
The old adage that ‘you can’t judge a book by its cover’ needs the addition ‘or by its title’ in the case of *Classical Art: from Greece to Rome*. For this publication does not meet the expectations raised by either its title or its subtitle. It is of course entirely acceptable that *Classical Art* is used to encompass a wide range of ancient works, but one hardly anticipates that the book will omit altogether the period most closely associated with the term ‘classical’—the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Likewise, the reasonable expectation that *from Greece to Rome* signals that both are included in the fullest sense is confounded when one discovers that pre-Hellenistic Greece and much of imperial Rome are absent. One must hope that booksellers will display this volume flanked by those in the Oxford History of Art series which do address those areas (Robin Osborne’s *Archaic and Classical Greek Art* and Jaś Elsner’s *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*), so that readers realise that this book fulfils a different agenda, which had been less ambiguously reflected in the pre-publication title, *Hellenistic and Early Roman Art*.

Although Osborne and Elsner meet more conventional expectations of Greek and Roman art, readers would be well advised not to omit this less predictable addition in their appraisal of ancient art. For Mary Beard and John Henderson argue that the all too often neglected period lying between what are typically thought of as, respectively, Greek and Roman art is ‘the crucial episode in the story of ancient art’ (3). Although they acknowledge that it lacks coherence—having neither ‘a linear thread of artistic development’ (4), nor ‘an intelligible narrative’ (5)—they do not see it as a mere ‘in-between’ phase. For them, it is a key period because it had most influence on later artists, and shaped ideas about ancient art during the definitive era of the Renaissance and beyond, particularly before original Greek Classical examples became known in the nineteenth century.

Instead of attempting to invent some sort of sequential narrative, the authors confront the challenge of writing on this difficult period by using a series of case studies to tackle a variety of themes that are critical
to an understanding of ancient art—in their own words, ‘identification and restoration, controversy and copying, international scholarship and imperial spectacle’ (3). It is meaty stuff and one might think that it could make for rather indigestible fare in a series intended for the non-specialist. But the authors find ways to whet less scholarly appetites, often with somewhat sensationalist examples. The Introduction, for instance, in order to problematise our understanding of ancient art, deploys as its first case study the recovery, restoration and reception of the Dying Seneca (Louvre Fisherman). It is an effective example—and one which allows the authors to open with the melodramatic story of Seneca opening his veins to commit suicide in ‘glamorous martyrdom’ after the bungled conspiracy against the ‘psychotic post-adolescent’ Nero (1). This is the strategy of a good lecture, analytical thinking spiced with anecdote, ensuring a lively pace and engaging tone.

Throughout their five chapter topics, on painting, sculpture, sexuality, political monuments and portraiture (with neat punning titles such as ‘Sizing up Power’ and ‘Facing up to Antiquity’ for the latter two), Beard and Henderson find approaches that will have interest for a current readership. Analogies with twentieth-century fascism enliven a reading of ancient art’s political agendas, for instance, and telling anecdotes about collectors from all periods add zest throughout. So too do examples of erotic works and interpretations, which the authors are extremely diligent in pursuing, by no means confining them to the chapter on ‘Sensuality, Sexuality and the Love of Art’. They even create their own titillating collage of a ‘double derrière’ in which the Apollo Belvedere appears to be hustling a naked Venus (106). Risqué imagery is guaranteed to capture reader attention, particularly as a sense of voyeurism is heightened by the knowledge that these works, when discovered, were locked away from the public eye for many years (as is mentioned a number of times). But it might be felt that this strategy is given undue emphasis at the expense of other themes of at least equal importance—there is no section dealing directly with religious art, for example. Possibly the treatment of gods and goddesses as part of a belief system seemed less interesting than a focus on their more lascivious characteristics as indicators of Greco-Roman sexual mores.
There can be a danger in trying to make too popular a serious book with a serious agenda, although Beard and Henderson invariably succeed in being thought-provoking rather than merely provocative. This is true for style as well as content. The writing is not uncomplicated but has verve and wit—for instance, ‘sex took scholarship for its fig-leaf’ (35) encapsulates elite tomes of erotic imagery, while ‘low-profile propaganda’ (219) characterises portraits on coinage. But droll phrases, such as ‘motel art for ancient businessmen’ at Delos (139) or Hercules referred to as ‘tanking up between monsters and missions’ (197), or Cupid as a ‘toy boy’ (110), sometimes seem a little gratuitous. One also wonders whether some contemporary colloquialisms like the last might have limited currency, puzzling some readers, which would rather defeat the objective of accessibility. Moreover, while such writing is entertaining, it can run the risk of trivialising the meaning of art—and the significance of the book’s arguments.

And this book has important things to say. The basic contention, eloquently driven home, is that Greek art is mediated through Rome, and that most knowledge of ancient art was forged through this interdependence. Drawing on up-to-date scholarship, this book helps the reader to understand the process, and to grasp how a concept of Greek art was and is strongly reliant upon its reception and reinterpretation in the visual culture of Rome. It is clearly demonstrated how selective survivals from antiquity have been, and how consistently those have been tampered with, literally or figuratively. Post-modernist ideas have enabled the authors to reconsider imitation in a positive light, however, and to read its more ingenious aspects not as interfering with an original work (as older scholarship was inclined to do) but reinventing it. To make this point vividly, modern reworkings are sometimes considered alongside ancient copies and derivations. The written arguments are also well supported by apposite quotations of the modern period as well as ancient ones. The book boasts a generous number of illustrations, too, many in colour, and has the particularly valuable addition of many clever diagrams and plans, skilfully assisting readers to reconstruct the form and location of artworks. And, while footnotes are kept to a minimum, the text is usefully augmented with annotated bibliographic references for each chapter.

The complexity of a subject which does not have a single ‘story line’ makes this book less easy a read than its colloquial humour might
imply, compounded by possibly bewilderingly manifold parallel sources of information—text, boxed quotations, and annotated illustrations and diagrams, as well as appendices of maps and plans, a timeline, a list of illustrations with further notes, the bibliography, and even a list of museums and web sites. But, even if it might prove quite a difficult text for junior undergraduates, it should certainly be recommended to them, and be required reading for more advanced students. It is a book that deals in weighty ideas with a light touch.

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