Dura Europas Paintings - A Comparative Note

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DUE to the excellent state of preservation, quality, variety and unique characteristics, Dura Europos paintings are, no doubt, of great importance. Some of them are significant in relation to the history of painting in the Near East (especially Byzantine) and the subject matter of many which decorate the walls of the various temples, the synagogues, and the Christian church are of extreme interest not only for their place in the history of art but also in that of religion.

In the choice and organization of the decorations of Dura's religious buildings the existence of a single basic type can easily be noticed, with two variations. It is best shown in the temples of Zeus Theos and Zeus Baal. The image of the cult deity is on the cella wall; facing the entrance, and on the side walls are those of worshippers offering homage through the agency of priests. The simplest variation of this pattern provides for the addition of a modicum of narrative material, usually from the cult myth of the god or gods. The Mithraeum furnishes the unparalleled sample, where Mithra the hunter appears on the side walls. Over the cult image at the end wall there is a whole cycle of scenes from Mithra's life. In the extreme variation of the pattern, represented by the Christian church and the synagogue, the narrative element predominates, and only in these two sanctuaries is the active intervention of the deity in mortal's affairs well represented.

The figures of worshippers lining the walls on either side of the cult image are usually isolated, having little relation with each other, frontal or stationary. This indeed is in strong contrast to the Greek idea in representing figures in a variety of postures and groupings. At Dura this convention dates from at least the first century A.D. and is well represented in the Konon fresco of the Zeus Baal temple. All figures stand in exactly the same posture. Similar groups in the synagogue paintings are used to accentuate the principles' figures. Moses, for instance, stands alone and far to the front in the Exodus scene, backed by rows of people about one-quarter his size. This type of group ordinarily stands with one arm close to the body and the other in some simple act. The standing of the scheme lies in its continuation to become one of the main characteristics of Byzantine work.

The several battle and hunt scenes from Dura are interesting for their treatment of the horse as subject matter. The three styles of rendering horses are exquisitely exemplified in the banquet and hunting scene in the private house, Mithra in the hunt from the late Mithroeum and the second scene in the battle of Ezenezer from the Synagogue.[1] The simplest rendition is that from the mural in the private house; the horse is drawn with a firm black line in the flying gallop. The legs are long, the body heavy; there is a short thick neck and small head. This horse is simply a crude sketch. The horse upon which Mithra rides is somewhat the same, being drawn with a heavy black line with no modelling indicated. However, here the line is firm, but flowing. The proportions of the body are similar to the last mentioned horse except in a sense of prevailing rhythm which makes the animal come to life. The two horses in the

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[1] *The Excavations at Dura Europos* (New Haven 1936), Preriminary Report October 1932-March 1933, Pl. XLI, 1; Rostovtzeff, M., Brown, F. E., Wells, C. B., *Excavations at Dura Europos,* Seventh and Ninth seasons (New Haven 1939), Pl. XVIII, I.; Kraeling, C., *The Synagogue,* Final Reort VIII (Cambridge 1956), Pl. LV.

battle scene of the Synagogues are standing on their hind legs. The black one on the left is better executed, with very limited modelling and quite effective; the curve of the body being graceful and dignified.

In general, three major methods of rendering the face are noticed at Dura. The most noteworthy common element is a lack of expression. These three types are best represented in the figures of Moses and the burning bush from the Synagogue; Heliodorus, from the House of Scribes; and the face of the high priest from the Konon fresco.[2] The face of the priest is the most expressive treatment of the three, being the only one that could possibly be considered a portrait. It recalls to a certain extent the Fayyum portraits from Egypt demonstrating several Hellenistic traits. Doubtless this is not an idealization or a type—the mouth is pinched tight, the chin small. The nose and eyes are well shaded and the face is full of immense individual character. In contrast the head of Heliodoros is not a portrait, but simply the representation of a type—without life or individuality. The eyes are extremely large and the irises are moved up to give a sad spiritual feeling. The nose is slightly shaded, this being done with short scratchy strokes. The black outlining used for the eyes and other features are very heavy. The beard and mustache are drawn with the same kind of lines only closer together. This particular painting with its sorrowful expression and crude drawing is a complete opposite of the stern priest of Konon.

Moses and the burning bush are depicted in the Greek orator type, with pinkish skin tone. The head is impressionistically rendered with a softness not seen in the two portraits. The difference here probably stems from the fact that this was a memory picture and never intended to be an individual. The shading is done with a distinct gradation of brown. There is no outlining noticeable and the lower lip is marked simply by a shadow line beneath. The left shoulder and left side of the nose are shaded in the same pattern of shading faces common in most of the synagogue figures.

These same three figures may serve to exemplify the rendition of drapery at Dura. Once more the most crude type of handling is in the folds of the garment worn by the scribe. They are heavy and black, having little or no variation of width and simply outlining the frame of the garment and a few folds around the neck. Simple also is the white garment of the priest. It is outlined with a fine black line but within the garment light grey is employed quite effectively to represent light and shade. This, of course, is simplified and unstudied. It produces none of the bulk of body structure so well executed by the Greeks. It is a two-dimensional body with a three-dimensional face. The Moses figure, on the other hand, emits a Hellenistic spirit in the drapery which is rarely found at Dura. The falling of the right sleeve is especially realistic and the internal drapery follows a natural pattern somewhat stiff and stylized.

Faces and drapery are never actually modelled, but built up, and are hardly ever individualized. Faces are usually oval shaped, ordinarily frontal, but sometimes bring one ear into view. Usually there is no attempt to maintain consistent proportion between the size of objects or between the several persons of a composition in relation to their distances from each other. Always, there is a combination of vertical and horizontal perspectives employed.

In the Dura figures a sketchy type also exists which was used for groups of secondary subjects. These all ordinarily have the same facial features, wear the same type of clothing and pose in the same position—usually with the entire weight on one leg and the other

[2] Kraeling, *op. cit.* p. LXXVI; Rostovtzeff, M., *Dura Europos and its Art* (Oxford 1938), Pl. XV.

swinging forward, backward, or to the side with the toe pointed down.

The pigments available to the artist at Dura were of considerable number—these being black, white, majenta, many shades of red, brown, orange, purple, several shades of green, yellow, two shades of blue, grey, buff, and pink. A rough sketch of the composition was ordinarily drawn first with red, yellow, or both, then corrected with a black line. Then the underpainting was done. Major areas such as background, flesh, and sometimes the drapery were blocked in with washes of flat color. Upon this background shading and modelling were done. Faces were built up by the addition of element after element. Most of the murals are true frescos, but many were painted on dry plaster. Some of the finest modelling of the whole site are seen in those fragments of the worshippers who lined the walls of the Zeus-Theos Temple. These are fresco-stucco with very thick paint and a binding medium. Jewelry often has a faint relief effect because of the thickness of the paint. Here also a very careful sketch was made with pale gray ink and no correction lines were necessary, which adds greatly to the craftsmanship of these works. The underpainting of the pronaos of the temple of the Gadde was blue—the only place at Dura where this was used.

Architectural background ordinarily takes three forms: (1) simple blocks of color representing doorways which immediately back figures; (2) divisional pillars, sometimes with a drapery; and (3) two types of temples. The first type is a plain rectangle made of bricks into which enter one or several doors, sometimes of rather elaborate wood carving. The other type of temple bears Corinthian columns and a pediment. Of the first type, one representation (Pharoah and the Infant Moses) in the Synagogue shows this as having flat turrets like a Roman fort.

The all-prevailing spirit of the works at Dura continued the traditions of the East, having its roots in Mesopotamia. It recognized certain Greek ideas, which became stiff and constricted by the Oriental hand. For the most part the works are frontal to extreme. Action is limited, but when used seems frozen rather than moving. The principle of isolation is used immoderately in keeping with the fundamental Oriental style. There is a tendency to treat the body as a lay figure which is completely flat upon which to hang stylized drapery and opulent jewelry. All are completely linear in essence. The earlier paintings at Dura show finer detail, modelling, and sincere portraiture. The later style is characterized by a more limited pallet of flatter, matt colors, paint is thinner and drawing bold and stereotyped. Modelling was often carelessly used and true portraiture almost ceased to exist. These criteria cover a wide group of paintings with marked individual differences, but they constitute the broad lines of distinction. These same critteria apply to the painting of Palmyra and may have stemmed from the influence of Roman "illusionism." This style reached Dura about the 2nd quarter of the second century A.D. and remained prominent until the fall of the city. Hellenism itself had completely disappeared, only to assert itself again in the art of Byzantium.

Parallels with paintings of Dura of the Greco-Roman sites are seen most clearly in the paintings of Roma and Campania during the first century B.C. For instance, at Pompeii a great picture sequence in the Villa of Mysteries is one of the outstanding memorials of Campanian art, both for its religious significance and high artistic quality. This painting was commissioned to depict the entire cycle of the Dionysiac Mysteries and illustrates the salient features of the ritual. The composition is structurally coherent, showing a panoramic scene spanning the entire wall like a giant frieze on which the figures move in beautiful rhythm against a dramatic red background.

The frieze is the work of an artist trained in the Campania school of Hellenism. The figures are beautifully modelled and the rightness of flesh tones and the realistic expressions are a far cry from the paintings of Dura.[3] The principle reason for the difference is that both stem from different traditions. The Pompeii mural is a direct descendant of pure Hellenism while the Dura painting owes its heritage to a completely Oriental background with some few and slight occasions where a seemingly Hellenic trend shines through. The similarity, however, lies in the general composition—the idea of figures dramatically isolated—the central figure of a deity and the interspersion of mythological characters. The figures, though moving in rhythm, seem to have halted in a formal frozen pose.

The so-called portrait of the baker and his wife is generally termed the masterwork of Pompeian portrait-painting.[4] Something in the rendering of the eyes recalls Coptic mummy-case portraits. The colors are warm, the modelling, drapery, and detail are excellent. Nowhere at Dura may a genre subject actually drawn as such may be found. There are feasts, hunts, and sacrifices, but no portrait as such for the pure sake of human vanity. Two styles of Coptic art are contemporary with Dura. Coptic art rose out of negation—out of protest against Hellenistic and Roman culture, forced on Egypt by foreign rulers. The Copt desires to produce a style completely independent of the Greek, but finds that he cannot renounce the Greek completely. In the first three centuries A.D. there were two sharply differentiated social classes in Egypt. One was the hellenized, influential stratum whose art was more international, having its center in Alexandria. The second group was the lower stratum—full of nationalistic hatred and passionate religiousity. The differences in these two products of different mental make-up is very plain.[5] In the latter type the Copt does not try actually to portray a living person, but forces all forms and details into an ornamental system, out of which emerges a type rather than an individual. Dura paintings lie somewhere in between these two types, a little closer to the national style than the Roman version with its quick, soft, impressionistic handling. The Dura paintings are perhaps less studied and more spontaneous than the nationalistic type, but nonetheless stem from the same spirit if not the same influences.

In a painting from Tomb I at Moustafa Pasha there is a scene of three men on rearing horses. Between the center rider and the two on either side are two standing draped women.[6] The drawing of this composition is excellent, especially the rendering of the horses. They are of the short, heavy type and much attention has been given to the shading of muscles. The faces are rather impressionistically rendered and the men have long hair, beards, and mustaches. The drapery of the women is indicated by simple but meaningful lines. The picture is not easy to interpret and may be heroized members of the Macedonian family buried here. In comparing these horsemen with, for instance, Mithra in the Hunting Scene, the purely Oriental character of the Dura work is striking. The stiffness, stylized form, pure frontality and the linear quality of the Dura work mark it as remote from these Hellenistic riders.

Mosaic pavements in the Synagogue of Beth Alpha, though of a more primitive nature than the Dura paintings, stem from a more common origin. In a picture of the Aron ha-Qodesh there is a rectangular arc sitting on a wider base

[3] Skira, A., *Roman Painting*, translated by Stewart Gilbert (Geneva 1953). See Plates on pp. 51-61.

[4] *Ibid.*, Pl. p. 102.

[5] Zunto, D., "The Two Styles of Coptic Painting", *JEA* (London 1935), Vol. XXI, Pl. III, 1.2.

[6] Adriane, A., *Annuaire du Musee Greco-Romain:* La Necropole de Moustapha Pasha (Alexandria 1936), Pl. XXVII.

and surmounted by a gabelled roof. From the apex hangs a lantern. On projections from either side of the roof are two large birds. Symmetrically grouped on either side of the ark are various plants, two dogs (or lions), a pair of staffs and two 7-branch candelabra.[7] At painting is not balanced in "mirror" fashion, although we see Solomon's temple in the middle, and on the right are figure groups which are balanced by a large candelabra. In both a complete outlining of forms in black, isolated spacing on a neutral ground and complete linearity is seen. Generally speaking, the Synagogue of Beth Alpha murals are primitive and extremely linear. All major forms—heads, bodies, legs, are outlined in black, then filled in with color. The mosaics are flat patterns, with a good sense of design, but no modelling or shading of any kind was employed.

A series of wall-paintings has been found on two tombs at Marissa. Painted tombs in Syria and Palestine are extremely rare. The entire tomb was built at the end of the 3rd century A.D. while the city was under Egyptian rule. Tomb II was constructed a little later but under the same Egyptian influence. The animals in the frieze of tomb I are, so far as they actually represent existing creatures, North African. These animals, both real and exotic, are quite well drawn and painted mostly in black and red.[9] The faces of human figures of this tomb have been destroyed. On either side of the entrance of Tomb II are large figure paintings. On the left are two musicians[10] slightly under life-size. They wear festival costume and descend toward the abode of the dead. The painting on the other side shows a youth pouring a libation into the tomb. In these figures there is little knowledge of proportion and drapery. Both are in profile, etched in black lines. Architectural background is indicated by simple forms of color. The feet, hands and face of the woman are very poorly drawn. The head of the man, however, is entirely Greek. Both are in profile. In comparison with Dura paintings we see these paintings of figures as much more primitive, with no modelling, but with complete linearity. Although less advanced technically than Dura works, they still cling more closely to certain Hellenistic qualities. For the most part, the animals are well drawn.

In a floor mosaic of the Third Century A.D. from Daphne[11] we see a symposium of Fruit, Field, and Wine (Opora, Agros, Oinos) which shows a trend toward neo-Attic conservatism in background treatment. It is more simplified and less spacious than previous works. In the middle background a pillar holds curtains which are draped down on either side, this being a background which was to pass on into Christian art of the East. In a few instances this mural from Daphne may be compared with the wall-paintings of the southern half of the back wall of the Dura Synagogue. The scenes of the Synagogue are divided by ornamental bands and are of various sizes.[12] The mural shows a number of panels separated in the same way and containing single motifs which border the central panel.

Similarities are specifically seen in two of the smaller panels of each work. The panel from Dura shows a mask with long hair and very heavy, white smiling lips. In the Daphne mosaic, the same mask appears but here with the mouth wide open. The painting appears as a

[7] Sukenik, E. L., *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha* (London 1932), Pl. VIII.

Dura, the main parallel for this mosaic would be the painting above the Torah Shrine in the Synagogue.[8] The Dura

[8] Kraeling, C. H., *The Synagogue* (New Haven 1956), Pl. LI.

[9] Peters, J. P., *Painted Tombs in the Necropolis of Marissa* (London 1905), Pl. VI-XVI.

[10] *Ibid.*, Pl. XVI.

[11] Morey, C. R., *The Mosaics of Antioch* (New York 1938), Pl. IX.

[12] *Duro Europos and Its Art, op. cit.*, Pl. XXIII.

slightly softer rendition, no doubt due to the difference in materials. In the center of one of the small panels from Dura is the head of a sweet-faced young woman with dark hair parted in the center. Comparable panels of the mosaic are the two female heads—one with an angry expression, the other with the eyes rolled back and mouth open. The greatest similarity is seen in the large, very expressive eyes and short heavy brows with a downward curve. One of the best known mosaics from Antioch is the so-called "Hermes Mosaic".[13] There is no indication of space, but the modelling of the figures in this mosaic is excellent. This is carried out by very delicate gradations of colored tesserae. The drawing within the figures, however, is much flattened and simplified. Due principally to the lack of definitive lines, the Hermes figure is a much softer rendition than anything seen at Dura. In the drapery, however, we see the same linear quality and lack of bulk. The eyes of Hermes are large and pathetic—like many expressions at Dura.

A funeral stele from Alexandria is of interest for its combination of Greek and Oriental influences. From the Necropolis of mercenary soldiers stationed at Sidon in Phoenicia a soldier in combat is painted.[14] The body is shown from the back , the head in profile. He wears a crested helmet and wields an iron sword. The inscription states that his duty with the detachment was that of standard-bearer. The Romans would have represented him with his standard. A painted stele from the necropolis of Hadra at Alexandria shows a young man in a conical hat holding a horse; behind him is a boy. The horse is done with spirit—ears back and eyes full of fire. The drawing is well done and the shading natural.[15]

[13] Schenck, E. C., "The Hermes Mosaic from Antioch", *AJA*, Vol. 41 (1937), figs. 2 and 5.

[14] Rostovtzeff *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*, Vol. I (Oxford 1941), Pl. XIX, 2.

[15] *Ibid.*, Pl. XXXVII, 2.

The paintings of Dura are comparable with another cycle of painting in the Eastern Roman world and may be considered contemporary: the decoration of a tomb at Palmyra called Magharet el-Djelideh.[16] Here are two pilasters painted with funeral portraits of two standing women. These are dated 241-259 A.D. The other paintings of the tomb, though less subject to local influences than those of Dura show certain similarities regarding style and Oriental aspect.[17] A male and a female head from the same tomb show much simplification of facial structure. In the female portraint perspective and technique are poor. The genii supporting the portrait bear some resemblance in the sketched and unpainted figures of the late Mithraeum at Dura. The lines used to indicate drapery are also seen at Dura. A rather interesting comparison is to be seen in the head of Baribonnaia (temple of Zeus-Theos) [18]; and the head of Orant Dionysias, from the Roman Catacomb of St. Callistus. The faces in both technique and style, are amazingly similar. The shape of the face, the nose painted in flat three-quarter view, the stern lips, the sweeping heavy eyebrows and the large "spiritual" eyes are almost exact duplicates. The only difference is that Baribonnaia wears a domed headdress, having no volume while the Roman work shows a mass of curling black hair.

From Sassanian silver-work there is a number of compositions which recall works from Dura. The most striking of these is a figure on horseback—the horse shown in a true flying gallop. He wears a high, domed helmet and turns his body to shoot an arrow at a rearing lion behind him. Beneath the horse is another fallen lion.[19] This scene, in-

[16] Doro Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, Vol. I, Princeton (1957), figs. 206-206.

[17] *Ibid.*, Fig. 206.

[18] *Dura Eropos and Its Art, op. cit.* Pl. XIV.

[19] Erdmann, Kurt, *Die Kunst Irans Zur Zeit Der Sassaniden* (Berlin 1943), plate 61.

cluding the rendering of the horse and the position of the rider's body is almost an exact duplicate of the hunting scene of the Mithraeum.

The Dura religious painting is strikingly different from Syrian, Phoenician, and Palestinian painting of the late Hellenistic and early Roman times. Its chief features are entirely absent in the creations of Antioch, Daphne, and Leptis Magna Mosaicists. The art of Dura is the product of an evolution quite different from that art which is seen at Antioch, Rome, or in any of the Western provinces. It is not slightly Orientalized Greek painting, it is oriental in origin with an admixture of Greek, North Syrian, Iranian, and Babylonian. The style of Dura is a kind of syncretism and synthesis of all these elements. We may say that it was a new edition of various branches of Late Oriental art, not a simplification and barbarization of one of the branches.

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