CHAPTER 1

Defining Roman Art

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The Discovery of Roman Art in the Late Nineteenth Century

A hundred years of "Roman art"

"Roman art" was first identified as a distinct subfield within the history of art only in the late nineteenth century; and the first scholars to attempt to define the subject, Franz Wickhoff and Alois Riegl, felt compelled to adopt a markedly defensive tone (Wickhoff and von Hartel 1895/1900; Riegl 1901/1985; Brendel 1979, 25–37). Up to that time art historians, following the lead of Winckelmann, had regarded the art produced in the Roman period as simply "ancient art in its period of decline"—a motley art, unlike Egyptian or classical Greek art, in that it possessed no recognisable style all of its own. Of course, the Romans themselves were partly responsible for this eighteenth- and nineteenth-century view. Had not Virgil, in a celebrated passage of the Aeneid, put into the mouth of one of his characters a memorable prophecy (Virgil, Aeneid 6.847–848):

"excedant alii spes amnis ornata ara
credo equidem, vitam desceat de marmore vulnus..."

"Others will hammer out bronze till it is soft and breathes, and will draw forth from marble living faces..."

This is referring, of course, to the Greeks. The Romans—in the very same passage—are charged with a rather different destiny (Virgil, Aeneid 6.851–853):

"Tu regere imperio populos, Romanus, necem
(iae vii cruenti aeti), pasque imponere suavem,
perversae subiectis et debellare superbi."

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Defining Roman Art

What is Roman about Roman art?

Those who first attempted to distinguish Roman art from Greek art started with representations of distinctly Roman subject matter, and the genre that we have come to know as "Roman historical relief," in which Roman public ceremonies or historical events were commemorated (Figures 2.3, 2.6, 11.2). Greek art offered no real precedent for this kind of representation; in its time it was clearly something authentically new. The products of late antique art were quickly also included (Figures 7.2, 7.8, 8.4), since they plainly represented the gradual abandonment of Greek and Hellenistic standards of representation. The next group of monuments to be widely recognized as properly part of Roman art were the portraits (Figures 3.1-3.10, 12.2-12.6). Here, of course, no one was arguing that the Greeks had not had portraits (distinctive and immediately identifiable images of specific individuals), merely that Roman portraits were sufficiently different, in style and appearance, to be regarded as an original creation of Roman culture. And rather similar considerations led to the inclusion of monumental carved sarcophagi (Figures 1.8, 15.4, 28.2). The reliefs on these are so unlike anything in earlier Greek art that—even where the subject matter is straightforwardly Greek—they could safely be regarded as something new. (Certainly there was no danger of these works appearing in books on Greek art.) Mosaic were not far behind the sarcophagi, since this was a medium enthusiastically taken up in the first century of Roman art, and developed in wholly new directions (Figures 14.4, 14.6, 21.6-21.7). And here, in a nutshell, we have the most important building blocks of any early first-century book on Roman art. If one adds a smattering of wall paintings, presented from the point of view of Roman domestic decoration (Figures 13.1-13.5), and a selection of the art produced for the middle levels of Roman society (Figures 4.5, 11.3, 11.5)—non-elite art, sometimes still misleadingly referred to as "plebeian art"—then we have the recipe for just about everything that one finds in a contemporary handbook of Roman art. In short, our book on Roman art may be described as perfect responses to the question: "What is Roman about Roman art?"

The problem with all of this, of course, is that we are calling "Roman art" is actually a selection, it leaves out of the picture a large part of Roman artistic production. Whole categories of objects, produced in great quantity during this period, are either not acknowledged at all or are only very selectively admitted. Where, for example, are all the images of the gods (e.g., Figures 4.9, 5.7-5.8, 7.5)? The enormous temple images, the votive reliefs, the figurines? Where is that vast army of mythological beings that occupied Rome's parks and public baths? The Muses, Amazon, Nymphs, Nereids, Hippocamps, Centaurs, Satyrs, Hermaphrodites, Pans, and Maenads (e.g., Figures 1.1, 8.2)? Where are the Greek heroes, Achilles, Meleager, Odysseus, and the rest (e.g., Figure 28.3)? The many copies of famous classical statues—the Diadoubi, the Delphi (Figure 9.5), the Knidian Aphrodite? Where are the thousands of pieces of villa furniture—the marble urns, candleabra, Neo-Arth relief, marble tables, well-heads, figured altars, and so on (Figures 16.1-16.7)? In a book like Diana Klein's Roman Sculpture (1992), the "wholly traditional" focus of the book—on portraits and historical relief—means that in terms of quantity, at a conservative
fanatical collectors (C. Verres, of course, being the most notorious example), pretentious connoisseurs, massively inflated prices, professional art dealers, inscrupulous forgers, and public art galleries—which have been claimed by some as the first “art museums” (Alsp 1982; Chevalier 1991; Strong 1994, 13–30; Bounia 2004). All of these categories are well documented from the literary sources. I cannot do more than glance at this “art market” here, but a brief survey will allow me to highlight some of its most characteristic features.

The collects most frequently mentioned by Roman writers are bronze figurines; and of these, Corinthian, “Corinthian bronzes,” were the most prized (Emanuele 1989; Bounia 2004, 195–196, 252–253). However, antique silverware (Figure 17.3), engraved gems, citron-wood tables, and drinking vessels carved out of semi-precious stones (Figures 17.1–17.2) were also popular. The emperor Nero reportedly paid a million sestercii for a bowl carved out of fluor spar (Pliny, Natural History 37.20). This is apparently the notorious stone that Romans called marmor—the “myth-stone” (Lecointe and Harden 1949, 31–37; Harden 1954, 53; André, Bloch, and Rouvier 1981, 126–127; there are two fine examples in the British Museum (Figure 17.1)). In the interest of space, however, I shall concentrate my attention exclusively on another category of artwork beloved of Roman collectors: old master panel paintings.

The orator Hortensius reportedly paid 144,000 sestercii for a painting of the Argonauts by Kydias, a Greek painter of the fourth century BCE, and built an elaborate pavilion for it in his Tuscan villa. Pliny describes this as an aedes, a “shrine” (Pliny, Natural History 35.130). Marcus Agrippa paid the city of Cyzicus 1,200,000 sestercii for two antique paintings—an Ajax and an Aphrodite—and he later displayed a series of panel paintings in the hot rooms of the public baths that he built in the Campus Martius (Pliny, Natural History 35.26). Julius Caesar was also a keen collector: Suetonius informs us that he collected not only paintings, but also engraved gems, metalwork, and statues as well—as of antique workmanship (Suetonius, Iulius Caesar 47). He displayed six cases of his gems in the temple of Venus Genetrix (Pliny, Natural History 37.11) and paid 80 talents (about two million sestercii) for two paintings, a Medea and an Ajax, by Timonathus, which he dedicated in the same building (Pliny, Natural History 7.126). To give an idea of what these prices mean, a daily wage for an unskilled laborer in this period is about three to four sestercii. I mention these prices merely to illustrate what collectors were willing to pay on the open market for genuine masterpieces.

Roman authors sometimes satirize the intense feelings that Greek art aroused in enthusiasts. Here is Encolpius, the protagonist of Petronius’s Satyriam, at a loose end in Pozzuoli (Petronius, Satyriam 83):

“...in pinacothecam perveniens variae specie tabularum mirabilia: Numa et Cesardus manus vi dium monum veratae historiae victoriae, et Protesilaos rudimenta exum ipsius naturae veritatem coronas favebat burrus trautari. Innu vero Apollo quam Graeci monobullum appellaverunt, etiam adhibebat. Tuam esse simulatitque extusim maris terrarum simulacrum de simulacris posuit, et credens etiam asinorum esse pietatem.”

“I went into a picture gallery (pinacotheca) which had a wonderful variety of paintings. For instance I saw the handiwork of Zeus, not yet overcome by the ravages of time. And I even examined, not without a certain thrill (burrus), some preliminary sketches (rudimentum) by Protesilas, which vividly conveyed the truth of nature herself. But that masterpiece of Apollo, which the Greeks call the monobullum (‘the one-kneed’)—I practically worshipped. For the outlines of the figures were so subtle and clear-cut they seemed to express the subjects’ very souls.”

The effusive language of the art connoisseur is here parodied by being put in the mouth of the hapless vagabond Encolpius. In a similar vein, Quintilian observes that some art enthusiasts of his day
affecting an exaggerated admiration for the almost "primitive" works of the early classical painters Polygnotos and Agiophasos, out of what he terms "their ostentatious desire to seem to be connoisseurs" (Quintillian, Institutio Oratoria 12.10.3. proprie quidam inutilis ob, non opinio at, ambitus), while Statius writes (perhaps rather optimistically) of the collector Novius Vindex (Statius, Silv., 4.6.22-24): quis namque audax certaverit nuperos / Vindex, artificium rector um agnecere ductus / et non inopta multae nudorum reddere signis ("Whoever could compete with the eye of Vindex in recognizing the works of an old master, or in identifying the sculptor of an unsigned statue?"). The majority of the literary reports and anecdotes naturally concern works by canonical "greats" or anteks (old masters): the Greek artists of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. And it has been estimated that the public places of Rome in the early empire contained an astonishing number of works from this period: at least four works by Praxiteles, eight by Skopas, four by Lyssippus, three each by Evphronios, Myron, and Sthenian, two each by Phidias, four by Polyclitus, and as many as thirty each by Aristocles, four by Nikias, three each by Apelles, Polykleitos, and Praxiteles; four paintings by Aristides, four by Nikias, three each by Apelles, Polykleitos, and Strongylion; four paintings by Aristides, four by Nikias, three each by Apelles, Polyclitus, and Nikomachus, two each by Zeuxis, Parrhasios, and Antiphilos, and works by Polygnotos, Timanthes, and Panaetius (Follit 1979, 187-188; see also Celani 1998). And this is a very conservative estimate: the great cavalry squadron of Alexander by the sculptor Lyssippus—comprising perhaps 26 equestrian figures—is counted here as one work. In addition, Rome was considered perhaps as early as the second century BCE. Not surprisingly, however, the best of these seem to have commanded huge fees. L. Lucullus reportedly commissioned the sculptor Arkesilas to make an image of Felicitas for him, at a cost of a million sesterces (Pliny, Natural History 35.156). Arkesilas also made the cult image of Venus Genetrix (ibid., 35.156), and his statues of "centaurs carrying nymphs" were later included in the collection of sculptorum put on permanent exhibition by Asius Polio, who had them attached to the Atrium Libertatis (Pliny, Natural History 35.33). Whether works by old masters, or by leading contemporary artists; whether dedicated in public—in parks, temples, porticos, or baths—or displayed in private—in the houses and villas of the wealthy elite, it is clear from the literary sources that all of these Greek works epitomized "art" for the Romans.

Wall paintings and villa furnishings as evidence for Roman attitudes toward art

In the mid-first century BCE, the luxurious villas of L. Lucullus were famous for their galleries of paintings (Varro, Three Books on Agriculture 1.2.10), and dining in one's pinnacotheca quickly became chic (ibid., 1.59.2). Vitruvius simply takes it for granted that the villas of the nobles will include picture galleries (Vitruvius, Ten Books on Architecture 1.27.6, 6.3.8, 6.4.2, 6.5.2, 6.7.3). Interestingly, we can perhaps discover something of how collectors like Lucullus displayed their valuable collections from surviving wall paintings. Many Roman houses have rooms that are quite plainly decorated as pinnacothecae (Figure 6.4); with illusionistic renderings of Greek mythological panel paintings set in elaborate frames (on ancient frames see Ehlrich 1953; 1977, 110-119; 1978, 167-176; 1979, 8-20; 1986; Bragantini and Badoni 1985). This small corpus comes from the luxuriously decorated house beside the Tiber discovered in the late nineteenth century in the gardens of the Villa Farnesina. We know that in the Roman period panel paintings were generally inset into a gallery wall (Philostroclus, Ikeupinres 1.250K.26: enxemnemonos) rather than hung, as they are today; so we must imagine the large ornamental frames as fixed, worked in various precious metals, and forming part of the fabric of the wall. Collectors apparently favored placing a large vertical panel painting in the center of a wall (viewing the painted noticia in Figure 6.4, one thinks naturally of the aedes that Hortensius constructed for his painting of the Argonauts) and they then would set smaller panels on either side. Sometimes these smaller side panels were painted as if fitted with wooden shutters, to protect the old painting inside from fading, and displayed in the center of a wall (viewing the painted noticia in Figure 6.4, one thinks naturally of the aedes that Hortensius constructed for his painting of the Argonauts) and they then would set smaller panels on either side. Sometimes these smaller side panels were painted as if fitted with wooden shutters, to protect the old painting inside from fading, and displayed in the center of a wall (viewing the painted noticia in Figure 6.4, one thinks naturally of the aedes that Hortensius constructed for his painting of the Argonauts).
the carved reliefs of Roman public monuments, they do not speak of them as "artworks." Sallust, in the introduction to his account of the war with Jugurtha, writes (Sallust, Jugurthine War 4.5):

Nam stepe ego audiri Q. Mammmum, P. Stephum, praeces civitatis urbis praecelum virtutis tuae daretur, cum museis imaginibus internecta, velniiusutibus olim autern autem accurrit.

I have often heard that Fabius Maximus and Scipio Afric anus, and other illustrious men of our state, used to say that when they gazed upon the portrait masks (imagines) of their ancestors, their hearts were fired with an ardent aspiration to virtus.

A book by Harriet Flower set out to collect all the references to the imagines in Roman literature (Flower 1996, 281-325); strikingly, in this large body of literary testimonia, it is never once mentioned by any ancient author that they are the work of artists. Romans just do not say things like, "Fabius Maximus often used to remark how well the sculptor had captured his grandfather's characteristic stern expression in his imagin." In producing such works the artist's goal was to be completely invisible; and the same is more or less true for imperial portraits, too. No Roman writer ever thought it worth recording the names of the artists who created the great imperial portraits. If the portraits of the emperor and his family are mentioned at all in contemporary texts, they are discussed in quite different terms from works of Greek art. A passage from a letter to the emperor Hadrian, written by the historian Arrian when he was governor of Cappadocia, will serve as a representative example (Arrian, Circei navigation of the Black Sea 1.3-4, 2.1):

Your statue [in Trapezon] stands in a pleasing posture (for it points towards the sea), but the work does not resemble you and is otherwise not of good quality. Please send me a statue that is worthy to carry your name, in the same posture.

Note that it is the lack of resemblance to the emperor that is the portrait's prime fault. Imperial images, of course, always acknowledged as the products of sculptors and painters; but they are never mentioned in the same breath with the works of the old masters, or even for that matter with the works of contemporary Greek artists—those who made the most famous cult images and votives for Roman temples.

Modern Difficulties in Approaching the Art of the Roman Period

"Roman art" is a modern category; it fulfills modern expectations of "art"

I must now return to the point from which I started. Roman art is a modern category; the term was coined in the late nineteenth century. There is no ancient category "Roman art." Romans were quite ready to compare Roman literary figures with Greek ones; Cicero with Demosthenes in the practice of oratory; Virgil with Homer in epic poetry; Sallust with Thucydides in the writing of history (Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory 10). However, no Roman ever refers to the existence of an ars Romana—a distinctly Roman visual art to compare with Greek art. That is why no one in antiquity ever thought of asking the question: "Who is the Roman Pheidias?" The best parallel here is not with poetry or oratory, but with philosophy. Many Romans were enthusiastic about philosophy, from Lucretius to Cicero, Seneca to Marcus Aurelius, and it
We cannot accept art as a function as art in Roman society

So what we call “Roman art” seems like art to us; but we have real difficulty with the material that functioned as art in Roman society (Figures 1.1, 1.6, 9.5, 16.1, 16.7, and 20.6—the Eechtheum carvings, redeplored around a pool). For it spectacularly does not fulfill our expectations of what art ought to do. It is transparently not the original creation of its own time; and it is expressive (from our perspective) primarily of the values and ideals of Greek culture—and of Greek culture centuries before the Roman period. Nevertheless, the practice of simply excluding all of these “Greek” works from our accounts of art in the Roman period is also quite plainly unsatisfactory. And this has led to a number of attempts in the last 40 years to rehabilitate this material, and to make it more acceptable to modern cultural sensibilities. For example, in the reproduction of the classical “Dionysus” type in Munich, the sculptor has merely added a sword belt and scabbard to the figure (Stewart 1990, 168, pl. 440); whereas in the reproduction of the Didoan Crouse of Polykletos found on Delos, the sculptor has supplied a statue support with a quiver—which seems intended to designate this figure as an Apollo (Stewart 1990, 163, pl. 383–385). So in the latter case we even seem to have a change of subject, from mortal athlete to divinity. In the replica of the “Melager” in the Vatican, on the other hand, we see that the copyist has added the head of the Calydonian boar and a cloak; a cloak that flutters out to the side in a manner quite alien to the art of the fourth century BCE (Stewart 1990, 185, pl. 549). Such modifications (and some much more radical than these, involving varying head types, gestures, and so on) have been seen as evidence of a remarkably ascetic and self-confident attitude, on the part of the copyists, toward the classical models from which they were working; an attitude that required that their creations be described as something other than “copies.” The first step was to give the material a new name. In the 1970s, German scholarship came up with the designation “Römische Idealplastik” (“Roman ideal statuary”); Wünsche 1972), so that one could explicitly drop the reference to Greek models and subject matter. Next, arguments were advanced that we should understand all the “copies” of Greek works not as reproductions, but as self-conscious attempts to rival the old masters of the classical period, improving on or improving their masterpieces, and creating from them something new and better (Wünsche 1972; Preisshofer and Zanker 1970/71; Zanker 1974). This approach was taken with enthusiasm for a while in Germany, but then just as quickly abandoned as it emerged more and more clearly that the ancient evidence could not support this interpretation. Nevertheless, these developments in Germany have bequeathed to us in the English-speaking world what must be counted as the dominant sensibility of “Roman art”—what should have been signed by Greeks; let alone that the characteristic styles of these monuments might be the creation of Greek artists and working for Roman patrons. The main thrust of Diane Conlin’s well-regarded (and beautifully produced) book The Artists of the Ara Pacis(1977), for example, is to argue from a detailed analysis of sculptural technique that those who carved the altar were Italians, not Greeks, or “Italics trained,” as the author puts it. I cite this study merely to emphasize that we are still as desperately keen as ever that Roman art should somehow be authentically Roman in our eyes.
Some Proposals for Redefining Roman Art for Modern Audiences

The figural arts of the Roman world are better termed “visual culture”

It should be clear by now that I regard the strange situation in which the discipline finds itself as stemming in large part from the modern category “Roman art.” Furthermore, we can sidestep many of the problems we have simply by discarding this category, and speaking instead of “Roman visual culture,” as some have already started to do (e.g., Clarke 2007). The term “visual culture” was apparently coined by Michael Baxandall in the mid-1980s, and introduced to the profession at large by Scetiana Alpers in her book The Art of Describing (Alpers 1983, 23f). It was subsequently picked up by others, notably the post-structuralist art historians Norman Bryson, Michael-Anne Holly, and Keith Moxey, in the title of a collection of essays that they published in 1994. These authors, however, employ the term in a rather different sense from Baxandall and Alpers (Bryson, Holly, and Moxey 1994, see esp. xvi–xvii). They propose that we should speak of “visual culture” in order to replace the “History of Art” with a “History of Images,” and in this way avoid perpetuating the many unspoken assumptions and prejudices that inevitably accompany the term “art” in modern art-historical writing. In the last 20 years it is fair to say that there has been a real surge in the number of studies in art history that have adopted this term—as far as I can tell, largely for the reasons just mentioned. And whether or not one accepts this general position, the designation “visual culture” seems ideally suited to help scholars of ancient art with the special problems presented by the Roman period. Now, it may be that in time the term will also generate difficulties of its own (problems of definition in particular), but let me start by listing some of its obvious advantages.

First, all of the products of the visual arts in the Roman period are part of “Roman visual culture.” We do not have to decide which works are really “Roman,” in some sense, and which are not. Accordingly, all of the works from a Roman building, like a villa, a theater, a nymphaeum, or a public bath, can be studied on equal terms. We do not have to divide them up into contemporary portraits, representations of members of the imperial family, historical reliefs, victories with trophies, friezes of captured weapons, and the like (which would be “Roman” in our eyes); and gods, mythological subjects, portraits of famous Greek writers and philosophers, and copies of famous classical statues (which would be “Greek”). We do not have to worry about the ethnic origins of the artists who made all these works. Romans evidently did not. As we saw earlier, Virgil’s Aeneid states it bluntly (Aenid 6.847–48): “Ostuli will hammer out bronze till it is soft and breathes, and draw forth from marble living faces.”* Others, not Romans. Or as Cicero expressed it, more prosaically, in a conversation with L. Lucullus (Cicero, On Academic Skepticism 2.86): “Few men become great artists”; he continues, “—few indeed among our race” ( nostro genere, see also ibid. 2.20.) The word that Cicero uses for artists in this exchange is artifex—and he is referring specifically to painters and flute players. If Romans were deeply concerned that there had been no great painters or sculptors of Roman stock, they left no record of it in their literature. For our purposes, whether the artists were Greeks, Romans—or even Spaniards or Gauls—all were perfectly capable of contributing to Roman visual culture. And finally, and for what I have to say in the rest of this chapter, most importantly: all of those Greek old masterpieces, avidly acquired and set up in Roman temples and public places, are also properly part of Roman visual culture. Moreover, I would contend that for understanding how that visual culture works, they are arguably the most crucial part of it. I shall return to this point below.

German scholarship and the mutually exclusive spheres of otium and negotium

What we have designated the “Greek” part of Roman visual culture has unquestionably been best studied over the last 40 years or so in Germany. In the late 1970s, Paul Zanker—in several influential articles—pioneered a number of new ways of thinking about this material and reconstructing the function that it served in Roman life (e.g., Zanker 1975 and 1979). A whole new approach was born that seemed to define and delimit an entirely new domain of Roman art (e.g., Neudecker 1988; Clarke 1991; Gada 1991; Wallace-Hadrill 1994). The focus of all of this work was, to a large extent, the sculpture and wall paintings that were specifically produced for Roman homes and villas; and this material was then used to shed light on Roman villa culture and the realm of otium (leisure), which in Roman thinking was directly opposed to negotium (the world of business, politics, and public service). Similar work has also been done on Roman mosaics (Muth 1958). The evidence from the visual arts has proved extremely valuable for our understanding of how Romans articulated for themselves a realm apart from the public and political arena, which could be devoted to otium: what we might term “private life.” However, while this approach has been immensely fruitful, it has to some extent perpetuated the long-standing division of the visual arts in the Roman period into two spheres—private and public, otium and negotium—with two discrete sets of visual imagery, Greek and Roman, respectively. Zanker used this division into private and public, for example, as the leading organizational principle in his book—until very recently—the best modern account of Roman art: his entry “Arte Romana” in the new supplements to the Enciclopedia dell’ Arte Antica (EAA: Zanker 1971–94; the best general account is now Zanker 2007/2008/2010); the EAA entry forms the cornerstone of two of Zanker’s most important subsequent essays (1991 and 2000). Despite the undeniable advances in our knowledge that have resulted from the approach, we thus still find the “Greek” material generally separated off from the “Roman” and studied in separate monographs—as now “the art of the private sphere” (e.g., Gada 1991).

On closer analysis, however, this division cannot hold. For while it is true that: Roman houses and villas very seldom contain much of the “public” imagery of Roman visual culture (portraits of the owner’s family being a conspicuous exception), Greek mythological and religious imagery simply cannot be separated from the Roman public sphere. A few well-known examples will suffice to make the point here.

In the Republican period, one of the best-known public monuments to have survived is the so-called Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus (really a monumental base; Figure 10.1). On one side it has a Marine thiasos, the wedding of Neptune and Aphrodite—Greek subject matter, straight out of the Hellenistic repertoire—on the other a Roman sacrifice and census scene. And at the very founding of the empire, the first emperor Augustus deployed a large number of Greek classical originals in his renewal of the capital city. He set up a bronze Zeus by the sculptor Leochares as the cult image of his temple to Jupiter Tonans on the Capitoline hill; we even know what this looked like from its representation on a contemporary coin (Pliny, Natural History 34.79; Zanker 1988, 108, fig. 89a). He placed a colossal Zeus by Myron in its own shrine in the area of the Capitolium (Strabo 14.14). He used a statue by Skopas as the cult image for his temple to Apollo on the Palatine (Pliny, Natural History 36.25), of which some small fragments survive (Tomei 1997, 47, no. 26–27; Martin 1987, 262–263, cat. 118). He also deployed archaic works in marble, by the Greek sculptors Bupalus and Athenis, as acroteria on the same building (Pliny, Natural History 36.13); a number of terracotta plaques survive from this sanctuary, also worked in archaic style (Tomei 1997, 49–53, no. 29a–f; Strazzulla...
In the peristyle that served as a forecourt to the temple, Augustus set up images of the 50 daughters of Danaus. They were represented as water carriers, holding water vessels on their heads, doing penance in Hades for the murder of their husbands. Three of these survive, and show that the figures took the form of hip-herms, which served as caryatids (though they cannot have had any serious architectural function; Torelli 1991, 56–57, nos. 31–33; Kalsenfien 1995). They are broadly early classical in style. In the temple of Apollo Sostius, on the other hand, built by Gaius Sosius in the 20th BCE, Greek original sculptures of the fifth century BCE served as the pedimental decoration (La Rocca 1985). The figures depict a battle between Greeks and Amazons, and were presumably taken from a classical Greek temple, although it is not known which. Sosius’ temple is also said to have contained a number of famous old masters, including works by the sculptor Praxiteles and the painter Aristides (Pliny, Natural History 26.28, 35.99).

The emperor Tiberius, when he dedicated the temple of Concordia in the Roman Forum, positively filled it with Greek old masters: statues by Euphranor and Thrasibulus; paintings by Nikias and Zeuxis. Furthermore, Tiberius apparently compelled the inhabitants of the island of Naxos to sell them—much against their will—an antique statue of Hestia for this temple (Dio Cassius 55.9.6). From representations of the temple on contemporary coins, it can be seen that the entrance to the temple was flanked by colossal nude statues of Mercury and Heracles—the Hercules recognizable as a Greek type known in replicas (Vermuel 1957, 284). To cite a later example too, Vespasian’s temple of Peace was also a veritable museum of Greek masterpieces. And the architectural ornament in all these fora and temple complexes, including figured friezes, was, of course, predominantly Greek in conception and subject matter. The beautifully carved frieze in Figure 1.3, for example, is from the Forum of Trajan (see also the frieze from the temple of Divus Julius: Heiney 1988, 373–374, cat. 206). However, one only needs to cite the example of the fifth-century BCE caryatids from the Erechtheum on the Athenian Acropolis replicated in the Forum of Augustus to make the point (Heiney 1988, 186–189, fig. 85).

In short, the public places of the capital were completely permeated with Greek and Hellenistic forms and subject matter. What we sometimes call “official art” is no different. On Roman coins of all periods we routinely find portraits on one side and images of the gods on the other, which reproduce Greek types and Greek styles. In Figure 1.4, for example, we see an image of the goddess Spes in Greek archaic style, on the reverse of a superb bronze.

Figure 1.4  Bronce secrtisius of the emperor Claudius, 41–42 CE, showing on the reverse the image of the goddess Spes in archaic style, accompanied by the legend SPES AVGVSTA. Photo: Ex Nominis Auction 7, 15 May 2013, lot 160.

socrates of Claudius. Even the image of the emperor as supreme commander was not exempt. The imperial parade armor was often decorated with flying Victories, Centaurs carrying trophies, Nereids riding on sea monsters, the chariot of the sun god, and so on. Rarely the armor even carries representations of Greek myths (Stemmer 1978). The magnificent bronze caurisaeo portrait of Germanicus found in Amelia (just outside Rome), for example, has on the breastplate an impressive depiction of the sea monster Scylla and the killing of Trolls by Achilles (Marinis 2002, 133–135, no. 24).

Romans themselves evidently thought of all of this imagery—including the Greek old masters—as part of a single system. In the center of the Forum Iulium Julius Caesar set up an equestrian statue of Alexander the Great by Lysippos; but he had Alexander’s head replaced with his own portrait (Statius, Silvae 1.1.84–85). And in the Augustan Forum Augustus set up two famous paintings by Apelles, each depicting Alexander the Great in an allegorical scene. In these paintings too the emperor Claudius eventually replaced the portrait features of Alexander with those of Augustus (Pliny, Natural History 35.93–94). We could not have a clearer indication that antique artworks like these were part of the program. In fact, the unity of Roman visual culture for which I am arguing here is actually embodied in the genre of Roman nude portraits (Figure 1.5; Hallett 2005b). In such figures a portrait head—Figure 1.5—that of the emperor Hadrian—is sometimes combined with the body of a classical type, in this case a fifth-century figure of Ares/Mars. To modern eyes this seems a hybrid—a combination of incompatible elements. Yet, the number of surviving examples (more than 300 such statues survive, most over life size), and the fact that such figures are found at all levels of Roman art, from gorgeous court cameos right down to the humble funerary altars of Roman freedmen, makes it clear that this kind of image was a natural and accepted form of self-representation in the Roman world. Such portraits, whether depictions on gems or cameos or statues in the round, reveal that even at the highest levels of “official art” we cannot sustain any kind of separation between the “Greek” and “Roman” parts of Roman art. They are part of the same visual culture. They are inextricably bound together in a single system of representation.

Summary of the argument so far

Before I present my conclusion, let me sum up the argument so far. In the first part of this chapter I addressed our current restrictive definition of Roman art; a definition that has resulted in a separation of artworks produced in the Roman period into “Greek” and “Roman” categories. The study of the “Greek” category (in recent decades) as part of the study of Roman rules or private life—while it has been very fruitful in some ways—has
actually perpetuated a division of material along the same old lines. I then argued that these separate categories that we have created within Roman artistic production cannot be sustained. On close scrutiny they quickly collapse into one another, and they must be accepted as parts of the same visual culture. This is something that is visually symbolized for us in the genre of the Roman nude portrait, where “Greek” and “Roman” elements are united in a single powerful image (Figure 1.5).

In addition, I advocated that the large numbers of classical Greek originals—the old master paintings and sculptures displayed in the public places of Rome and in private collections—should also be included in our definition of Roman visual culture. This may seem a somewhat radical step. However, it is perhaps no more radical than suggesting, for example, that from the mid-sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century a whole collection of famous Roman statues—such as the Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoön, and the Belvedere Torso (Figure 1.6)—were properly part of a pan-European visual culture. That is to name only three. It is no exaggeration to say that these Roman works, survivals from antiquity, played an extraordinarily important role in the development of European visual culture for the next 300 years. I am thinking here, of course, of the material collected and studied by Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny in their book Taste and the Antique (Haskell and Penny 1981).

Figure 1.5  Over-life-size statue of the emperor Hadrian portrayed with the attributes of Mars. Rome, Capitoline Museum, Salone 13, inv. 634. Photo: Samsini, Neg. D-DAI-ROM SS 776

Figure 1.6 Red chalk drawing of Belvedere Torso, signed by Matthew Verheijden, 1714; Hamburg, Art Market. Drawing: Meisterzeichnungen, 1993, Nr. 18. Courtesy of Martin Moeller-Pisani.

A New Model for Understanding Roman Art

The Roman reception of Greek art is the missing center of Roman visual culture

So what is to be gained by taking the step that I am proposing? At the beginning of this chapter I claimed that our current restrictive definition of Roman art has prevented us from perceiving the links and associations that unite all of its products. Otto Brendel wrote in 1979:

The more examples of the diverse genres of Roman art that are collected between the covers of one book, the more difficult it is to align them sensibly with one another. (1979, 146)

This is just as true now as it was then. What does the development that we see in the decoration of sarcophagi have to do with the stylistic evolution of mosaics? What do the changing scenes of wall painting have to do with the development of Roman historical relief? Very little. The most important result of putting all of the artistic production of the Roman world back together, and viewing it whole, is that in this way it becomes intelligible as a system. Here, I take my lead from the pioneering work of Tonio Hölsher on reading Roman official art as a kind of Bildsprache, or “visual language” (Hölsher 1987/2004). The various genres of what we call “Roman art” are often not very clearly related to one another in style and in form, but they are all natural outgrowths of the Roman admiration for—and appropriation of—the Greek
tradition. In other words, the Roman reception of Greek art is the “missing center” of Roman visual culture. At this point I wish to distinguish my position strongly from that of Holzher: it is not simply the relationship with the various earlier styles and monuments of Greek art that provides the key to understanding Roman visual culture. It is the Roman reception of Greek art tout court—the use that the Romans made of Greek artworks, the function that all this re-employed Greek art served in Roman society—that is the missing center of the entire system, I would argue.

A plurality of styles illuminated from the center

The existence in Roman art of very different styles of representation side by side on the same monument has often been remarked on (Brindel 1979, 130–137). In the past it has been felt to be particularly frustrating that Roman art does not exhibit a uniform stylistic progression. We should replace our unrealistic expectation of regular stylistic progression with a “centripetal” model: one with the Greek tradition set firmly at its center. The various genres of Roman monument continually draw from this fixed center, as well as from earlier works in the same genre. Thus, works widely separated in date may have much more in common with one another, or with earlier works of Greek art, than they do with contemporary works. The battle friezes from the Arch at Orange in southern France (Amy et al. 1962)—reliefs that adorn a monument dated by its inscription to the reign of Tiberius (Figure 1.7)—can be compared with Roman battle sarcophagi, such as the “Ponsonac sarcophagus,” the “Ludovisi sarcophagus,” or the example shown in Figure 1.8, all usually dated more than a century later. The reliefs on the arch and those on the sarcophagi owe their family resemblance to a shared use of Hellenistic pictorial conventions for representing battles. None of them, on the other hand,

![Figure 1.7](image1.png)

Figure 1.7  Line drawing of a relief from the second attic of the Arch of Tiberius at Orange. *After: L'Arc d'Orange* by Robert Amy et al. (suppl. Gallia, XV, pl. 38) © CNRS Editeurs.

...has much in common with representations of Roman imperial processions of any date (e.g., Figures 2.4, 10.10). Those draw on a different set of Greek models, and are aimed at a different effect.

It is very important that my aims here are not misunderstood. I am well aware that in endeavoring to search for the “center” of Roman art and to see it “wholly,” as a “unity,” I am moving in the opposite direction from many art historians in other areas of the discipline. Many of my colleagues in the History of Art department at the University of California at Berkeley, for example, are expressly trying to write a decentralized art history, which emphasizes a plurality of voices, agendas, and receptions. I applaud this effort, and the last thing I want to do for Roman visual culture is to give the impression that it is monolithic. Nothing could be further from the truth. In many ways this was a mass culture, a culture of mass production; its characteristic imagery is employed by very different levels of society, and is found in private homes and modest tombs as well as imperial fora and luxury villas. Many sections of the population have a role and a share in this culture, and all of them can—and should—be taken into account. However, what I am arguing is that the artistic production of the Roman period has never been studied all together, and it is only by seeing all of this material as belonging to the same larger cultural phenomenon that we will be able to understand its special expressive qualities: as a “representational language”—what the Germans call Bildsprache, although for a number of reasons I think that it is better described as a distinctive “visual culture,” rather than a “representational language.”

How Roman visual culture works

Let me present a thumbnail sketch of how I think Roman visual culture actually works. For the Romans, all the visual arts of the Greek tradition, from archaic to late Hellenistic, were simultaneously present. In fact, the same situation may be perceived in Roman literature. The whole of the Greek literary past may be perceived as simultaneously present in the writings of Virgil, for example. In the *Aeneid* the Roman poet draws on pre-classical Homeric epic, classical tragedy, Hellenistic cosmology—and even elegy. The kind of epic that he creates blends elements drawn from many different periods of Greek literature. Greek art of all periods was to be seen in every
Roman sanctuary and temple, not to mention every sanctuary or agora of the Hellenistic world. The Romans and the artists who worked for them appropriated all the styles of the Greek past for their own purposes. Just as in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in England for example, there was a Greek Revival, a Gothic Revival, the early Renaissance art of the Pre-Raphaelites, and a broadly Palladian style of architecture, each with its own stylistic models and historical associations, so for the Romans all of the styles of the Greek past could be employed wherever the context seemed to demand it. Nevertheless, whereas in nineteenth-century Europe Romantic aesthetics came to abhor this kind of historical eclecticism, and idealized stylistic purity and originality instead, the Romans developed a visual culture in which the selective revival of earlier styles and forms was the defining principle, a visual culture in which styles could be mixed and matched to order. That is how it is that Roman artists are able to combine different “period styles” in one and the same composition (as in the imperial portrait in Figure 1.5); or, in another example, no less striking than the nude portraits, the relief in Figure 1.9, where the gods Apollo, Diana, and Leto, seen against a backdrop of their sanctuary, receive a libation from a winged Victory. The gods are worked in the relief style of the late archaic period (ca. 500 BCE) and appear on tip-toe, hovering like apparitions, while the sanctuary is rendered in the illusionistic style of a Hellenistic landscape painting.

I will conclude with a mid-nineteenth century Italian statue that I came across at the Scala Santa, in the old Lateran palace in Rome (Figure 1.10). If you want a demonstration of how Roman visual culture actually works, then this statue provides a perfect example. Here we see Christ before Pontius Pilate, Pilate turning to address the crowd. Notice that the Roman governor is depicted in perfect Republican, or early imperial, virile style, while for the figure of Christ the sculptor has drawn on a number of sources—including early Christian and Byzantine images of the savior—even incorporating a bronze halo! Each figure is thus rendered in a historical style appropriate to the subject, and the sculptor does not appear to be worried about combining models and styles from different periods. It is no accident, of course, that the sculptor of this work, Ignazio Jacometti, is today totally unregarded. Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics roundly condemned this kind of eclecticism, and it has disappeared almost without trace from our art-history textbooks. However, in Roman times stylistic eclecticism of this sort became the basis of a whole visual culture, which continued for more than 300 years. In my view the history of that culture may have a special interest for us now, in the post-modern era, as “the path not taken”; and I believe that we have now reached a stage in the study of Roman art when that story can finally be told.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING


REFERENCES

Defining Roman Art

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