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A Companion to Roman Art,
edited by Barbara E. Borg
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Reviewed by Bente Kiilerich

Recent years have seen an explosion of multi-authored books, variously called companions, dictionaries, encyclopaedias and handbooks. These collected essays are put into print by leading publishers such as Brill, Routledge, the university presses of Cambridge and Oxford and, for the companion under review, Wiley-Blackwell. Some volumes have a restricted focus; others attempt to cover larger areas in terms of chronology, geography and themes. Inevitably there has been some overlap. For instance, *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, 2008, *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Art*, 2014, and *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Sculpture*, 2015, treat some of the same aspects as *A Companion to Roman Art*. By now, the Blackwell companions to the ancient world count close to a hundred titles, and the series include, to mention but two, *A Companion to Roman Italy*, 2016, and *A Companion to the Flavian Age of Imperial Rome*, 2016. In 2014 *A Companion to Roman Architecture* was published, and with a few exceptions, the present volume, therefore, treats architecture mainly in connection with architectural settings and contexts.

A Companion to Roman Art is edited by Barbara E. Borg, professor of Classical Archaeology at Exeter University. As she notes in the Introduction, the demanding enterprise took nearly six years to complete. Such a long time of production is a shame, but with thirty contributors, it is probably unavoidable. About one third of the authors are

German, as is Borg herself, while the vast majority of the ‘distinguished scholars with unrivalled expertise’, to quote the promotion page, are Anglo-Americans. In a book on Roman art, it is thought-provoking that only three authors are Italian and none are French.

Before turning to the text, a note on the images should be made. In a book on art and visual culture, it is regrettable that the illustrations are mainly in black-and-white and of varying quality. Priced at £120, one might have expected the book to have been lavishly illustrated and with colours used to a larger extent than what we find here: fifteen quite small colour photos at the back of the volume. As for typography and layout, the dense pages set with fifty lines of text do not present an easy read for a newcomer, and the first encounter with some of the more text-heavy chapters may be off-putting.

The thirty chapters are divided into seven parts under the following headings: I: Methods and Approaches; II: The Beginnings and End of Roman Art; III: Producing and Commissioning Roman Art; IV: Genres; V: Contexts, subdivided into three sections; VI: Themes; VII: Reception of Roman Art in the Modern World. The reasons undergirding the divisions are not totally obvious. For instance, sarcophagi are placed under Genres, while the decoration of Roman tombs is in a section on Art and Death filed under Contexts. Wall painting is a Genre, while Christian tomb decoration belongs to Contexts. Historical representation is included in Method, while the related subject ‘Roman Art and the State’ appears under Commissioning. In the following, each contribution will be mentioned, but given the format of the book, it falls beyond the scope of this review to summarize and comment on each chapter.

Christopher Hallett’s ‘Defining Roman Art’ (chap. 1) reflects on the nature of Roman art. It brings to mind the essay by Otto Brendel: ‘What is Roman about Roman art’ (1953). Hallett proposes that what we regard as typically Roman, such as the historical reliefs and portraiture, differs from what the Romans themselves preferred: to them art meant Greek art. In fact, Hallett goes so far as to claim that no such thing as Roman art exists – quite a paradox in a book devoted to the very subject. It might perhaps be wondered whether the apparent Greek versus Roman dichotomy to some extent is a pseudo-problem created by art-historiographers. At any rate, the Romans were surrounded by and made use of many kinds of images; so Hallett, to avoid the loaded and restricting term ‘art’, recommends the currently popular term ‘visual culture’. Since it is reasonable to assume that the Romans did not view the historical reliefs on their triumphal arches chiefly as aesthetical objects, the term visual culture may indeed be more appropriate.

Whether defined as visual culture, art or non-art, the quintessential ‘Roman Historical Representation’ is the subject of the following chapter (chap. 2). Tonio Hölscher discusses the representation of historical reality and political ideology in public monuments. The Column of Trajan is a main focus. Hölscher concludes that ‘by selecting, configuring, and stylizing, [art] creates semantic emphases and nuances that are not possible in the real world. This is where the real significance of political monuments lies for our understanding of the Roman world.’ (p. 49). Next, Klaus Fittschen addresses the ‘Methodological Approaches to the Dating and Identification of Roman Portraits’ (chap. 3). Making use of more than twenty subheadings that serve as keywords, he outlines

problems and perspectives. Among the questions that need to be considered when facing portraits are: How does one tell an imperial from a non-imperial portrait? Is it always the emperors who influence their citizens? How can portraits be dated? What happens to a portrait when it is recut? The final contribution to the methodological section is the late Natalie Kampen's 'Roman Art and Gender Studies' (chap. 4). Kampen notes that while feminist and gender studies have long been seen as relevant approaches in art history, classical archaeologists have been more reluctant to apply these methods to ancient material. Areas worth studying include representations of women, gender roles, gender relations and erotic scenes.

Does Roman art have a 'beginning' and an 'end'? The theme of 'Republican Rome and Italic Art' is addressed by Massimiliano Papini (chap. 5). He includes Etruscan works in the discussion, but since these are also the subject of *A Companion to the Etruscans*, 2016, they are not the main focus of his entry. Parallel to the Italian tradition, the Romans turned to 'Adapting Greek Art', as discussed by Rachel Kousser (chap. 6), a chapter that takes the reader back to some of the questions raised by Hallett. Kousser's exposé is structured chronologically, presenting the Greek impact on architecture, sculpture and painting from the second century BC to the second century AD. In 'The Art of Late Antiquity: A Contextual Approach' (chap. 7), Alessandra Bravi begins with the collecting of Greek sculpture in Constantinople, before all too swiftly enumerating various types of monuments and artworks – sculpture in the round, sarcophagi, triumphal arch, silver plate, diptychs, opus sectile, paintings, Christian mosaics – from the fourth to the seventh, or actually the ninth, century.

The producing and commissioning of Roman art is a theme that can be approached from various angles. Mont Allen, in 'Technique and Message in Roman Art' (chap. 8), points to the importance of material. Marble and coloured stones were expensive and could be used to convey specific messages. For instance, it seems logical to carve a Phrygian captive in Phrygian marble. The mottled stone also serves well for suggesting the flayed skin of the satyr Marsyas, while a red stone is apt for wild and drunken creatures. Allen further addresses compositions that combine white and dark stone. With white divinities (with polychrome accents one can assume) contrasting dark monsters, the material undoubtedly has semantic value. Unfortunately, little is known about the artists who carved such sculptures. In 'Roman Art and the Artist' (chap. 9), Michael Squire makes an almost desperate attempt to trace the elusive artist. The (mostly Greek) names of many artists and artisans have been preserved, along with many signatures and some representations of artisans at work; there are even a few extant images of female painters. Still, in spite of drawing on six pages of references and the inclusion into his thorough discussion of literary, archaeological and epigraphic sources, Squire is bound to conclude that we actually do not know much about Roman artists.

Peter J. Holliday's 'Roman Art and the State' (chap. 10) is mainly devoted to Julio-Claudian sculpture – the Ara Pacis, the Augustus Prima Porta, the Gemma Augustea, but also focuses on the Cancelleria reliefs and the question of reworking. In contrast to these imperially commissioned works, Lauren Hackworth Petersen deals with "Arte Plebea" and

Non-elite Roman Art' (chap. 11). She addresses the tendency to view Roman art dualistically as the classical, Hellenistic, aulic tradition versus the local, Italic, plebeian tradition. In 1967, the Marxist aristocrat Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli coined the term *arte plebea* and posited a dualistic style complex of elite versus plebeian. In 1977 Bianca Maria Felletti Maj modified this by linking *arte plebea* (*arte popolare*, *Volkskunst*) with the Italic tradition rather than with a specific class. The 'popular' style has been associated with early Roman art, but it has also been applied to Roman sarcophagi, Tetrarchic reliefs and, especially, the Arch of Constantine. Since one would imagine a certain quality in an official monument, the 'lack of quality' on the Constantinian Arch has been explained as a conscious wish to appeal to the masses by use of a 'popular' style. Petersen warns us not to follow in the footsteps of Bernard Berenson who viewed classical/elite style positively and unclassical/plebeian style negatively. As for the Arch, it may be suggested that if we agree that the reliefs are not 'art', but represent a Roman visual culture chiefly intended to convey a political message, the particular style of the historical frieze need neither be defended (Riegl), nor ridiculed (Berenson). At any rate, the questions of style in Roman art are still largely unanswered.

Portraiture is one of the distinguishing genres of Roman art. Jane Fejfer's 'Roman Portraits' (chap. 12) can be seen as an exemplification of some of the questions posed by Fittschen (chap. 3); in fact, this chapter might just as well have been placed in the methodological section. Among issues addressed are likeness, styles and chronology, clothing and contexts, and the importance of inscriptions – often the only thing remaining of a portrait. With reference to von den Hoff, Fejfer suggests that verism reduced distance between an image and its viewer, since a veristic portrait was sensed as a person like oneself, whereas idealized portraits alienated the beholder (p. 238). This is an interesting observation. But the very opposite could also be argued: at least in this day and age of plastic surgery we generally prefer to identify ourselves with the idealized, digitally edited image rather than with the realistic representation. The psychological and cognitive aspects of Roman portraiture warrant further study.

Since the late nineteenth century, the study of Roman painting has been informed by the four Pompeiian styles defined by Alfred Mau. In chapter 13, 'Wall Painting', Katharina Lorenz explains the main characteristics of the four 'styles'. A student may be slightly confused by Lorenz' calling the first style three-dimensional and the second style two-dimensional. From the point of view of physical reality, it is correct since the *faux marbres* of the first style were often plastically modelled in stucco, whereas walls painted in the second style were totally flat. Still, the visual effect was reversed: first-style walls look flat and closed-off, whereas the complex designs of the second style, with vistas opening up beyond the surface, make them appear three-dimensional. Turning from walls to floors, Roger Ling, in the chapter with the short title 'Mosaics' (chap. 14), surveys pavements in Roman Italy, the Eastern provinces, Roman Africa and the Northern and Western provinces. It is obviously impossible to do justice to the numerous and varied pavements preserved from various parts of the Roman Empire. Thus, for instance, the important Antioch mosaics are only mentioned in passing. On the subject of walls and vaults, Ling

states that the Romans invented this category (p. 280). Still, the finesse of certain late Hellenistic floors suggests that they derive from compositions intended for walls, so in spite of the lack of evidence, it may be speculated whether Hellenistic wall mosaics did exist.

In the following section Michael Koortbojian, in a clear and succinct text, considers 'Roman sarcophagi', of which no less than about 15.000 have survived (chap. 15). Next, we are back above ground with a chapter on the 'Decorative Arts' by Friederike Sinn, who understands the category as consisting of objects such as tables, candelabra, vessels, masks, altars and bases in marble (chap. 16). The 'Luxury Arts' (chap. 17) is a category some steps up the economic ladder. Kenneth Lapatin includes gems, cameos, jewellery, silverplate, vessels and small size portraits in precious materials. These intricate works prove the quality and sophistication of Roman *art*.

The visual aspects of architecture are the subject of Edmund Thomas' 'Roman Architecture as Art?' (chap.18), a chapter one would rather have expected to find in *A Companion to Roman Architecture*. Architecture also plays a significant role in Simon Ellis' 'Art in Roman Town Houses' (chap. 19), and Richard Neudecker's 'Art in the Roman Villa' (chap. 20). Concentrating mainly on two examples, the House of M. Lucretius Fronto at Pompeii and the later House of the Bound Animals at Thuburbo Maius, and discussing the paintings and other imagery in relation to the lay-out of the houses, Ellis makes it easy for the reader to follow his presentation. While a town house can be large and richly decorated, a villa, particularly an imperial one, is even more grandiose. Neudecker's examples include Oplontis, Stabiae, Baia, Sperlonga, Capri and Hadrian's villa at Tivoli. The text is accompanied by instructive reconstruction drawings.

The *Companion* treats late Roman art as belonging to a discrete period (chap. 7, 21, 23). Susanne Muth's 'The Decoration of Private Space in the Later Roman Empire' (chap. 21) is set off from the preceding articles, thus making the implicit claim that late Roman art differs from Roman art proper. Indeed, most of the contributions in the book make but little reference to works that post-date Constantine. Muth argues that new forms of status representation appeared from around the third century onwards. Focus shifted from the wall to the floor, with increasingly richer and more extravagant pavements: 'the more suggestive the floor decoration, the more restrained the wall decoration' (p. 415). While this tendency may be observed at some places, Piazza Armerina (here dated to the late fourth century) being presented as an example, there is the caveat that very few late antique walls are preserved, so one should not draw too categorical a conclusion.

'The Decoration of Roman Tombs' is discussed in the contribution by Francisca Feraudi-Gruenais (chap. 22). She concentrates on paintings and decorations in metropolitan Rome, paying special attention to the chosen themes and their significance. With the advent of Christianity, ancient imagery is reinterpreted and new images are formed, the subject of Norbert Zimmermann's 'Catacombs and the Beginnings of Christian Tomb Decoration' (chap. 23). The word decoration, featured in several of the titles, is almost as problematic as the term art, for to many readers, decoration denotes something devoid of potential meaning. As far as Christian painting is concerned this, of

course, is far from the mark (as it also goes forth from Zimmermann's article). Still, it would hardly be feasible to speak of a visual catacomb culture.

In this fifth part, the word context is employed in a broad sense to stand for private spaces, tombs and in the wider sense of an eastern and a western context. Roland Smith deals authoritatively with 'The Greek East under Rome' (chap. 24), while Roger Wilson addresses 'The Western Roman Provinces' (chap. 25). This chapter is divided into African provinces, Spanish provinces, Gaul and Germany, and Britain, and further subdivided into sculpture, mosaics and other art forms. The material for these two chapters is so large that it might have profited from being expanded into more chapters with in-depth treatment of, for instance, Roman Greece and with a separate chapter (by Smith) on Aphrodisias.

Part six, 'Themes', contains three papers that fall somewhat outside, but supplement, the tenor of the volume as a whole: Maureen Carroll's 'Contextualizing Roman Art and Nature', 'Roman Art and Spectacle' by Zahra Newby, and 'Roman Art and Myth' by Francesco de Angelis (chap. 26-28). In the chapter on nature, Carroll first presents the evidence of real gardens in the Pompeii area before considering some of the delightful garden paintings. Her examples range from Pompeiian frescos to the garden room from Livia's villa at Prima Porta. The archaeological and art-historical evidence is supplemented by the written testimony of the natural historian Pliny.

The reception of Roman art is the subject of the final two chapters. Rosemary Barrow treats the topic of 'The Myth of Pompeii: Fragments, Frescos, and the Visual Imagination' (chap. 29). While Alma-Tadema, on whom Barrow has written an excellent monograph, is an obvious choice, most readers will strain to spot the alleged influence from the Mystery frieze on the colour field paintings of Mark Rothko (see colour plate). A more pertinent example would have been Eleanor Antin's 'Last Days of Pompeii', a series of large tableaux which can be understood as a modern counterpart to Alma-Tadema's Roman scenarios. Finally, Stefan Altekamp's 'Roman Architecture through the Ages' (chap. 30) is an article which, like the one by Thomas, seems like it would have been better situated in the *Companion to Roman Architecture*. With only two entries in this final part, it is surprising that a chapter on the modern reception of Roman sculpture was not included. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, marble and plaster copies of ancient sculptures are frequently appropriated by contemporary artists. Thus, in continuation of the Roman practice of recycling ancient models, the modern practice might have thrown light on certain aspects of the Romans' adaptation of Greek art.

To sum up: The chapters are generally well written and provide much useful information and ample bibliographies. A few authors tend to cover too much ground, accumulating names, places and facts, rather than concentrating on principal problems and a close reading of a limited number of works. Since the authors at times hold contrasting views and their manner of presenting their specific theme differs considerably, the volume does not present a coherent overview of Roman art. That said, the reader does gain insight into the current understanding of some of the main aspects of Roman visual culture. Other aspects have been left out: A state of research, outlining the different ways of

approaching Roman art, would have been particularly useful as an introductory chapter. One might also have appreciated sections on art criticism and aesthetic theory in antiquity, on art and rhetoric and on viewers' responses to art.

The *Companion* does not have a conclusion. In place of that, the reader may re-pose the question posed by Otto Brendel: 'What is Roman about Roman art?' It is difficult to find a common denominator to characterize the visual arts of many centuries and diverse geographical areas, a material ranging from small personal objects to large-scale official monuments. Images served many functions, from commemoration to glorification and display. The Romans also collected (Greek) art. But as Cicero put it, once the works he so desired had arrived, he was not sure he actually wanted them. This, perhaps, sums up the Romans' at times ambivalent attitude to the visual arts. As the *Companion* proves, Roman art is a multifaceted theme well worth exploring.

Bente Kiilerich
Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies
University of Bergen
bente.kiilerich@uib.no