

Human as Creator in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*

Although Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (hereafter *NH*) was long treated as solely a cache of information, scholars have increasingly broadened their approach to consider it as a monumental literary project (e.g. Beagon 1992, Naas 2002, Laehn 2013). Throughout the *NH*, Pliny often characterizes *Natura* in a Stoic fashion, as a higher power who creates for the benefit of humanity (Beagon 1992). As the text progresses, he shifts from describing the natural world itself to explaining humanity's use of it, documenting the gradual integration of nature and humanity (Laehn 2013). The final books of the *NH*, which focus on art and architecture, thus present the transformation of humans into creators in their own right. These books have received particular attention due to the insight they provide into Pliny's ethical, political, and aesthetic values (e.g. Isager 1991, Carey 2003). However, to Pliny, the evolution of human into creator has a troubling outcome; humans simply plunder *Natura*'s creations in order to produce their own superficial imitations, spurred on by an insatiable need to collect and conquer (Carey 2000). The result is the denigration of human nature itself (Henderson 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to offer a more nuanced understanding of Pliny's decline narrative by showing that he does in fact ascribe to humans certain creative qualities of *Natura* herself. In Book 35, Pliny describes artists of the Greek past who painted with such verisimilitude that spectators could not distinguish between art and life (c.f. Bussels 2013). Yet also sprinkled throughout Book 35 are anecdotes about Greek painters who depicted immaterial concepts and phenomena, including *mores*, an *animus*, and things which Pliny expressly states cannot be portrayed. Pliny suggests that *Natura* served as an inspiration and instructor for these artists, the model for their artistic personae and processes. Such artists do not simply imitate the

creations of *Natura* superficially, they create their own characters and world of which the art is merely a snapshot.

By examining these particular examples of human creators, it is possible to achieve a more subtle understanding of Pliny's narrative of decline. Pliny does not assert a simple transition from human into creator, but contrasts the art of his own world with a mythic past during which artists resembled their own creator, *Natura*. Pliny is generally eager to demonstrate how the knowledge of the past and present is encompassed within the pages of the *NH*, and within the confines of the Roman Empire; however, the most transcendent artistic works of the past are lost, surviving only in descriptions, unable to be reconstructed, and marking a lacuna in both contemporary knowledge and in the empire's acquisitions. In this way, collecting becomes an important metaphor in Pliny's narrative of decline, as Pliny characterizes the insurmountable divide between past and present in terms of an irreparable hole in his – and Rome's – collection.

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