literature, and culture for an educated elite Roman audience. The framing of this anecdote, *hic est Nicias, de quo Praxiteles dicebat*, i.e.

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<sup>49</sup> For this portrait, see Corcoran and Svoboda 2010. On the so-called 'Fayum Mummy Portraits,' see Parlasca 1967 - 2003, Doxiadis 1995, Corcoran 1995, Borg 1996, Freccero 2000.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Corso 1988, 441, "La consuetudine col lavoro sul marmo, appresa col lavoro per Prassitele, dev'esser alla base della <<specializzazione>> di Nicia nella pittura sul marmo...." "The practice with the work on marble, learned with work for Praxiteles, must be at the base of Nicias' "specialization" in painting on marble..."

<sup>51</sup> Pliny, *NH*, 34.69, *Praxiteles quoque, qui marmore felicior, ideo et clarior fuit, fecit tamen et ex aere pulcherrima opera*, "Praxiteles too, who was more successful in marble and therefore more famous, still also made most beautiful works out of bronze." cf. *NH*, 35.122, *Ceris pingere ac picturam inurere quis primus excogitaverit, non constat. quidam Aristidis inventum putant, postea consummatum a Praxitele*, "It is not agreed who was the first to paint with wax and burn in a painting. Some think it was the discovery of Aristides, afterwards perfected by Praxiteles."

<sup>52</sup> In Greek Praxiteles likely would have used *xeir* for "hand." OLD, 1077, *s.v. manus*, n. 20, "The hand as the seat of skill or artistic ability, touch; *-us extrema, summa, ultima*, the final or finishing touch; handwork, workmanship." The entry cites this anecdote as one example of this sense of *manus*. Pliny elsewhere uses hand in a similar artistic sense: 35.66, *Zeuxidis manu Romae Helena est*, "There is a Helen at Rome by the hand of Zeuxis;" cf. 35.92, *Dorothei manu*, "by the hand of Dorotheus;" at 35.80 Apelles remarks that Protogenes was a superior artist except that Apelles knew when *manum de tabula sciret tollere*, "to lift his hand from the panel;" OLD, 50, *s.v. admoveo*, n. 4d, "(fig.) *manus (manum) -movere*, to lay hands upon, use violence towards; also, to set one's hand to (a task)." This entry cites this anecdote as its example of this particular sense of the verb and its object.

“so said the famous sculptor about this painter,” is a revealing insight into ancient artistic practice and production through the collaboration of two artists and is evidence of a cultural aesthetic in which, even to the sculptor himself, the encaustic paint layer is what elevates the status of the marble from substrate to work of art.<sup>53</sup> Praxiteles’ privileged position as Pliny’s sculptor par excellence, however, suggests that his preference for his own works that have been completed by Nicias is not merely the sculptor’s aesthetic appreciation but likely an indication of the later evaluation of Nicias’ particular style of encaustic painting.

The preeminence of Praxiteles and Nicias in Pliny’s account of encaustic painting informs the spectrum of interpretation for the *circumlitio* anecdote in light of the other anecdotes discussed that feature two artists famous for inventing or perfecting an artistic technique. One, minimal, interpretation of the anecdote is that, as in the anecdote of Zeuxis and Parrhassios, Nicias so excelled at the nuanced illusionistic effects of encaustic painting, or *circumlitio*, that Praxiteles himself, the artist who perfected the technique, preferred of all his own marbles the ones to which Nicias put his hand. Another, maximal, interpretation is that, as in the anecdote of Apelles and Protogenes, Pliny’s use of the term as well as the possessive pronoun *eius*, “his” suggests that *circumlitio* signifies a distinctive, highly individualized encaustic treatment that is also, to other connoisseurs, a recognizable visual signature of the artist. As in the anecdote about Apelles, Protogenes, and *subtilitas*, this spectrum of interpretations indicates that Pliny is demonstrating his knowledge of the Latin translation of a lost Greek term belonging to the broader ancient vocabulary of artistic connoisseurship.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Pliny *NH* 35.118, *nulla gloria artificum est nisi qui tabulas pinxere*, “there is no glory for of artists except those who paint panels” i.e. panel paintings, is an indication of the privileged status reserved for painters. On ancient panel painting see Jones 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Although, cf. *supra* n. 10 for the possibility that *circumlitio* is a shift from the artistic to the technical register.

A mid fourth-century Apulian red figure column krater of unknown provenance in the Metropolitan Museum of Art that depicts an encaustic painter putting his hand to a marble statue of Herakles is the single image of encaustic painting, if not *circumlitio*, from the era of Nicias and Praxiteles [fig. 2].<sup>55</sup> A painter, whose full beard and *exomis* tied around his waist identify him as a Greek artist, is at work in a sanctuary, indicated by the column and phiale at left, holding a *cestros*, a pointed tool used in encaustic painting, in his right hand and bowl in his left. An African assistant heating rods in a metal brazier at left, whose presence in turn is an indication of the status of the painter, assists the painter with the encaustic process. The artist is in the midst of applying details to the hero's lion skin so that the surface topography of the lion's mane stands out from the marble substrate of the statue and imitates the texture of a textile.

In addition to Zeus and Nike at either side of the upper register, whose heads are turned towards the center of the scene where the statue has caught their attention, Herakles appears at right with the same attributes (club, bow, and lion skin) as the statue.<sup>56</sup> The juxtaposition of the iconographically similar statue of Herakles and the live hero accentuates the contrast between the manner of representation of the two figures: while the marble Herakles stands heroically, the

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<sup>55</sup> Originally published by D. von Bothmer in 1951, Marconi 2011, 145-167, thoroughly revisits the depiction of the painting of a statue of Herakles as well as scholarship concerning the vase since the initial publication. The dating has been discussed by Richter 1953; Cambitoglou and Trendall 1961 Stenico and De Cesare 1966, Cambitoglou and Trendall 1969, Schneider-Hermann 1972, Cambitoglou and Trendall 1978, Palagia 1988, Schefold, Jung, Oenbrink, Berns, and Brinkmann 1988, Trendall 1989, Cambitoglou and Trendall 1991, De Cesare 1994 and 1997, Oenbrink 1997, Berns 2002, and Brinkmann 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Marconi 2011, 156-157, "It should be pointed out that although on our vase there are significant similarities between the statue of Herakles and the living Herakles, there are also deliberate differences... One difference concerns the attributes, which are the same, but are handled in different ways. For example, on the statue the lion skin is removed from the head and allows for a full display of the flowing hair, while the club is moved from the side to a full view in the front. A similar opposition concerns posture and attitude: The living Herakles is casual in his posture and emotional in his gesturing, whereas his statue is self-confident in displaying the nudity and the beauty of his body... This explicit differentiation between the living figure and his statue seems to reflect developments in fourth-century art. One is reminded of the painter, sculptor, and art theorist Euphranor, who according to Pliny was the first to express the dignity of heroes (*dignitates heroum*), in explicit contrast with previous generations of artists."



living Herakles reacts with amazement to the artist's painting. Herakles' relaxed stance and excited gesture indicate his wonder in response to the painter's creation in a narrative that emphasizes the artist's encaustic painting, not the marble sculpture. The refined art of painting carried out by the artist has elevated the status of the marble statue, just as the red-figure painting carried out by the vase painter elevates the status of the humble terracotta from substrate to work of art. Herakles seemingly, like Praxiteles, approves of the delicate and nuanced effects of the artist's encaustic painting, not just the color of the pigment.

### SENECA'S *CIRCUMLITIO*

The other instance of *circumlitio* is in Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*. In this passage Seneca bemoans marble walls decorated with a *circumlitio* "varied in the manner of a painting,"

*Pauper sibi videtur ac sordidus nisi parietes  
magnis et pretiosis orbibus refulserunt, nisi  
Alexandrina marmora Numidicis crustis  
distincta sunt, nisi illis undique operosa et in  
picturae modum variata circumlitio  
praetexitur...* (86.6)

He regards himself poorly and dirty unless the walls shine with great and precious circles, unless Alexandrian marbles are adorned with Numidian tiles, unless everywhere a laborious *circumlitio* varied in the manner of a painting is bordered by them...<sup>57</sup>

The specific qualification of *circumlitio* "varied in the manner of a painting" in a passage critical of the domestic use of *opus sectile* marble inlay does not reveal much about Pliny's use of the term in the context of the painting of marble sculpture.<sup>58</sup> Despite the connection between *circumlitio* and painting in both Seneca's passage and Pliny's anecdote, translations of the term have struggled to reconcile the two with regard to the encaustic painting of marble sculpture.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Noblot 1969 translates the line in question, 139, "si l'on ne voit régner autour de ces plaques de marbre un filet d'émail dont la mosaïque savante rappelle le pinceau du peintre;" "if one does not see ruling over these marble slabs a string of enamel whose erudite mosaic recalls the paintbrush of the painter."

<sup>58</sup> Henderson 2004, 58, translates the phrase in question, "if the walls aren't given a border by a wash all around-elaborately worked on all sides, and patterned like a painting."

<sup>59</sup> Noblot 1969, 139 in his note on *variata circumlitio* offers the Greek *poikilai chriseis*, "smearing with various colors."

VITRUVIUS' *GANOSIS*

Another term often considered with *circumlitio* is *ganosis*, from the Greek verb γανόω, “to brighten,” which occurs in a passage from book seven of Vitruvius’ *de Architectura*.<sup>60</sup>

*At si qui subtilior fuerit et voluerit expolitionem miniaciam suum colorem retinere, cum paries expolitus et aridus est, ceram punicam igni liquefactam paulo oleo temperatam saeta inducat; deinde postea carbonibus in ferreo vase compositis eam ceram a primo cum pariete calfaciundo sudare cogat fiatque, ut peraequetur; deinde tunc candela linteisque puris subigat, uti signa marmorea nuda curantur (haec autem ganosis Graece dicitur): ita obstans cerae punicae lorica non patitur nec lunae splendorem nec solis radios lambendo eripere his politionibus colorem. (de Architectura VII, 3-4)*

But if anyone was more subtle and wanted a polished cinnabar surface to retain its color, when the wall is polished and dry, let him apply Punic wax liquified in the fire mixed with a little oil with a brush; then after the charcoal is placed in an iron vessel as soon as the wall is heated gather it and let it be so that it settles; and then work it with a wax cord and clean linens, like nude marble statues are undertaken (moreover in Greek this is called *ganosis*): thus a protective coat of Punic wax does not allow the brightness of the moon nor the rays of the sun to take away the color from these polished parts by lapping them up.

Although the process described in detail here is similar to that of encaustic wax painting, several factors suggest that *circumlitio* and *ganosis* are distinct artistic processes. First, Vitruvius is specifically discussing the preparation and application of cinnabar on a wall, *paries*. Second, the treatment here does not involve the mixing of pigment into the melted wax, but rather the preservation of a finished surface with wax.<sup>61</sup> Finally, although Vitruvius’ comment “this is called *ganosis* in Greek” also evidently refers to the treatment of marble statues, the specific qualification that these statues are nude, *signa marmorea nuda*, suggests that this particular

<sup>60</sup> Liddell and Scott, 338.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Rowland and Howe 1999, understand *nuda* to signify “unpainted” and translate translate the passage in question, 93-94, “Now if anyone is more refined and wants cinnabar fresco to retain its color, then, once the wall has been frescoed and dried, Phoenician wax, liquefied in fire and tempered with a little oil, should be applied with a brush. Afterward, with coals assembled in an iron pot he should first make the wall sweat by heating it from close by, so that it can be evened out, and then work it with a candle and clean linens, just as unpainted marble statues are maintained. This is called “shining” in Greek.”

process could be used to brighten the flesh of statues, but does not refer to the overall process of painting sculpture; this is reinforced by the literal meaning of *ganosis*, “brightening.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 268, “This is apparently a final polishing, not to be confused with encaustic, painting in hot wax.” cf. Corso 1988, who misunderstands *circumlitio* and *ganosis* to be the same operation, 442-443, “Il significato di *circumlitio* è chiarito: ... 4) dall'osservazione che la *circumlitio* doveva essere applicata soprattutto ai nudi, essendo integralmente nude le statue più celebri di Prassitele. Questo termine deve pertanto esprimere l'operazione (in greco *ganosis*) dello stendere patine di cere trasparenti (dove l'assimilazione all'encausto) su dipinti e statue, alle quali essa dava i valori luministici e chiaroscurali dell'incarnato e che rende ragione dell'assimilazione di diverse statue di Prassitele a esseri viventi...” “The meaning of *circumlitio* is clarified:... 4) from the observation that the *circumlitio* had to be applied above all to the nudes, being that the most famous statues of Praxiteles were completely naked. This term must therefore express the operation (in Greek *ganosis*) of the laying out of transparent waxes (whence assimilation to the encaustic) on paintings and statues, to which it gave the luministic and chiaroscuro values of the flesh and which makes sense of the assimilation of several statues of Praxiteles to living beings...”

*CIRCVMLITIO AND CIRCVMLITVS*

It seems consequential that Pliny, rather than Praxiteles, uses the term *circumlitio* in his authorial explanation of his own “quotation” of the sculptor, “so much he attributed to his *circumlitio*.” Although the noun *circumlitio* is exceedingly rare in extant Latin, Pliny and other authors use the related perfect-passive-participle of the verb *circumlinere*, *circumlitus*, “having been treated,” enough to inform interpretations of *circumlitio*.<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, Pliny uses the participle throughout his text in an exclusively technical sense to signify the thorough treatment of the entire surface area of a three-dimensional object with a liquid, often in preparation for a subsequent heat treatment. This meaning resonates not only with Pliny’s literary predecessors and contemporaries but also with the practice and production of encaustic wax painting in the context of sculptural polychromy.

In his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny uses a form of the perfect-passive-participle *circumlitus* no fewer than fifteen times. In the majority of these passages *circumlitus* modifies the surface treated, rather than the surface treatment.<sup>64</sup> These instances, for example his description of the production of silver, in which copper, silver, and sulphur “are burned up thus in a vessel *circumlito* with white clay,” consistently exhibit three characteristics. First, whenever it is

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Corso 1988, who correctly understands the meanings of *circum* and *linere* but misunderstands *circumlitio*, 442-443, “Il significato di *circumlitio* è chiarito: ... 2) dal valore di lino che, quando rientra nel lessico artigianale, significa «sovrappongo, spalmo, rivesto», piuttosto che «dipingo» (Thesaurus, s.v.); 3) dall'avverbio *circum*, pertinente a un'operazione non settoriale, ma involucrate le statue;” “The meaning of *circumlitio* is clarified: 2) from the value of *lino* which, when it is part of the artistic lexicon means “I overlap, I spread, I cover” rather than “I paint;” 3) from the adverb *circum*, pertinent to a non-sector-based operation, but enveloping the statues...”

<sup>64</sup> The passages in which *circumlitus* modifies the surface treatment: 24.21, *ramo hellebori circumlitum*, with a branch of hellebore *circumlitum*;" 24.153, *oculorumque dolores sedandos circumlitus*, “*circumlitus* for sedating pains of the eyes;” 35.34, *oculorum mitigat ac dolores circumlita*, “*circumlita* it soothes fluxions of the eyes and pains.”

appropriate Pliny modifies *circumlitus* with an “ablative of material covering” to make clear to his audience what he is describing, as in the example, *circumlito argilla*, “*circumlito* with white clay.”<sup>65</sup> Second, Pliny often uses *circumlitus* in contexts in which the layer applied anticipates a heat treatment, here indicated by *conflantur*, “they are burned up.”<sup>66</sup> Note that, third, unless otherwise noted (e.g. just the mouth of a vessel) *circumlitus* signifies that the entire surface of the object modified is completely covered by the material in the ablative.<sup>67</sup>

Cicero, Horace, Ovid, Seneca, and Quintilian each use forms of *circumlitus* in their works that reinforce Pliny’s and further illuminate the artistic significance of the *circumlitio* anecdote. In his *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero records that Persians bury their dead “*circumlitos* with wax, so that the bodies last as long as possible,” clearly suggesting a wax covering of the entire surface of the body.<sup>68</sup> In the tenth letter in Book one of his *Epistulae*, Horace praises the countryside and specifically “rocks *circumlita* with moss.”<sup>69</sup> In light of Cicero’s example, the contextual motivation of Horace’s poetic pastoral ideal indicates a similar significance for *circumlita* as the thorough covering of the visible, three-dimensional surface area of the rocks with moss, and suggests that *circumlitio* could signify the thorough covering of the surface of a

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<sup>65</sup> The passages in which *circumlitus* signifies the surface treated: 17.62, *tomice moris spinarum circumlita*, “with a string *circumlita* with the berries of the thorns;” 21.83, *vasis melle circumlitis*, “vessels *circumlitis* with honey;” 22.105, *cera circumlitum*, “*circulitum* with wax;” 28.250, *circumlita sanguine feminae suis*, “*circumlita* with the blood of a female pig;” 33.103, *offis bubuli fimi circumlitum*, “*circumlitum* with lumps of cattle dung;” 34.119, *circumlito fimo*, “*circumlito* with dung.”

<sup>66</sup> The passages in which *circumlitus* also anticipates a heat treatment: 27.83, *luto circumlit<a>*, “*circumlita* with clay mud;” 29.89, *luto circumlitos*, “*circumlitos* with clay;” 29.98, *vase fictili novo argilla circumlito*, “a new earthen vessel *circumlito* with white clay;” 33.131, *fictili circumlito argilla*, “a clay pot *circumlito* with white clay;” 35.35, *ollis novis luto circumlitis*, in new jars *circumlitis* with clay.”

<sup>67</sup> The passage in which *circumlitus* modifies a specific part of a whole: 34.106, *vasorum circumlito spiramento*, “with the mouth of the vessels *circumlito*.”

<sup>68</sup> Cicero *TD*, 1.108, *Persae etiam cera circumlitos condunt, ut quam maxime permaneant diuturna corpora*, “the Egyptians preserve their dead and keep them at home; in Persia they even bury them *circumlitos* with wax, so that the bodies last for as long as possible.”

<sup>69</sup> Horace *Epistulae*, 1.10.9, *tu nidum servas, ego laudo ruris amoeni / rivos et musco circumlita saxa nemusque*, “you keep the nest, I praise the streams of the country without walls, and the rocks *circumlita* with moss and the grove.”

statue intended for viewing. The constructions even resonate with Pliny on a syntactical level: Cicero and Horace both juxtapose the perfect passive participle directly with the ablative noun modifying it, a formula Pliny often follows when he uses *circumlitus*.

A passage from the story of King Midas in Book eleven of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* anticipates and reinforces the meaning of *circumlitus* in Pliny with interesting implications for the interpretation of *circumlitio*.<sup>70</sup> Ovid, in the voice of the god Bacchus, associates *circumlitus* with the human form when he begins his instructions for how Midas can remove his 'golden touch' with the grim alternative, "lest you remain *circumlitus* with poorly chosen gold." The threat to Midas' health is, obviously, not that he might become tinted with gold or have gold applied to his hair and accessories, but instead that the total surface of his entire body might become thoroughly covered with gold, rendering Midas, here the substrate, completely concealed and trapped within. As polychrome sculpture includes gilded statues, this phrase could therefore also signify a gilded statue.

In a passage from his consolation *ad Helviam*, Seneca decries "the things which everyone wants," as "*circumlita* with fancy and deceptive paint."<sup>71</sup> Seneca claims that, because the surface treatments are in contrast with the objects they conceal, they are consequently compromised and deceptive. Additionally, Seneca uses the same construction Pliny will later make great use of, only this time the ablative modifying *circumlita* is *fuco*, "paint." In a passage from his *Epistulae*

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<sup>70</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* 11, 129 ff., 'ne' ve 'male optato maneat *circumlitus* auro, / vade' ait 'ad magnis vicinum Sardibus amnem perque iugum nitens labentibus obvius undis / carpe viam, donec venias ad fluminis ortus, / spumigeroque tuum fonti, qua plurimus exit, / subde caput corpusque simul, simul elue crimen,' "lest you remain *circumlitus* with badly chosen gold, go" he said "to the river near great Sardis and along the shining ridge take the path in the way of the gliding waves, until you come to the source of the river, and in the foaming fountain, at which point most comes out, put under your head and body at the same time, and at the same time wash away your crime."

<sup>71</sup> Seneca *ad Helviam* 12.5.6, *Itaque ego in illis quae omnes optant existi maui semper nihil veri boni inesse, tum inania et specioso ac deceptorio fuco circumlita inueni*, "and so I have always believed that there is nothing of real good in those things which everybody desires, then I have found them to be empty and *circumlita* with fancy and deceptive paint."

*Morales* discussed above, Seneca bemoans marble walls decorated with a “*circumlitio* varied in the manner of a painting,” the only other extant use of the term in the singular.<sup>72</sup>

Two examples from Pliny’s younger contemporary Quintilian, whose *Institutio Oratoria* (c. 95 CE) was published in the decades after Pliny’s death, demonstrate the range of meaning of *circumlitus* in both literary and artistic contexts. In a passage in Book four, Quintilian shares his thoughts that the proem of a speech should be *circumlita*.<sup>73</sup> In Book eight, Quintilian says that a painting in which nothing has been *circumlitum* does not *eminet*, “project.”<sup>74</sup> Notably, this is the same verb Pliny used at the beginning of his biography of Nicias to describe the effect of the artist’s encaustic painting, “he took the greatest care so that his paintings *eminerent* from their panels.”<sup>75</sup> The specifically artistic context clarifies the meaning of *circumlitum*, and thus no ablative modifier is required, as in the passage from Seneca. This example from Quintilian suggests that within the context of writing about art, a Roman author could expect his audience to understand the material implied by *circumlitus* or *circumlitio*.

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<sup>72</sup> Seneca *Epistulae Morales* 86.6.

<sup>73</sup> Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* 4.1.60, *Nec argumentis autem nec locis nec narrationi similis esse in prohemio debet oratio, neque tamen deducta semper atque circumlita*, “But in the proem the speech should be similar neither to the argumentative nor the narrative parts, and it should not however always be fine spun and *circumlita*.”

<sup>74</sup> Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* 8.5.26, *Nec pictura in qua nihil circumlitum est eminent*, “nor does a painting in which nothing has been *circumlitum* stand out.” This passage has a complex and not unproblematic history of its own. Several scholars, including Pollitt, refer to this exact citation but quote entirely different text that, as far as can be discerned, appears neither in Quintilian nor anywhere else in extant Latin literature. This ‘fictive *IO* 8.5.26’ reads *circumductio colorum in extremitatibus figurarum, qua ipsae figurae aptius finiuntur et eminentius extant*, “a leading around of colors on the borders of figures, by which figures are more suitably finished and stand forth more prominently.” This passage, which seemingly articulates the effects of *skiagraphia* discussed above, is quoted by Pollitt in his discussion of *skiagraphia*, who claims that this passage is Quintilian’s definition of *circumlitio*: 253, “Quintilian *Inst.* 8.5.26, makes it clear that the term could also be applied to representational painting: he defines *circumlitio* as a *circumductio colorum in extremitatibus figurarum, qua ipsae figurae aptius finiuntur et eminentius extant*.”

<sup>75</sup> Pliny *NH* 35.131, *lumen et umbras custodiit atque ut eminerent e tabulis picturae maxime curavit*, “He watched carefully over light and shadow and took the greatest care that his paintings projected from their panels.” cf. Corso 1988, 442-443, “Il significato di *circumlitio* e chiarito: 1) dall’uso che ne fa Quintiliano, VIII, 5, 26, che si riferisce non all’atto del dipingere, ma ad una sovrapposizione alla pittura;” “The meaning of *circumlitio* is clarified: 1) by the use that Quintilian makes at VIII, 5, 26, that refers not to the act of painting, but to a superimposition to painting...”



These passages from Cicero, Horace, Ovid, Seneca, and Quintilian reinforce and complement Pliny's technical use of the participle. Horace's poetic description of "rocks *circumlita* with moss" is an indication of the surface texture implied, while the passages from Seneca and Quintilian illuminate the potential artistic connotations of *circumlitus*, and the passages from Cicero and Ovid associate the participle directly with the human form. Taken together, these passages make clear not only that *circumlitus* signified the covering of the entire surface area of a three-dimensional object but also that the term *circumlitio* could have a distinctly artistic connotation.

## TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

Translation is an act of interpretation, yet, although translations of the Latin term *circumlitio* have reflected the reluctance of post-classical Western civilization to accept sculptural polychromy generally and that the flesh of ancient marble sculpture was painted specifically, the texts of Pliny and other authors reveal that throughout Latin literature of the late republic and early empire *circumlitus* signified the thorough covering of the entire surface area of a three-dimensional object with a thick liquid material. Clearly, the participle *circumlitus* indicates that the term *circumlitio* was not limited to sculptural polychromy but rather was part of the broader Roman vocabulary of artistic finishes and visual connoisseurship. While textual arguments that have attempted to connect the literal meaning of the word itself, “anointing round about,” with the artistic process have achieved limited success, the ambiguity is further compounded by the relatively limited lexicon of the Latin language compared to ancient Greek or modern English, with the result that most Latin signifiers can connote a spectrum of signs from specific to general, from literal to abstract.<sup>76</sup>

Although the ancient grammarians would have disagreed, modern semiotics suggests that the sign evoked by the signifier *circumlitio* does not have to have any connection to whatever process, effect, or technique it signified.<sup>77</sup> Thus an approach that seeks a philological answer to an art historical question is ultimately fated to come up short: there is no single English equivalent for *circumlitio* that can translate the term literally and captures effectively its ancient

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<sup>76</sup> For a thorough discussion of ancient phonetics and linguistics, see Allen 1978.

<sup>77</sup> Ahl 1985 discusses the ancient ideas of inherent relationships between words, their meanings, and the implications of this connection for sound play in ancient literature.

aesthetic implications. There may, however, be an art historical answer to the philological question of what *circumlitio* signifies. In light of reconstructions of ancient artistic techniques, Pliny's association of *circumlitus* with heat suggests that in this anecdote, *circumlitio* signifies the encaustic wax painting technique that Pliny explicitly associates with Nicias and Praxiteles. The narrative of the single vase painting of the artist putting his hand to a marble sculpture is similar to the famous anecdote of Nicias and Praxiteles: Herakles approves of the nuanced effects of the surface topography of the painter's encaustic paint layer just as Praxiteles admired Nicias' distinctive *circumlitio* that elevated the marble from substrate to work of art.

## CONCLUSION

So how should we translate the term *circumlitio* and interpret the anecdote of Nicias and Praxiteles? The maximal interpretation of this anecdote is that Pliny's use of the noun *circumlitio* itself reflects yet another act of artistic, literary, and cultural translation, adaptation, and interpretation. Pliny does not explain his translation of Praxiteles simply "so much he attributed to *circumlitio*," he distinctly remarks "so much he attributed to his (*eius*) *circumlitio*," implying that Pliny's use of the term is a demonstration of his knowledge of the Latin translation of the equivalent Greek term of artistic connoisseurship for his audience of educated Roman elite.<sup>78</sup> This use of the possessive pronoun emphasizes that it was Nicias' *circumlitio* in particular that Praxiteles valued, suggesting that in this anecdote *circumlitio* signifies a distinctive, highly individualized polychrome encaustic treatment that is also, to other connoisseurs, a recognizable visual signature of the artist.<sup>79</sup>

This reevaluation of Pliny's *circumlitio* anecdote demonstrates the merit of a methodology that links the traditions of texts and images with an understanding of material technique. Such an approach not only sheds light on issues from each discipline but also leads to new interpretations that incorporate perspectives drawn from a dialogue of evidence. As art historians, archaeologists, and classicists continue to reconsider presumptions about ancient visual, material, and textual evidence, this case study serves as a model for future investigation of the art, literature, and culture of the ancient world.

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<sup>78</sup> Perhaps περιαιολιφή, cf. *supra* n.7.

<sup>79</sup> The translation "handiwork" approximately captures this interpretation and, although it loses any literal or aesthetic connection with the term *circumlitio* itself, has the advantage of also recalling Praxiteles' remark, "the ones to which Nicias put his hand."

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## IMAGES

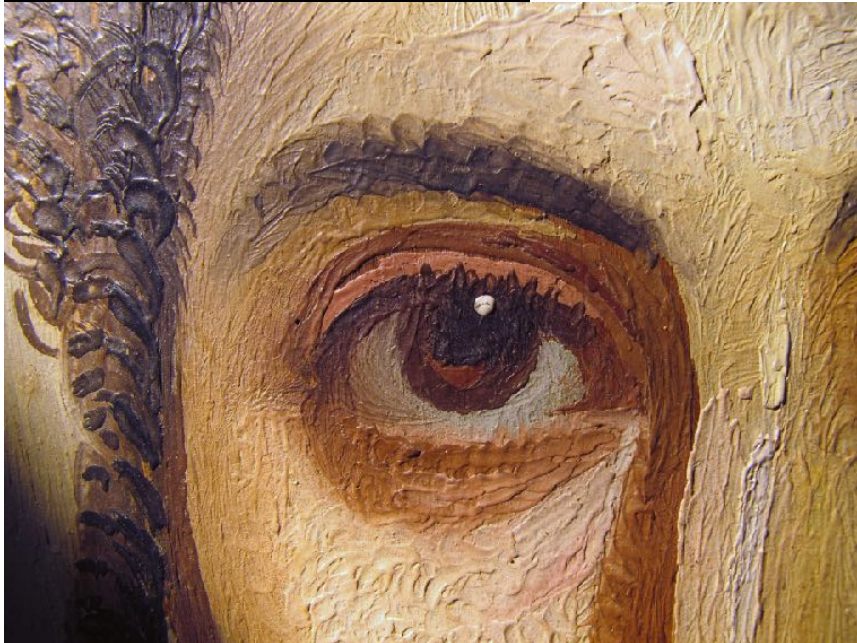


Figure 1 and detail. *Mummy Portrait of a Woman*, Attributed to the Isidora Master, ca. 100-110 CE, Fayum, Egypt, Encaustic on wood, 48 × 36 × 12.8 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, 1949.585.



Figure 2. Terracotta column krater, Attributed to the Group of Boston, c. 360-350 BCE, Probably from Apulia, h. 51.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 50.11.4.