



CRITICAL REVIEW

Susan B. Matheson & Jerome J. Pollitt, *Old Age in Greek and Roman Art*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2022. Pp. 295. ISBN 9780300266566.

Borja Méndez Santiago

University of Salamanca, Spain

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0030-4122>

This book, a major contribution to the study of old age in Antiquity, examines the different ways in which the elderly were represented in Greek and Roman art. Its authors, Susan Matheson (Curator of Art at the Yale University Art Gallery) and Jerome Pollitt (Sterling Professor Emeritus of Classical Archaeology and History of Art at Yale University), are experienced and renowned specialists in the field of Greek and Roman art, having been active in their fields for many years. A positive feature of this co-authored volume is that, unlike many others, it clearly indicates the authorship of each chapter. Pollitt's contribution is limited to the short chapters 1, 5 and 6 (plus the Preface and Conclusions), so his part is much more limited in comparison to Matheson's.

In the "Preface and Acknowledgments" (pp. 7-12) the authors stress the importance of works of art — along with literature and archaeology — in 'recovering' ancient attitudes toward old age. After offering a brief summary of the book contents, Matheson and Pollitt state that this volume is the product of a very long commitment towards the study of old age which started in 1996, when Matheson presented a paper at the exhibition 'I, Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome' (see *I, Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*, edited by Kleiner and Matheson, Yale University Art Gallery, 2000). The book is structured in eight chapters of varying length (ranging from 6 to 48 pages) which are organised both thematically and according to the somewhat arbitrary, but effective, division between notions of "sympathy", "ambiguity" and "derision" towards elders.

The first two chapters pave the way for the discussion that follows. Chapter 1, "Attitudes toward Old Age in Classical Literature" (pp. 15-27), brings together some famous literary testimonies regarding old age in Antiquity. The information is divided into two, somewhat arbitrary but clear, sections respectively called 'catastrophe theme' and

* **CONTACT** Borja Méndez Santiago Email: mendezsborja@usal.es

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'liberation theme'. The former states that, in old age, everything that is worth living is lost, whereas the latter considers this life stage as a period of release from human passions. The authors note that, while literary images are often very critical of old age, the same is not true of the visual arts, as they show in the remainder of the book.

Chapter 2, "The Features of Old Age: Identifying Elders in Greek and Roman Art" (pp. 29-39), briefly comments on the main physical features that were associated with the elderly in Greek and Roman art. The ways in which the visual signs of old age are selected, emphasized, and combined are of utmost importance for revealing Greek and Roman attitudes towards the elderly.

Chapter 3, "Veneration and Sympathy: Elders in Family Life" (pp. 41-89), studies the variety of ways in which old people were represented. Drawing particular attention to the continuities and changes across different artistic media, this chapter tries not only to show the relevance of the elders within families, but also the roles exercised by them. The information is subdivided into three different epigraphs. The first one, "Funerary Ritual and Commemoration" (pp. 41-76), shows us how the elderly were represented in funerary contexts, either as mourners or as the deceased themselves. The second, "Childcare and Education" (pp. 76-84), analyses the involvement of elderly nurses, tutors or *paidagogoi* in the lives of Greek and Roman families. The last, "Warrior Departures and Other Rituals" (pp. 84-89), deals with representations of elderly people in rituals such as warrior departures, processions, offerings to the gods, and *extispicy/hieroskopia* (reading of the organs). To present the vast amount of information available, Matheson and Pollitt successfully combined a chronological approach (from Greece to Rome) with the typological division of the evidence (from Greek pottery to stelae, reliefs, round sculptures, and to various pictorial elements).

Chapter 4, "Honouring Experience and Wisdom: Elders in Public Life" (pp. 91-121), deals with the (mainly positive) public representations of elite men and women. The first part of the chapter consists of a brief catalogue of Hellenistic and Roman rulers, both male and female (from Livia Drusila to Helen, the mother of Constantine). Then follows an examination of the different ways of representing Greek and Roman aged priests and priestesses. The next section studies the depiction of elderly men as professionals in areas such as education (at all levels and in all disciplines), medicine, art, commerce, and farming. The chapter concludes with an interesting analysis of those rare images that link old age with activities such as athletics and symposia.

Chapter 5, "The advent of the Aged Sage" (pp. 123-131), explains the emergence of a new model of masculinity from the 4th century BC onwards. In Athens, and later elsewhere, a new society developed in which the involvement of the elderly in intellectual tasks became a valid alternative to the more traditional figures of the politician and general. Reflecting this trend, several Hellenistic and Roman portraits show aged philosophers (Epicurus, Zeno, Chrysippos, Diogenes), poets (Homer), physicians (Hippocrates) and orators (Cicero, Seneca).



Chapter 6, “Ambiguous Images” (pp. 133-147), deals briefly with an innovative but well-studied genre of sculptures that represent elderly men and women at work. Traditionally labelled as the *Fischer und Landleute*, the chapter analyses the three main types of these sculptures — that of fishermen, shepherds, and female workers —, discussing both their ‘meaning’ and their uncertain functions. As both authors say in the Conclusions (p. 200), they “were serious votive or funerary offerings rather than, as some scholars have argued, gifts to the gods offered by the wealthy with disdainful amusement”.

Chapter 7, “Derision: An Extreme View of Old Age” (pp. 149-155), focuses on a small number of Greek vases (late 6th-early 5th century BC) and terracotta figures that express derision toward the elderly. In Matheson’s words, they mainly show different forms of humour at their expense. Among them, playful scenes featuring old Satyrs, old *hetairai* or *pornai* still at work, and some representations of Geras with Heracles are highlighted.

Chapter 8, “Pathos and Paradigms: The Aged in Myth” (pp. 157-197), is basically a catalogue dealing with the ambivalent depiction of the elderly in some ancient myths. The first section shows us that the *Iliad* offers a significant number of elderly characters. In stark contrast with the revered and powerful figures of some aged kings like Nestor and Phoinix, the depiction of other elders, such as Priam or Hekabe, not only shows their extreme vulnerability, but also their dependence on younger people (e.g., Aithra, Anchises). Attic tragedies are also very rich in representations of mythological elders, be they victims (Pelias, Oedipus), witnesses (Tyndareus, Tantalus, Pitheus), or agents of tragedy (Alcestis’ parents, Kepheus). Old nurses, paidagogoi, herdsmen and personifications are only briefly considered, while the figures of old satyrs, Silenos and Papposilenos are given more consideration. The last two sections of this chapter deal, respectively, with the representation of ageing gods (Hades, the Three Judges of the Underworld, Nereus) and heroes (Herakles), and with some of the aged characters of the *Odyssey*, such as Laertes, Eurykleia and Teiresias.

A brief Conclusions section (pp. 198-201), an image Appendix (pp. 202-248), Notes (pp. 249-267), Bibliography (pp. 268-280) and Index (pp. 281-292) follow the chapters.

Sometimes, the boundary between “maturity” and “old age” is not clearly defined, so the appearance of one or two of the features of old age is enough to qualify a specific individual as “old”. As the authors themselves point out on several occasions, this is a very complicated question. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this difficulty. The ‘old married couple’ in Appendix 20 is loosely labelled as “aged” (p. 53) due to the sole presence of crow’s feet and sagging flesh in the woman’s jawline, and the furrowed forehead and wrinkles of the husband (who is probably older than his wife). The figure of Tiberius Julius Vitalis (Figure 68) is labelled as “old” (p. 117) despite only showing pronounced wrinkles and partial baldness. His body, by contrast, seems to be still strong. Nevertheless, in the reviewer’s impression, neither the man nor the woman can be considered ‘old’. The use of the portrait bust of Marcus Aurelius in the Musée Saint-Raymond in Toulouse (Figure 57) to



illustrate the emperor's alleged tendency to be represented as older than he actually was is questionable. While two other images — Figure 58 (the Conservatori Reliefs) and Appendix 76 (his bust at the Museo Nazionale Romano) — clearly show this trend, Toulouse's portrait shows a mature man whose age accords closely with his biological one (somewhere between 50 and 60 years old).

Despite the book not being particularly innovative in its methodology, it is extremely well written, carefully edited and meticulously proofread. The outstanding quality of the 297 images, along with their brief and accessible commentaries, makes this work a very useful tool, both for undergraduates and postgraduate students alike. The exhaustive notes section frequently alludes to further images which could not be reproduced in this volume for various reasons. The extensive use of notes (placed at the end of the book) testifies not only to the thoroughness of the authors, but also of their willingness to make the reading process as easy as possible. Nevertheless, their decision to divide the images into two different sections (the Figures, placed inside the different chapters, and the Appendix, located at the end, after the Conclusions) certainly makes consultation more difficult for the reader at times.

Contrary to a general (and regrettable) trend in current scholarship, both authors should be praised for using an extensive, up-to-date, multilingual bibliography. Despite this, some relevant publications are missing. See, for example, A. Catrysse (2003), *Les grecs et la vieillesse: d'Homère à Epicure*, L'Harmattan; W. Suder (2015), *Starość w antycznym Rzymie: aspekt społeczno-demograficzny*, Chrymar; M. Moreno (2018), "En la linde de la vida: imágenes de la vejez en la cerámica griega", in C. Rubiera (ed.), *Las edades vulnerables. Infancia y vejez en la antigüedad*, Trea, pp. 247-274; S. Casamayor (2020), *La vejez femenina en la antigua Roma. Cuerpos, roles y sentimientos*, Trabe; M. Harlow & R. Laurence (eds.) (2022), *Age, Ages and Ageing in the Greco-Roman World*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing; N. Bernard (2023), *Être vieux dans le monde grec. De Solon à Philopoemen (VI^e – II^e s. a.C.)*, Ausonius.

It should also be noted that the authors have made a conscious effort to highlight the importance of female figures in an academic environment in which they are not always sufficiently visible. Despite some minor criticism (see above), what we have is an outstanding piece of scholarship, as this is the first volume to bring together most of the images of the elderly over a vast period of time (1,200 years). Indeed, this is a book which should be purchased by every university library (mainly by those offering Arts and/or Classics), since it is highly recommended as a reference tool for any art historian or classicist interested in the sociocultural history of Greek and Roman societies. To sum up, this work provides us with a solid foundation on which to build new knowledge on a subject that has traditionally been understudied, but whose importance is essential at a time increasingly burdened by the challenges of an ageing population.