Sculpture, Likeness, and Recognition in Classical Athens

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How do we recognize a person – a specific, named individual – in a work of art? In some instances, we do so because of visual resemblance between picture and person – because, that is to say, the work of art looks like them. Yet art objects can prompt recognition by other means. They might index an individual through ownership or facture. They might be taken as accurate depictions through the authority of the artist or patron. Or they might convince us to recognize a specific person by appealing to our own perspective as a viewer or even our own subjectivity – our knowledge, our memories, our emotions. Sculptures produced in Classical Athens (ca. 470-300 BCE) have long been celebrated for their lifelike appearance and anatomical realism. Yet portrait statues and funerary monuments – the only genres of sculpture to which the names of historical personages, rather than figures from myth, were attached – rarely if ever attempted to reproduce a particular individual's actual physiognomic appearance. Rather than rely on resemblance, sculptors drew on a limited range of stock figural types that viewers were invited to imaginatively recognize as named persons. In this talk, I turn away from the questions of artistic naturalism that have dominated the study of Classical art to these corresponding practices of recognition. Working through a set of key terms that were regularly attached to statues – especially likeness (*eikon*), sign (*sema*), and remembrance (*mnema*) – as well as the ancient Greek concept of recognition (*anagnorisis*), I argue that similar-looking monuments, depending how they were framed, could invite different practices of recognition, ones that varied according to a viewer's emotional subjectivity as much as according to the appearance of the work of art itself.

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