

Retrieving the art of Aetion

Aetion was a painter and a sculptor known from several ancient literary testimonia. A reconstruction of his artistic itinerary has never been attempted but it is possible to attempt it because some of these sources offer a lot of data. He was born probably around 375 BC. He was from Amphipolis, as we argue from an epigram of Callimachus. His early peak at 352-349, given by Pliny, may coincide with his creation which appears in the first place in the catalogue of his oeuvre given by Pliny: his triad of Dionysos, Tragedy and Comedy. His other creations listed by Pliny clarify that he worked a lot for patrons of monuments linked to the theatrical life. He won the competition for painters held by the Hellanodikoi at Olympia probably in 324 BC with his masterpiece: the Wedding of Rhoxane and Alexander. His picture of Semiramis may also have flattered the imperial couple because Semiramis was thought to have also moved up from a provincial background to her marriage with Ninus, the king who was told to have created an empire from the Nile to the Indos. Aetion's marriage with the daughter of the head of the Hellanodikoi, Praxenides, may have helped him to establish a great fame. He became rich as we know from Pliny and Theocritus.

His triad of Dionysus, Tragedy and Comedy may have been copied with the statues of these three subjects from Thasos. His pattern of the Erotes playing with weapons (a detail of his picture of Rhoxane and Alexander) probably was copied with a wall painting on Delos. Finally, he may have been the master responsible for sculptures and paintings of the tumulus Kasta at Amphipolis: the sculptures from this tumulus are very close to the above mentioned sculptures from Thasos and moreover the painting above room 3 of the tumulus is made with only 4 colours. This detail fits well Pliny's information that Aetion was a tetrachromatic painter. Finally, it makes sense that an artist from Amphipolis, who enjoyed very powerful connections, was charged of this important monumental enterprise.