

BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO THE ANCIENT WORLD

A COMPANION TO
ROMAN ART

EDITED BY BARBARA E. BORG



WILEY Blackwell

Introduction

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A Companion to Roman Art: this sounds like a pretty straightforward title—but is it? We all know what Roman “art” is—after all, the Augustus statue from Prima Porta ([Figure 10.7](#)) and the Column of Trajan ([Figure 2.1](#)) are widely known far beyond the academic realm. Or do we? We all have immediate associations with the notion of “Roman” art (as opposed, for instance, to “Greek” art). But are we sure what exactly is Roman about it? And while “companions” are springing up like mushrooms around us; and there will be few people who have never read or consulted one; and we surely have certain expectations when we read the word in a book title—is there an agreement on what they are, or should be like? At a second glance, none of these terms is as obvious as it may initially appear.

Roman?

The difficulty in determining what “Roman” may mean, arguably a definition that shifts with time, has long been discussed. That the city of Rome plays a key part is obvious, but almost everything beyond this point is disputed. Conventionally the term is used for phenomena pertaining to the imperial period, and within the borders of the Roman Empire – that is, primarily in chronological terms, even if a spatial notion comes into play, as the chronological usage would not make sense when speaking about second-century CE China, for instance. However, clearly not everything that pertains to this period and the regions of Roman influence is shaped by the cultural

tradition of Rome, and even when it is, it is likely to merge metropolitan inspiration with the local. On the other hand, from its very beginnings Rome itself had been shaped by the various cultures with which it came into contact, and from the late republic onwards it was a multicultural melting pot with people from all parts of the empire and beyond settling in the city.

This raises the question of what it really is that makes certain features Roman, and whether it is the same for us as it was for the ancients. We may identify certain hairstyles or building types as Roman, but how do we know that they did not merely express a *habitus* or lifestyle that had been adopted across the Empire without necessarily being an emphatic marker of Romanness? Do Europeans always think of the United States when they drink Coca-Cola? Evidence suggests that at least the local elites and aspiring parts of the citizenry of the Roman Empire adhered to a remarkable extent to a common system of shared values, aspirations, and lifestyles; and that these also shaped the material and visual culture across the Empire. Yet disregarding whether the individuals concerned considered these as specifically Roman—as opposed to local—the degree and level of detail to which they shared in such habits and their material expressions varied widely. For example, the Roman timocratic system demanded a considerable degree of self-promotion, and the use of honorific statue monuments, either in public or in more private contexts such as houses, villas, and tombs, was one means of achieving that aim. Nevertheless, the extent to which this habit was adopted, and the precise details of what locals regarded as worth depicting in these monuments, as well as the degree to which the monuments conveyed an explicitly Roman image, varied greatly across the Empire.

There is a chronological dimension linked to the geographical one as well. For the archaic period, the era of the kings, “Roman” would probably largely refer to the art and culture of the emerging city of Rome—although one might question how “Roman” Roman art was at a time when Greek and Etruscan art loomed large in the city. Most would extend the term step by step to include also the art of those regions that came under Roman dominion and finally formed the Roman Empire. But at what point, then, should we start calling Roman the art from, say, Campania? At the other end of the chronological spectrum, it is quite strange, and somewhat arbitrary, that the periods from Constantine onwards are very rarely included in what is generally called Roman culture. To be sure, Rome and its Empire experienced major changes at the time, but there was no cultural caesura, and even Christianity not only drew on Roman tradition in all sorts of ways, but also took quite some time fully to dominate and shape the culture of the Roman Empire and its successors.

I am not claiming to have resolved any of these issues with the present volume, and any attempt at trying to do so would probably be doomed to fail. I have therefore adopted an approach whereby the core of the volume focuses, in a rather traditional way and probably along the lines of most readers’ expectations, on the imperial period before Constantine, and to some degree on the city of Rome and Italy, but in doing so a conscious attempt was made to blur any boundaries that this traditional focus might create. I have thus included dedicated chapters on the Republican period ([Chapter 5](#), by Massimiliano Papini, but see also Rachel Kousser in [Chapter 6](#) and Peter J. Holliday in [Chapter 10](#)); on the assimilation of Greek art within the Roman empire ([Chapter 6](#), by Rachel Kousser, but see also Christopher H. Hallett in [Chapter 1](#)); and on late antiquity ([Chapter 7](#), by Alessandra Bravi; [Chapter 21](#), by Susanne

Muth; and [Chapter 23](#), by Norbert Zimmermann), as well as on Roman art in the provinces ([Chapter 24](#) on the Greek East, by Roland R.R. Smith; and [Chapter 25](#) on the Latin West, by Roger J.A. Wilson), with many other authors including the provinces in their discussions.

Art?

The term “art” is at least as contested and elusive. Conventionally, and at least when we disregard modern art, it is applied to everything that is nice to look at and required some advanced skills to be produced. Yet what exactly does it take to deny an object the title of “art”? How much skill is needed to make an object acceptable as “art”? How beautiful does it need to be? And according to whose judgment? The term also carries the baggage of the modern concept of “art as such,” of art as the product of the genius artist who creates a piece of art out of his (rarely her) own mind and spirit, merely for contemplation, and without regard for the object’s purpose or function. If we subscribe to this definition, hardly anything from the classical world can be regarded as art, since the idea of art as a category of its own that is detached from aspects of usefulness and function is a modern one (Abrams 1981 and 1985). In Greco-Roman antiquity, “art” was not created for its own sake but was meant to serve a purpose, whether as a dedication to the gods; an honorific monument to a human being; a monument depicting achievements and expressing ideologies of the state, a social group, or an individual; or furnishing of a public building, house, villa, or tomb. The main criterion for commissioning, placing, and judging art was appropriateness, decorum in relation to the purpose and context for which it was created or in which it was displayed (Hallett 2005; Perry 2005; Marvin 2008; Hallett, [Chapter 1](#), and Petersen, [Chapter 11](#), this volume).

One specific of Roman art (as opposed to Greek art in particular) is that it has often been denied its status as art altogether. While the copies after Greek works of art (or what were believed to be copies) were despised as being derivative and unoriginal, subjects and forms that had no immediate Greek models and were therefore regarded as truly Roman, such as veristic portraiture or “historical” reliefs, did not meet modern expectations of art as being contemplative, in both its production and reception, since they were considered to be primarily documentary in character, and their subjects were not necessarily beautiful either. While some of these ideas were challenged already by Alois Riegl (1901) and Franz Wickhoff (Wickhoff and von Hartel 1895) at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was only with the “historic turn” in scholarship on “classical art” that Roman art moved more into the center of scholarly attention. Following in the wake of Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli and Gerhard Rodenwaldt, and inspired by the new political awareness and interest in contemporary political issues of the late 1960s and 1970s, young scholars such as Tonio Hölscher, Paul Zanker, and Klaus Fittschen started studying Roman “art” as a source for a social history of Rome and its empire (Borg 2005; Dally 2008; Hölscher, [Chapter 2](#), this volume). The huge popularity that Roman art has enjoyed since then, not least in countries that did not have a strong tradition in art history, is largely due to the successful analysis of Roman art as a historical source. While at first this line of inquiry was applied to the images as such, contextual approaches have come to dominate more recent research. Both approaches have yielded their own results, often supplementing but sometimes also contradicting each other, and both have been given space in the present volume. Sections of [Parts II](#) and [IV](#) are dedicated to different artistic genres, [Part V](#) concentrates on display contexts, and [Part VI](#) discusses popular themes of artistic

representations across several genres, while almost all chapters refer to context in one way or another. The *Companion* is therefore a reflection of this still dominant interest in Roman art.

In the choice of artistic media and display contexts, I have certainly not escaped the prejudice of common expectations raised by the term “art,” as I have largely excluded from this book genres such as terracotta lamps, roof tiles, or terra sigillata, which can all bear image decoration, some of which is very beautiful. A conventional, though mostly non-reflective, hierarchy uses “art” as a term mostly for relatively large-scale objects *without* a practical function, while the “minor arts” comprise sophisticated products, often of smaller scale, *with* practical function such as coins, silver plates, gems, or jewelry; “decorative art” usually designates mainly repetitive ornaments or allegedly meaningless but beautiful embellishments of practical objects such as furniture or architecture; and the crafts, which are ultimately impossible to differentiate from “art,” tend to be characterized by mass production, limited technical skills, less precious materials, less satisfactory aesthetic qualities, or a combination of these. Such classifications are obviously based on modern value judgments, and are utterly anachronistic. Some scholars would therefore like to abolish the term “art” altogether and prefer terms such as “material culture” (which encompasses all artifacts of a given time and space) or “visual culture,” which tends to be used for items that are or include image decoration of some sort. None of this is fully satisfactory. While embracing the term art for all its faults, and not least in order to acknowledge that some Roman artworks are stunningly beautiful and were made with awe-inspiring skill, I have attempted to mitigate the problem, at least to some extent, by addressing a wide range of arts, not all of which will

necessarily spring to a traditional mind, including architecture ([Chapter 18](#), by Edmund Thomas), luxury items (traditionally classified as “minor arts,” but often as precious in material as they were in artistic terms; [Chapter 17](#), by Kenneth Lapatin), and the “minor arts,” in this case decorative marble items ([Chapter 16](#), by Friederike Sinn). For the latter, I have deliberately kept the contentious terminology for the chapter title, in order to draw attention to these objects, which were so essential for the furnishing of houses and villas, but are so often ignored. In addition, several contributors also discuss artworks that may not necessarily elicit outbursts of enthusiasm in the average museum goer, be they from early periods (Massimiliano Papini in [Chapter 5](#)) or from the provinces (especially Roger J.A. Wilson in [Chapter 25](#), and Rachel Kousser in [Chapter 6](#)).

What have largely fallen by the wayside with the “historic turn,” however, are the artistic aspects of Roman art, the role of materials and techniques, the role of the artist, and the significance of style and aesthetics. The Romans undoubtedly had a sense of the level of skill needed to accomplish certain results, and of the visual effects generated by different materials and surfaces. They also admired some artists while ignoring others, although, especially with regard to copies of Greek artworks, the reputation of the original artist certainly mattered as well, which turned the item into “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1979). The degree to which technique and material contributed to the aesthetics of sculpture is largely ignored in surveys of Roman art, but is demonstrated lucidly by Mont Allen in [Chapter 8](#). In [Chapter 9](#), Michael Squire makes equally intriguing observations on the marginalized question of the role of the artist in Roman culture, and Edmund Thomas has included a passage on the role of the architect in his [Chapter 18](#) on architecture as art. To

complement these production-focused chapters, in [Chapters 10](#) and [11](#), Peter J. Holliday and Lauren H. Petersen explore the impact of the patron on the selection and commissioning of art, and discuss art commissioned by the emperor or the state on the one hand, and the lower classes and the freedmen on the other.

Aesthetic aspects related to styles are a subject that has only been taken up again in the last ten years or so (see especially Hallett 2005; Perry 2005; Marvin 2008) and, despite the exciting new perspectives gained on Roman art, there is still enormous scope for further research. The chapters by Holliday ([Chapter 10](#)) and Petersen ([Chapter 11](#)) also contrast stylistic choices that depended on both patrons and subject matter, and Petersen includes a lucid analysis of the history of Roman art history with particular attention to the derogative assessments of non-classical styles in Roman art in past (and even some more recent) scholarship. Christopher H. Hallett opens the volume by fundamentally challenging established positions and terminologies, and with a forceful bid for a new interest in Roman art as “art” and in its aesthetic and stylistic aspects, and it is interesting to observe that the subject is picked up in some other chapters as well (e.g., in [Chapter 8](#) by Allen, [Chapter 9](#) by Squire, [Chapter 6](#) by Kousser, and [Chapter 11](#) by Petersen). Hallett also makes clear how deeply research in Roman art was, and still is, entangled with modern aesthetic value judgments. The wavering currency of Roman art in the modern era is addressed to various degrees in several other chapters as well, and taken up again in the final two chapters specifically dedicated to the reception of Roman art, thus rounding off the book and returning to subjects with which it started. In [Chapter 29](#), Rosemary J. Barrow traces the influence that the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum, and especially the frescos from these sites, had on modern decorators and

artists, while in [Chapter 30](#) Stefan Altekamp discusses the influence of Roman architecture on modern building.

Companion?

Finally, we come to the term “companion.” Over the last two decades or so, the companion has had an amazing career as a literary genre in its own right. Loved by students as an up-to-date answer to all their questions, companions are highly successful commercially, but sometimes regarded with suspicion by scholars for their alleged lack of originality and original research (although I suspect that these same scholars use them as convenient introductions to fields with which they are less familiar when they need to engage with them). However, while there are huge differences in approaches, most companion editors, and many of their authors, strive to give their volumes their very own spin, and to inspire new research and thought as much as presenting widely agreed certainties. This is not the place to review the companion practice in general, or to pass judgment. Instead, I would like to add a few further remarks on my own ideas behind the concept of the present book.

First, companions are highly successful. They are used widely, and by a wide range of audiences including undergraduate students, scholars, and the interested public. As such, they are an excellent way of promoting a subject, disseminating ideas, and stimulating questions and further research. Although there is now an increasing number of companions on art and other material culture, text-based subjects predominate by far, and even in companions “to the age of X,” it is usually one chapter at best that addresses material culture and “art” (see Galinsky 2005 for a notable exception). There is, thus, a real need to draw attention to non-textual aspects of human expression

and communication, and to demonstrate that “art” is an integral part of the culture and history of any given society and era.

A second aspect is the fragmentation of the field – that is, of studies in Roman art – which often develops along the lines of both artistic media and national and language boundaries, with the latter concerning both subject areas and specific approaches. To be sure, there is no lack of excellent introductions to the study of Roman art, such as Brilliant (1974), Strong (1976), Andreae (1977), Brendel (1979), Henig (1983), Heintze (1990), Ramage and Ramage (1991a and b), D’Ambra (1993), Stewart (2004 and 2008), Zanker (2007), and Kleiner (2010), to name only the most influential and/or recent publications that have appeared in the English language. Yet due to their more limited word count, by comparison to this volume, they necessarily remain at the surface of the wide range of questions and subjects that they typically include, or follow a very individual approach, thus neglecting different ways of thinking about the material in question and different methodologies. While it is obviously impossible ever to be fully comprehensive, there are advantages in having the opportunity to present the subject on 671 pages rather than 200 pages or less. I have at least tried to incorporate as wide a range as possible of what I felt to be most central to the study of Roman “art.” Apart from the aspects already mentioned, this also includes three chapters on methodological questions by scholars whose work has been essential for the “historic turn” in the field, and thus for raising interest in Roman art in general since the 1970s, and whose contributions to the development of research questions and methodologies have been hugely influential: Tonio Hölscher on “historical reliefs” ([Chapter 2](#)), Klaus Fittschen on portraiture ([Chapter 3](#)), and the late Natalie Kampen on gender studies ([Chapter 4](#)). In addition, I have

been able to collect contributions from scholars of all degrees of seniority in order to benefit from both the broad experience and wide-ranging knowledge of established scholars, and the bright new ideas and approaches of more junior ones (which of course does not insinuate either that senior scholars do not have bright new ideas, or that junior ones would not know their subject and material). Moreover, the contributors to this volume come from seven different nationalities, thus reflecting, to some degree, scholarly approaches shaped by the different national traditions.

Some readers may complain that this results in a lack of coherence in approach, some may like some contributions more than others, and some will certainly miss aspects that they consider important to the field (or indeed represent their nation). I have deliberately hazarded at least the first two complaints. I wanted this *Companion* not just to be a convenient summary of the state of the art (“according to Borg”), but to reflect the diversity of the field, to give food for thought, and to stimulate further engagement with the subject. I hope that it presents the field not as a “closed shop,” or as one that has had all its problems solved, but as a vibrant field of research that engages in stimulating controversies, strives for suitable methodologies and approaches, and bears huge potential for future research, not least for the young generation of students and scholars.

Acknowledgments

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PART I

Methods and Approaches

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)?

*“excudent 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
(hae 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) “*Graecia 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

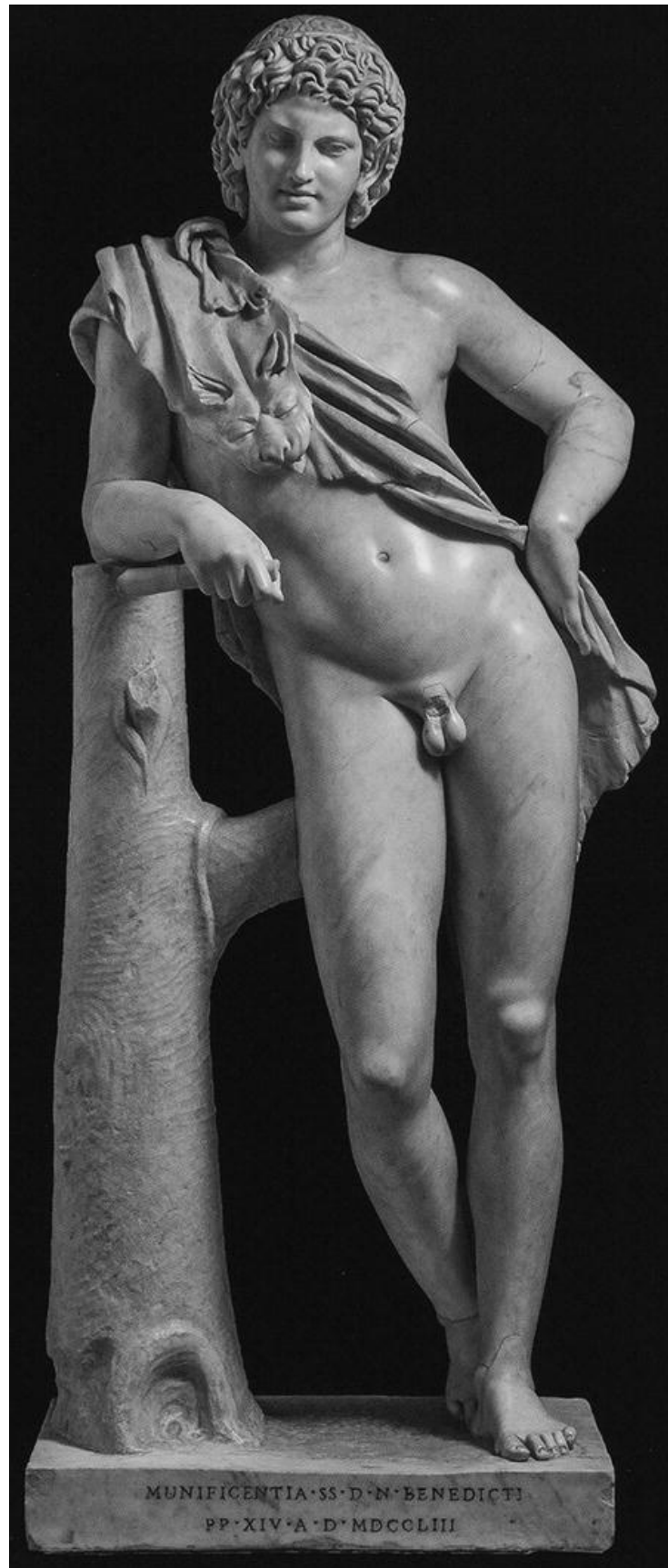
What is Roman about Roman art?

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 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).



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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).

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, *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 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 Graeci monoknêmon 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 *monoknêmon* ("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 Antiphrilos, 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). Arcesilaus 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, *Images* 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 *aedicula* 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