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Author

Hallett, CH

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CHAPTER 1

Defining Roman Art

Christopher H. Hallett

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 recognizable *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)?

*"exudent alii spirantia mollius aera
(credo equidem), vivos ducent de marmore vultus..."*

"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, Romane, memento
(haec tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem,
parcere subiectis et debellare superbos."*

"But you, Roman, remember to rule Earth's peoples with *imperium*!
For these shall be *your* arts: to crown peace with the rule of law,
To spare the vanquished and to battle down the proud."

Read together with other well-known excerpts from Latin literature, like Horace's oft-quoted remark (Horace, *Epistles* 2.1.156) "*Græcia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis / intulit agreste Latio*" ("captive Greece took her uncouth conqueror captive, and introduced the arts into rustic Latium"), Virgil's lines inevitably suggest that there really was no Roman art. And by the late nineteenth century most educated people seem to have taken this for granted. George Bernard Shaw, for example, offers this very loose version of the Virgilian passage just quoted, in his play *Caesar and Cleopatra* of 1898. We are in the last act (Act V), and Julius Caesar is about to board ship and set off from Alexandria for Rome. He calls out to the Sicilian Greek, Apollodorus, a freelance "artist" and carpet salesman:

- CAESAR: Apollodorus, I leave the art of Egypt in your charge. Remember:
Rome loves art and will encourage it ungrudgingly.
APOLLODORUS: I understand, Caesar. Rome will produce no art itself; but it will buy up
and take away whatever the other nations produce.
CAESAR: What! Rome produce no art! Is peace not an art? Is war not an art? Is
government not an art? Is civilization not an art? All these we give you in
exchange for a few ornaments. You will have the best of the bargain.

Thus, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, those scholars who were attempting to found the new field of "Roman art" felt that they were faced with two urgent tasks. The first was to try to establish that there really *was* such a thing as "Roman art"; that it was not merely *Greek* art in decline. The second was to show that the art of this period was not merely a mass of heterogeneous and disparate works, related to one another only in being products of the same time and culture; but that it represented instead a clear artistic development, shaped by identifiable aesthetic goals.

Looking back after more than a century of scholarship, we may fairly say that in the first aim scholars of Roman art were remarkably successful. Talk of "decline" has been all but banished from our books—even when discussing the art of late antiquity—and few writers now feel the need to justify the subject as an independent field of study, distinct from Greek and Hellenistic art. In the second aim, however, the field has been conspicuously less successful. Within particular genres of monument, like historical relief or monumental sarcophagi, scholars have made great strides in describing and analyzing the way in which styles change; and plausible explanations have been advanced as to why they change as they do. Yet overall, a glance through any modern textbook of Roman art reveals the same very varied assortment of material: a selection of Roman buildings, portraits, coins, mosaics, and so on; and how these various genres of artwork are all to be related to one another in *aesthetic* terms—that is, in terms of their style, their formal composition, or their outward appearance—remains as unclear as ever (compare the more or less contemporary works Figures 1.3, 2.1, and 3.9, for example). No consensus has emerged on what are the defining characteristics of this art; and no way has yet been found of understanding all the various genres of Roman art—from wall paintings to imperial cameos—as parts of a unified artistic tradition.

Thus, the field has achieved remarkable success in one key aim, and striking lack of success in another. In this chapter I shall argue that these two outcomes are directly related. The current definition that we have of "Roman art" was devised specifically in order to defend it from the charge that it was really *Greek* art in a stage of decline; and this modern, restrictive definition to some extent prevents us from seeing Roman art *as a whole*, and perceiving the

links and associations that unite all its products. Further, in the latter part of the chapter I shall propose a way out of the current dilemma, and offer a new formulation for understanding artistic production in the Roman world.

Continuing Problems of Definition

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.) Mosaics were not far behind the sarcophagi, since this was a medium enthusiastically taken up in the Roman period, 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 twenty-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 books 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 what 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, Amazons, 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 *Diskobolos*, the *Doryphoros* (Figure 9.5), the Knidian Aphrodite? Where are the thousands of pieces of villa furniture—the marble urns, candelabra, Neo-Attic reliefs, marble tables, well-heads, figured altars, and so on (Figures 16.1–16.7)? In a book like Diana Kleiner's *Roman Sculpture* (1992), perhaps the most authoritative modern treatment of the subject in English with more than 400 illustrations, we find these categories scarcely represented at all. The (wholly traditional) focus of the book—on portraits and historical relief—means that in terms of quantity, at a conservative



Figure 1.1 Young Satyr known in Rome since the eighteenth century. It served as the inspiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Marble Faun* (1860). Rome, Capitoline Museum. Palazzo Nuovo, Sala di Galata, inv. S739. Photo: Archäologisches Institut, Cologne Digital Archaeology Laboratory, Universität zu Köln, Mal1963-3_15892 (www.arachne.uni-koeln.de).

estimate perhaps 60 percent of the sculptural output of the Roman world is silently omitted. Similarly, in the modern books that claim to present not only sculpture but the whole of Roman art, and include other genres like painting and mosaics, the discussion of wall painting tends to focus on systems of interior decoration (Mau's "four Pompeian styles"; cf. Figure 13.1); while the importance of mythological paintings—which often form the centerpieces of Roman murals—is generally played down, for such paintings are almost exclusively Greek in content (e.g. Figures 6.4, 13.4, 19.4). And the huge bulk of Greek subjects represented in mosaics and on sarcophagi also tends to be passed over in favor of more distinctly "Roman" or contemporary themes, such as hunting (in mosaics) or scenes of battle (on sarcophagi).

So, our books of Roman art present a very partial picture: representative pieces are included of perhaps less than half of what we know was produced. There would be nothing wrong with this, of course, if it were openly stated. But in fact, this selection is made *without* explicit acknowledgment. Or rather, modern scholars regard this acknowledgment as made by the title on the cover of the book: *Roman* sculpture or *Roman* art. All of the material that has been left out, when it is referred to at all in these books, is described as *Greek* art.

In Roman culture, "art" means Greek art

Unfortunately, there is a further complicating factor. When Romans discuss art in their literature, as they quite often do, "art" for them means *Greek* art. Late Republican Rome already possessed a fully developed "art market," replete with an accepted canon of old masters,

fanatical collectors (C. Verres, of course, being the most notorious example), pretentious connoisseurs, massively inflated prices, professional art dealers, unscrupulous forgers, and public art galleries—which have been claimed by some as the first "art museums" (Alsop 1982; Chevallier 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 collectibles most frequently mentioned by Roman writers are bronze figurines; and of these, *Corinthia*, "Corinthian bronzes," were the most prized (Emanuele 1989; Bounia 2004, 195–196, 252–253). However, antique silverware (Figure 17.3), engraved gems, citrus-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 sesterces for a bowl carved out of fluorspar (Pliny, *Natural History* 37.20). This is apparently the notorious stone that Romans called *murra*—the "myrrh-stone" (Loewenthal and Harden 1949, 31–37; Harden 1954, 53; André, Bloch, and Rouveret 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 sesterces 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 Tusculan villa. Pliny describes this as an *aedes*, a "shrine" (Pliny, *Natural History* 35.130). Marcus Agrippa paid the city of Cyzicus 1,200,000 sesterces 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—all of antique workmanship (Suetonius, *Julius 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 sesterces) for two paintings, a Medea and an Ajax, by Timomachus, 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 sesterces. 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' *Satyricon*, at a loose end in Pozzuoli (Petronius, *Satyricon* 83):

"In pinacothecam perveni vario genere tabularum mirabilem. Nam et Zeuxidos manus vidi nondum vetustatis iniuria victas, et Protogenis rudimenta cum ipsius naturae veritate certantia non sine quodam horrore tractavi. Iam vero Apellis quam Gracci monoknēmon appellant, etiam adoravi. Tanta enim subtilitate extremitates imaginum erant ad similitudinem praecisae, ut crederes etiam animorum esse picturam."

"I went into a picture gallery (*pinacotheca*) which had a wonderful variety of paintings. For instance I saw the handiwork of Zeuxis, not yet overcome by the ravages of time. And I even examined, not without a certain thrill (*horror*), some preliminary sketches (*rudimenta*) by Protogenes, which vied with the truth of nature herself. But that masterpiece of Apelles, which the Greeks call the *monoknēmon* ("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

affected an exaggerated admiration for the almost “primitive” works of the early classical painters Polygnotos and Aglaophon, out of what he terms “their ostentatious desire to seem to be connoisseurs” (Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 12.10.3: *proprio quodam intelligendi, ut mea opinio est, ambitu*), while Statius writes (perhaps rather optimistically) of the collector Novius Vindex (Statius, *Silvae*, 4.6.22–24): *quis namque oculis certaverit usquam / Vindicis, artificium veteres agnoscere ductus / et non inscriptis auctorem 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 *antiqui* (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 fourteen works by Praxiteles, eight by Skopas, four by Lysippos, three each by Euphranor, Myron, and Sthennis, two each by Pheidias, Polykleitos, and Strongylion; four paintings by Aristides, four by Nikias, three each by Apelles and Nikomachos, two each by Zeuxis, Parrhasius, and Antipholos, and works by Polygnotos, Timanthes, and Pausias besides (Pollitt 1978, 157–158; see also Celani 1998). And this is a very conservative estimate: the great cavalry squadron of Alexander by the sculptor Lysippos—comprising perhaps 26 equestrian figures—is counted here as one work. In addition, Rome was evidently full of works by the most sought-after *contemporary* Greek artists too (although these are generally treated in our literary sources as far inferior in stature to the old masters). Not surprisingly, however, the best of these seem to have commanded huge fees. L. Lucullus reportedly commissioned the sculptor Arkesilaos to make an image of *Felicitas* for him, at a cost of a million sesterces (Pliny, *Natural History* 35.156). Arkesilaos also made the cult image of Venus Genetrix for Julius Caesar (*ibid.*), and his statues of “centaurs carrying nymphs” were later included in the collection of sculpture put on permanent exhibition by Asinius Pollio in the library attached to the *Atrium Libertatis* (Pliny, *Natural History* 36.33). 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 *pinacotheca* quickly became chic (*ibid.*, 1.59.2). Vitruvius simply takes it for granted that the villas of the *nobiles* will include picture galleries (Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture* 1.2.7, 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 *pinacothecae* (Figure 6.4), with illusionistic renderings of Greek mythological panel paintings set in elaborate frames (on ancient frames see Ehlich 1953; 1977, 110–119; 1978, 167–176; 1979, 8–20; 1986; Bragantini and Badoni 1985). This small cubiculum 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 (Philostratus, *Imagines* 1.295K.26: *enêrmosmenôn*) rather than hung, as they are today; so we must imagine the large ornamental frames as fixed, worked in various precious materials, 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 *aedícula* 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 high up; although of course the doors are invariably painted as if open—as if the host has put his valuable collection on display for his honored guests. (These shutters had apparently originated as a protective device for votive paintings set up in sanctuaries, so may also have had sacred “votive” associations; see Scheibler 1998.) And if we look more closely at the subsidiary flanking panels from cubiculum B of the house under the Farnesina (Figure 6.4), we see that they are very early works of Greek painting, almost like line drawing against a white background, and very different in style from the later painting seen in the center of the wall. Such contrasts in size, subordinating smaller works to larger ones, and contrasts in style or technique, between paintings exhibited together, may have been typical of such displays. And if the evidence of wall painting can be trusted, collectors were keen to create elaborate contemporary frames and settings for their prize pieces, which would incorporate them in the overall design of the room.

The surviving marble sculpture from Roman villas (Figures 20.1–20.2, 16.1–16.7) provides evidence for the Roman *reception* of Greek art in the same way as do these imitation *pinacothecae*. The sculptures themselves, however, are more akin to expensive pieces of furniture than to the Corinthian bronzes so coveted by collectors. Figure 16.2, for example, shows a relief-decorated marble puteal or well-head; Figure 16.5, on the other hand, illustrates a finely carved marble krater, both intended to be displayed in a peristyle garden. It is probably wrong to think of assemblages of decorative marbles from domestic settings as “collections.” However, the arrangements of all of this sculpture in the porticoes and gardens of Roman houses were definitely intended to be viewed as *ensembles*, and clearly owed something to the great public displays of Greek original works in the capital: the Porticus of Pompey’s theater, the *Horti* of Caesar, the baths of Agrippa, the *Atrium Libertatis*. In some Campana reliefs we see the combination—within a single portico—of statues of nude Greek athletes, gods, herm shafts, marble urns, and basins (e.g., Figure 1.2).

Such objects were certainly *not* collector’s items (Neudecker 1998; *contra* Bartman 1991). Yet, it is mistaken to think that marble reproductions of famous Greek statues, and other



Figure 1.2 “Campana plaque” with portico showing a statue of Mercury in the center. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Francis Barlett Donation of 1900, inv. 03.885. Photo: © 2014 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

furnishings of this sort, were not highly valued. The best of them were clearly very expensive, and there was certainly no stigma attached to “copies” in Roman culture. Lucullus reportedly paid the staggering sum of two talents (about 50,000 sesterces) for a copy of a famous work by the fourth-century painter Pausias (our texts refer to the copy as an *apographon*), and we are told that the copy was made by a leading painter of the day, Dionysios of Athens (Pliny, *Natural History* 35.125–126). The sculptor Zenodorus, creator of the colossus of Nero, made copies of two silver cups, allegedly by the fifth-century sculptor Kalamis, that were widely praised as being scarcely distinguishable from the originals (Pliny, *Natural History* 34.47). The rooms of the reopened Palatine museum in Rome contain many marble copies of well-known Greek works that all once stood in the palace of the Caesars—some of them of absolutely superlative quality (e.g., Tomei 1997, nos. 102, 120). The best of these show that in terms of sculptural technique these “Roman copies” far surpass anything that was made in marble in the fifth century BCE. A marble copy of another classical type was found in a small private *cubiculum* of the emperor Tiberius’ villa on Capri (Maiuri 1997, 72, fig. 29); and the other imperial villas were packed with replicas of Greek works (see the inventory of works from the various imperial villas given in Neudecker 1988). Reproductions of classical statuary actually seem to be the works of sculpture most frequently signed by sculptors in the Roman period, and this too perhaps tells us something about their status in contemporary culture—as art objects.

Still more interestingly, Romans do not generally refer to such works as “copies.” Lucian preserves a description of a private house of the second century CE, the courtyard of which contained Myron’s *Diskobolos*, the *Tyrannicides* of Kritias and Nesiotes, and the *Diadoumenos* of Polykleitos (Lucian, *Lover of Lies* 18). Obviously, the originals of these statues all stood elsewhere. And Statius describes the seaside villa of Pollius Felix as containing works by Apelles, Pheidias, Myron, and Polykleitos (*Silvae* 2.2.61–72). Once again, originals cannot be meant: none of the imperial complexes of the capital could boast a collection of old masters like that. This list can easily be extended. For example, Propertius (2.31.7–8) describes the statues of cows set around the altar of Palatine Apollo as the *armenta Myronis*, “the oxen of Myron”—presumably multiple copies of his famous bronze heifer from the Athenian Acropolis; while Juvenal (3.216–17) relates the story of a wealthy childless man whose house burned down, so that all his property was lost, but who then is the recipient of a flood of presents from legacy hunters: included among the gifts are some “nude white figures” and “something by the famous Euphranor or Polykleitos.” In such passages it is never explicitly acknowledged that we are talking about reproductions. But why should it be? If today an admirer of Renaissance art were described as having Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* in his living room and Leonardo’s “Vitruvian Man” at the top of the staircase, this would generally not be misunderstood.

Copies or not, all of this material is what a Roman would have thought of as “art.” And it is all of this material that is conspicuously *absent* from our books on Roman art. If such statues are ever illustrated in modern books on Roman art, they appear in rare studies like Cornelius Vermeule’s *Greek Sculpture and Roman Taste* (1977); or books explicitly concerned with Roman copies, like Margarete Bieber’s *Ancient Copies* (1977). More commonly, such statues are to be found in books of *Greek art*.

What we call “Roman art” was not “art” as far as Romans were concerned

Having established what *Romans* generally thought of as “art,” we are now faced with an interesting paradox. Our books of Roman art contain almost exclusively works that, from the Roman point of view, were *not* art. For when Romans refer to the ancestral family portraits of the *nobiles* of the Republic (the *imagines*), the statues of the emperor and his family, and

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 saepe ego audiui Q. Maximum, P. Scipionem, praeterea civitatis nostrae praeclaros viros solitos ita dicere, cum maiorum imagines intuerentur, vehementissime sibi animum ad virtutem accendi.

I have often heard that Fabius Maximus and Scipio Africanus, 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 *imago*.” 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, *Circumnavigation 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 were, 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

came to play an important role in Roman society. Yet, it remained something foreign; it was never accepted as part of the *mos maiorum*. Nor were the visual arts.

Now, it is not my purpose here to try to argue that there is no such thing as Roman art. However, I *do* want to emphasize that those of us who study Roman art are studying a late nineteenth-century category. Furthermore, the sort of works that we generally call “Roman art” fulfill our modern, post-Romantic expectations of art very effectively. Roman portraits and historical reliefs, for example, are original creations of their own time; they are “expressive” of the age in which they were made, and they clearly embody *Roman* cultural values. Nevertheless, art historians understandably try to play up those aspects of Roman works that most effectively answer our *modern* expectations, and play down those aspects that thwart them.

One persistent problem for modern scholars, for example, has been the question of the artists who made all this material. Mostly artists of the Roman period do not sign their work; but where they do, they mostly have Greek names and they sign in Greek (Toynbee 1951). Moreover, the literary sources record for us a not inconsiderable number of artists working for Roman patrons: all but a handful of them have Greek names; and some of those few with Roman names look like successful Greeks who were granted Roman citizenship, or Greek freedmen. In the face of the modern belief that the visual arts are a crucial medium for the forging of cultural or ethnic identity, this has been felt to be deeply disturbing. There are only two artists whose names are recorded in the literary sources as having made portraits of emperors: Dioskourides the gem carver, who worked for Augustus (Suet. *Augustus* 50); and Zenodorus, who created the bronze colossus of Nero (Pliny, *Natural History* 34.45–47)—both Greeks. Likewise, the creator of the greatest of the imperial fora, the Forum of Trajan, was also a Greek: Apollodorus of Damascus (Dio Cassius 69.4.1). It has proved very troubling to modern scholars that veristic or imperial portraits, or other key works of “Roman art,” should have been signed by Greeks; let alone that the characteristic styles of these monuments might be the creation of Greek artists and architects working for Roman patrons. The main thrust of Diane Conlin’s well-regarded (and beautifully produced) book *The Artists of the Ara Pacis* (1997), for example, is to argue from a detailed analysis of sculptural technique that those who carved the altar were Italians, not Greeks; or “Italian-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*.

We cannot accept as art what functioned 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 Erechtheum caryatids, redeployed 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 sensibilities.

It quickly attracted attention here that Roman copyists regularly introduced changes and variations into their reproduction of famous classical statues, in a way that would be unthinkable today. These changes range from relatively modest to quite dramatic. For example, in the reproduction of the classical “Diomedes” 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 *Diadoumenos* of Polykleitos 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 “Meleager” 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 assertive 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 their work, appropriating their masterpieces, and creating from them something *new* and better (Wünsche 1972; Preissshofen and Zanker 1970/71; Zanker 1974). This approach was taken up 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 approach to this material at the current time. Brunilde Ridgway, Elaine Gazda, Ellen Perry, and Miranda Marvin (among others) have all become strong proponents of this view. They have sought to make the surviving statues more acceptable to modern audiences by asserting first of all that they are *not* copies: Elaine Gazda titled one of her review articles “Roman copies: The unmaking of a modern myth” (Gazda 1995a); while Miranda Marvin speaks explicitly of the modern “copy myth” (Marvin 2008). Next, they have argued that even where we have a whole series of statues that reproduce a particular prototype (like the figures that we have been considering), this prototype is just as likely a Roman contemporary creation in classical style as a Greek classical original (Gazda 1995b, 133). The whole phenomenon has been dubbed “Roman emulation,” to emphasize that such works should not be thought of as merely derivative, but exercises in self-conscious creativity. Gazda’s volume of essays broadly advocating this new approach appeared in 2004, entitled *The Ancient Art of Emulation: Studies in Artistic Originality and Tradition from the Present to Classical Antiquity*. This idea is carried further, and more systematically developed, in Perry (2005).

These scholars are right, of course, that all these marble villa furnishings are not copies in the modern sense; that is, the kind of museum reproductions that we might desire of a famous artistic masterpiece. This was pointed out in the early decades of the twentieth century by Georg Lippold (1917 and 1923) and has always been acknowledged. Lippold devised a long (and somewhat bewildering) list of terms for describing the different kinds of relationship that Roman copies can have to the Greek works that they reproduce. However, in just about every other respect the current drive to render this material more palatable to modern tastes by asserting its “originality” and its essential “Romanness”—or non-Greekness—could not be more misguided. I have advanced a number of criticisms of this approach elsewhere, which I shall not repeat here (Hallett 2005a, esp. 30–35; see also Kousser 2008), except to add one observation. What the elaborate arguments of all this contemporary scholarship reveal is just how problematic we find these sculptures, when trying to reconcile them with our modern ideas about art.

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 Svetlana Alpers in her book *The Art of Describing* (Alpers 1983, xxv). It was subsequently picked up by others, notably the post-structuralist art historians Norman Bryson, Michael-Ann 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 Anchises stated it bluntly (*Aeneid* 6.847–48): "Others 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 conversation with L. Lucullus (Cicero, *On Academic Skepticism* 2.86): "Few men become great artists"; he continues, "—few *indeed* among our race" (*nostri generis*, see also *ibid.* 2.20.) The word that Cicero uses for artist 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; Gazda 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 1998). 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 what was—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—now as "the art of the private sphere" (e.g., Gazda 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 Aphitrite—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

1990). 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; Tomei 1991, 56–57, nos. 31–33; Balensiefen 1995). They are broadly early classical in style. In the temple of Apollo Sosianus, on the other hand, built by Gaius Sosius in the 20s 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* 36.28, 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 Sthenis; paintings by Nikias and Zeuxis. Furthermore, Tiberius apparently compelled the inhabitants of the island of Naxos to sell him—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 Hercules—the Hercules recognizable as a Greek type known in replicas (Vermeule 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 figural 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: Heilmeyer 1988, 373–374, cat. 206). However, one only needs to cite the example of the fifth-century BCE caryatids from the Erechtheion on the Athenian Acropolis replicated in the Forum of Augustus to make the point (Heilmeyer 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

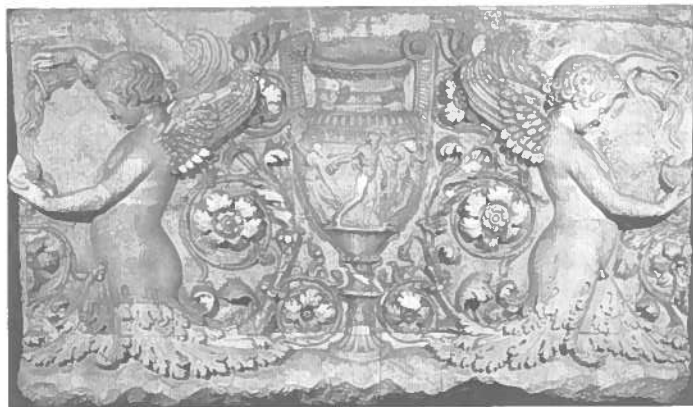


Figure 1.3 Frieze from the Forum of Trajan. Rome, Vatican Museum. Museo Pio Gregoriano Profano, no. 9760. Photo: Vatican Museums.



Figure 1.4 Bronze sestertius 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 Nomos Auction 7, 15 May 2013, lot 160.

sestertius 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 cuirassed 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 Troilus 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—in 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 *otium* or private life—while it has been very fruitful in some ways—has



Figure 1.5 Over-lifesize statue of the emperor Hadrian portrayed with the attributes of Mars. Rome, Capitoline Museum, Salone 13, inv. 634. Photo: Sansaini, Neg. D-DAI-ROM-55.275.

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 closer 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).

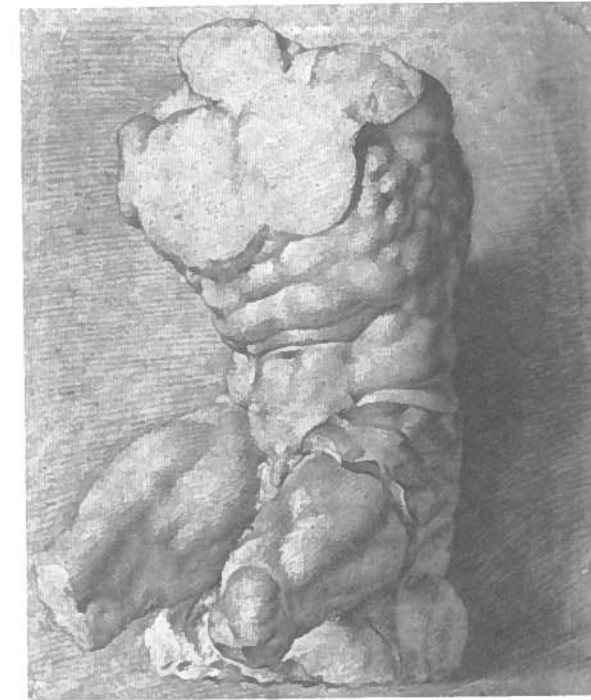


Figure 1.6 Red chalk drawing of Belvedere Torso, signed by Mattheus Verheijden, 1714; Hamburg, Art Market. Drawing: *Meisterzeichnungen*, 1993, Nr. 13. Courtesy of Martin Moeller-Pisani.

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 styles 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 Hölscher on reading Roman official art as a kind of *Bildsprache*, or “visual language” (Hölscher 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 Hölscher: 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 redeployed 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 (Brendel 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 “Portonaccio 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,

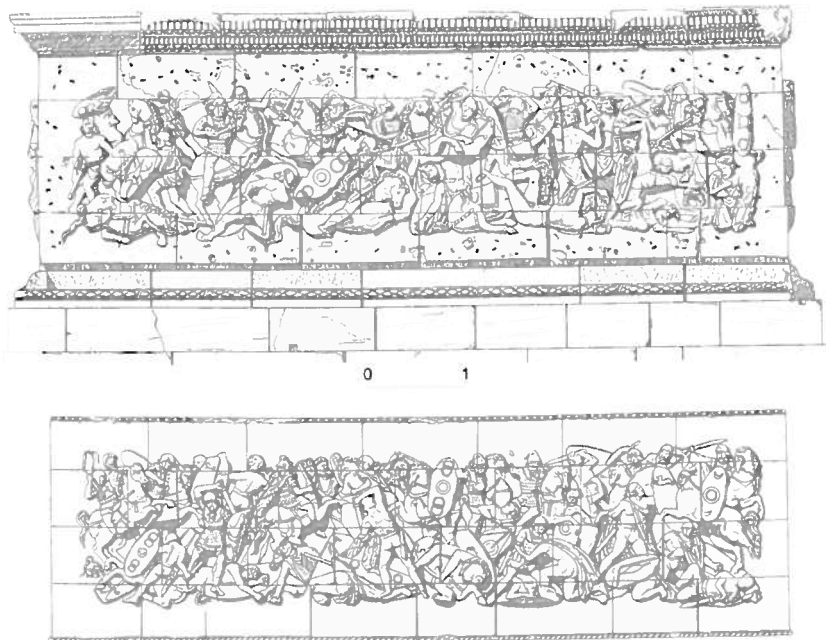


Figure 1.7 Line drawing of a relief from the second attic of the Arch of Tiberius at Orange. After: *L'Arc d'Orange* by Robert Amy et al. (suppl. Gallia, XV, pl. 28) © CNRS Editions.



Figure 1.8 Sarcophagus with relief carving showing a battle between Greeks and Galatians. Rome, Museo Capitolino, inv. S 213. Photo: Archäologisches Institut, Cologne Digital Archaeology Laboratory, Universität zu Köln, Mal1683-01_16417,03 (www.arachne.uni-koeln.de).

has much in common with representations of Roman imperial processions of any date (e.g., Figures 2.4, 10.10). Those drew 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 “whole,” 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 decentered 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

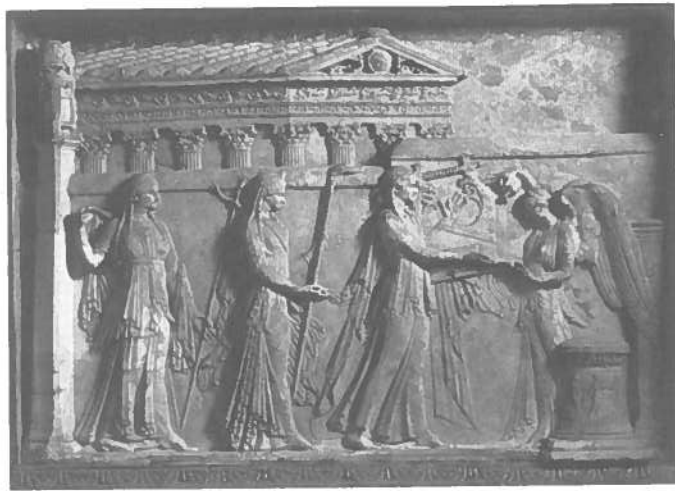


Figure 1.9 Marble relief panel depicting a libation offering made before the Apolline Triad. Rome, Villa Albani, inv. 1014. Photo: Museum für Abgüsse Klassischer Bildwerke, Munich, Photothek.

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, *veristic* 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



Figure 1.10 “Ecce Homo,” Christ before Pilate; statue by Ignazio Jacometti, 1854; Rome, Scala Santa, St. John the Lateran. Photo: Gregor Borg.

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

On the history of the problem, see especially Brendel (1979). On the relationship of Roman art with earlier Greek art, Hölscher (2004) and Zanker (2010) are most relevant. On Roman looting and collecting of Greek artworks, see Pape (1975), Alsop (1982), Chevallier (1991), Bounia (2004), and Miles (2008). On original Greek artworks on display in Rome, see especially Pollitt (1978), Strong (1994), Celani (1998), and Rutledge (2012). On the replication of Greek art in the Roman period, see Gazda (2004), Hallett (2005a), Perry (2005), Kousser (2008), and Marvin (2008).

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