# ROMAN IMPERIALISM AND PROVINCIAL ART

Edited by

**Sarah Scott**
*University of Leicester*

**Jane Webster**
*University of Leicester*

# Contents

# List of Illustrations

# List of Contributors

**Sarah Scott**
School of Archaeology and Ancient History
University of Leicester

**Catherine Johns**
Department of Prehistory and Early Europe
The British Museum

**Jane Webster**
School of Archaeology and Ancient History
University of Leicester

**Iain Ferris**
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
University of Birmingham

**René Rodgers**
NMRC
Great Western Village
Swindon

**Miranda Aldhouse Green**
Department of Humanities and Science
University of Wales College Newport
Caerleon Campus

**Martin Henig**
Institute of Archaeology
University of Oxford

**Greg Woolf**
Department of Ancient History
School of Greek, Latin, and Ancient History
University of St. Andrews

**David J. Mattingly**
School of Archaeology and Ancient History
University of Leicester

**Shelley Hales**
The Bristol Institute of Hellenic and Roman Studies

**Zahra Newby**
Department of Classics and Ancient History
University of Warwick

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# Provincial Art and Roman Imperialism: An Overview

Sarah Scott

## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the majority of Roman archaeologists and historians are aware of the limitations of the concept 'Roman art'. It is now widely acknowledged that in labelling objects as Roman art we are placing them within an artificial category that has more to do with the development of modern art history and aesthetics than with the contexts for which such objects were originally created (Kristeller 1965, 171–4; Kampen 1995; Scott 2000). Yet museum galleries and volumes on Roman art are still dominated by high-quality forms. The legacy of eighteenth-century aesthetic ideals has resulted in a relative lack of interest in provincial as opposed to Roman art, and a longstanding concern with aesthetically pleasing forms (see Henig 1995, 178–89).

From the latter part of the nineteenth century, interpretations of Roman art have also been influenced by developments in the field of Roman archaeology, and, in particular, by the introduction of the concept of 'Romanisation'. This concept originated in a period when imperialist and colonialist perspectives were dominant in provincial archaeology (Webster and Cooper 1996; Mattingly 1997), and promoted the idea that Roman conquest brought peace and civilisation to the provinces. When viewed in such terms, provincial art is often dismissed as a pale imitation of the art of Rome, leading to the assumption that its supposed technical and artistic shortcomings reflect an uncritical acceptance or even non-comprehension of the messages encoded in the iconography of the 'core'. Yet the empire was an amalgam of a wide variety of different cultures, from which Rome duly borrowed, and little is understood about this interplay. Hence the crucial issue for us in studying Roman provincial art is not whether it is judged to be 'good' art, but what it tells us about the nature of life under an imperial regime, and about patterns of belief and behaviour in provincial society.

This introductory chapter seeks to outline the development of approaches to provincial art, focussing in particular on the emergence of aesthetic frameworks

for evaluation and interpretation. Whilst examples are drawn largely from Roman Britain, the issues raised are more widely relevant. It is clear that although the evaluation of the aesthetic and technical aspects of art is extremely useful for identifying empire-wide artistic developments, there is much scope for new 'post-colonial' perspectives on provincial art.

## PROVINCIAL ART

From the latter part of the eighteenth century many scholars believed in a 'chain of art' in which Greek art represented the peak of human artistic achievement (Brendel 1979; Jenkins 1992; Preziosi 1998, 21–30). Within this chain of art only the highest quality Roman art – or that which most closely approximated the Greek ideal – was deemed worthy of serious study (Jenkins 1992, 30–74). The most aesthetically pleasing objects were believed to be those of the Republic or early Empire, because they were thought to be more classical in conception. In contrast, the art of the later Roman period, and that of the provinces, was seen as more stylised, and, therefore, as aesthetically inferior (see Kitzinger 1977 for a full discussion of the later Roman period).

Throughout most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provincial art was, therefore, deemed far less important than 'classical' art within both academic debates and museum displays (Brendel 1979). At the British Museum, the Trustees were primarily interested in classical and biblical antiquities, and by 1850 all the antiquities of ancient Britain and Gaul could be collected in four cases in one room, with only thirteen more cases for later British and Medieval antiquities (Caygill 1996, 31). As late as the 1870s, a 391 page guide, *A Handy-Book of the British Museum*, covered the Celtic, Roman, and Saxon collections in six pages. This compared with 80 for Assyrian antiquities, 144 on Egyptian, and 129 on classical (Caygill 1996, 31). These interests are also reflected in the Great Exhibition of 1851 at Crystal Palace, which ignored British archaeology in general (Potter 1997, 130).

Whilst many Victorians were convinced that they were the true successors to the ancient Romans and were great admirers of the Roman *genius* for war, technology, and government, they were less than complimentary about their artistic achievements (Pemble 1987, 64)(see also Chapter 2 by Catherine Johns in this volume). In Victorian novels and art, Roman connoisseurship is often presented as a matter of acquisitiveness and social status, suggesting Imperial decadence and a general lack of taste (Prettejohn 1996, 135). When viewed in such terms, provincial art is often dismissed as a poor imitation of the art of Rome, which itself is often viewed unfavourably.

Roman provincial archaeology only became a serious field of study in the latter part of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries, and

it is in this period that we see the first serious discussion of provincial art. In Britain, Francis Haverfield emphasised the inevitability of the expansion of Rome and the subsequent disappearance of Celtic art:

> When the Romans spread their dominion over the island [Celtic art] almost wholly vanished. For that we are not to blame any evil influence of this particular Empire. All native arts, however beautiful tend to disappear before the more even technique and the neater finish of town manufactures.
>
> (Haverfield 1915, 48)

Haverfield was strongly influenced by the work of the German scholar Mommsen (1885) who emphasised the uniformity of various Roman institutions and accomplishments across the Western Empire, and used regional similarities as a means of measuring the penetration and achievements of Roman civilisation (Freeman 1997, 43). The adoption of Roman forms, or the process of Romanisation, was seen as an inevitable process by both Mommsen and Haverfield, and Haverfield assumed that the transition from native to Roman art was equally an inevitable process (see Hingley 1995, 1996 and Freeman 1997 for a full historiography of Romanisation studies; see Woolf 1998, 1–23 for a history of Gallic Romanisation studies).

Twenty years later Collingwood (1937) was also distinctly unimpressed with the art of Roman Britain, although this view was probably strongly influenced by political events taking place in Europe in the 1930s (Henig 1995, 9):

> Before the Roman conquest the Britons were a race of gifted and brilliant artists: the conquest, forcing them into the mould of Roman life with its vulgar efficiency and lack of taste, destroyed that gift and reduced their arts to the level of mere manufactures.
>
> (Collingwood and Myers 1937, 247)

This negative view of Romano-British art was to dominate until the 1960s, when a gradual change in attitudes was brought about most notably by the work of Toynbee. An exhibition of the art of Roman Britain held in Goldsmiths' Hall in London in July 1961 brought together a wide variety of Romano-British art for the first time. In the catalogue of the exhibition Toynbee enthuses about the overall impression created, which was 'that of an immensely rich intermingling in Britain of aesthetic tastes and standards, of patrons of very diverse types, and of subjects of widely differing kinds depicted in both native and imported works of art' (1962, 1).

In two volumes that appeared at this time (1962, 1964) Toynbee catalogued and analysed the considerable body of art from the Roman period in Britain. In doing so she defined three basic categories of finds: high-quality art, imported

from the Mediterranean area; high-quality provincial art, usually attributed to Gaulish artists; and low-quality art, usually produced by British craftsmen (1964, 5–9). Despite the immense importance of Toynbee's work, this categorization is still reminiscent of the nineteenth-century 'chain of art'. Provincial art is seen as a poor imitation of traditional classical forms, demonstrating a lack of skill or understanding on the part of the artist or patron. A simple process of emulation is assumed, with a progressive and hierarchical structure for culture change (Mattingly 1997, 17).

Such perspectives are also embedded within many general histories of Roman art, where history is often viewed, at least in part, as linear, and art is viewed, at least in part, as being aesthetically motivated (Kampen 1995, 375). Kampen argues that a key problem with writing histories of Roman art has been the continuing importance of a nineteenth-century view of empire that sees the centre as the dominant force. Within such a framework, the lives and cultures of provincial populations were shaped by forces emanating from the core (see for example Ramage and Ramage 1991)(Kampen 1995, 377). Therefore, Kampen proposes that a new approach is necessary:

> It is in the interactions of . . . communities with other communities that one could locate the possibility of moving . . . to another kind of history, one in which a linear narrative dominated by a centre might be subverted . . . The goal would be to use visual and textual materials in order to understand the nature of overlapping as well as conflicting discourses in multiple communities and, at the same time, to locate these temporally in relation to one another.
>
> (Kampen 1995, 377)

The importance of explaining artistic choices in relation to the context of production is certainly clear from a number of recent studies that see Roman art as integral to the social and political circumstances in which it was created and viewed (for example, Price 1984; Hannestad 1986; Zanker 1988; Elsner 1995, 1998; Onians 1999; Scott 2000). For example, Elsner (1998) examines how art both reflected and contributed to social construction in the Roman world, and focuses on the role of images within cultural history. Recent excavations at Pompeii have also promoted such studies in the context of Roman private life (e.g., Wallace-Hadrill 1988; Clarke 1991; Allison 1997; Laurence and Wallace-Hadrill 1997). Furthermore, the importance of gender has also been addressed, most notably by Kampen (1981; 1991; 1994), and it is clear that traditional modes of writing art history have resulted in women being overlooked as either producers or consumers of art in the Roman world (see also Nochlin 1973 and Rodgers Chapter 5, this volume). Although this move towards contextual studies of Roman art has highlighted the complex relationship between art and society in Rome and Italy (for Imperial art in particular), there is much scope for further work in the provinces.

Large numbers of specialist studies now provide comprehensive coverage of all aspects of provincial art. Much of this work consists of catalogues of particular forms of art, such as mosaics (see Dunbabin 1999 for a comprehensive bibliography) or wall-paintings (see, e.g., Davey and Ling 1981), and there is often a focus on the nature and organisation of craft industries (for example the important work by D.J. Smith (1969) on the Romano-British mosaic industry). Yet the subject has often been overlooked in general volumes on the provinces. For example, in Wacher's (1978) *Roman Britain*, there is virtually no mention of art, and in Salway's (1984) *Roman Britain*, the only serious discussion is a small section on mosaics, which are included only as an example of commerce and industry (for other provinces see for example Drinkwater 1983; Manton 1988; Rivet 1988; King 1990). This reflects a continuing concern with the military and administrative achievements of the Romans in the provinces, and a perception that art is perhaps somewhat peripheral to the more important mechanics of empire.

A notable shift in approach is marked by Millett's (1990) *Romanization of Britain*, which acknowledges the importance of Romanised artistic expression as a means of expressing power and status within the province, and emphasises the importance of the 'native' contribution to Romanisation (*interpretatio celtiana*) (1990, 117). However, whilst this approach reflects an important theoretical shift in provincial archaeology, the perspective is still essentially acculturative. For example, in his discussion of Romano-British art, Millett suggests that 'Romanization had firmly taken root, even if the quality of the art produced in response to patrons' demands was perhaps lacking . . .' (1990, 117).

Perhaps the most detailed discussion of provincial art to date is Henig's *Art of Roman Britain* (1995). In this volume, Henig aims to establish Romano-British art as both distinctive and innovative. In particular, he convincingly argues that the fourth century was an artistic golden age, and that the best Romano-British art from this period was at the very least equal to high-quality art from elsewhere in the empire at this time. Yet despite the immense importance of this work for studies of Romano-British art, there is still a strong emphasis on establishing the aesthetic and technical merit of the evidence in relation to art from elsewhere in the Empire. Whilst such an analysis can undoubtedly provide us with considerable insights into regional and chronological artistic developments, there is still scope for closer analysis of the specific circumstances in which the art was created and viewed (see Scott 2000 for a contextual approach to Romano-British mosaics).

## POST-COLONIAL APPROACHES TO PROVINCIAL ART

An important development in Roman provincial archaeology in recent years has been the adoption of post-colonial approaches by a number of scholars. Such

approaches have been strongly influenced by post-colonial studies in the social sciences, and in anthropology in particular (for example Comaroff 1985; Said 1993; Scott 1990). Whilst earlier studies tended to focus on the dominating force, more recently there has been increasing concern with the complexity of colonial encounters. For example, Thomas and Losche (1999, 3) suggest that studies of 'art' in colonial contexts must empower indigenous cultures, not simply by addressing the resistance of counter-colonial art, but also 'by acknowledging the spaces beyond colonial culture, in which cultural forms and values have never been prescribed by a dominant colonising culture' (1999, 5).

In the context of Roman provincial archaeology, scholars have become increasingly aware of the limited and monolithic nature of many approaches to Roman imperialism (Barrett 1997a, 1997b; Webster and Cooper 1996; Mattingly 1997; Woolf 1998; Webster 2001), and the historical origins of this concept have now been thoroughly examined (Hingley 1995, 1996; Freeman 1997). The work of Webster in particular (1995, 1997a, 1997b, 2001, and Chapter 3 this volume) has served to highlight the problems surrounding the concept of Romanisation (with its implication of a straightforward and inevitable adoption of a 'Roman' way of life by indigenous peoples). Webster suggests instead that the term creolisation might be more appropriate. This term is commonly used to describe the processes of multicultural adjustment through which African-American and Afro-Caribbean societies were created, but can also provide a useful perspective on the material culture of the Roman provinces (Webster Chapter 3, this volume).

The potential of approaches that address the contexts in which art would have been viewed and interpreted is clear (for example, Price 1984; Hannestad 1986; Zanker 1988; Elsner 1995, 1996, 1998; Onians 1999; Scott 2000). The integrated study of art, archaeology, and history can provide new insights into the relationship between art and society, and such approaches offer the opportunity for 'decentered histories' of Roman art (Kampen 1995, 378; Elsner 1998, 117–26). As Mattingly suggests, there are important insights to be gained if 'we take a more pluralistic view of the experience of the past and accept that history is invariably subject to multiple readings' (1997, 20). The vast quantity of carefully catalogued material available means that we can now consider a whole range of new and exciting issues concerning the relationship between art and society in the Roman provinces.

This book has two main aims. The first is to ask how far, and in what ways, the above themes have been addressed in traditional and contemporary approaches to art in the Roman provinces. The second is to highlight the new directions in which our discipline is currently moving through a series of case studies on Provincial art. The volume has a strong focus on Britain and Gaul, because the analysis and critique of Romanisation has become a major topic for research and debate amongst scholars of these provinces over the past ten

years. Despite this geographical bias, the papers presented here both highlight the growing recognition that new perspectives are needed, and point to some of the ways in which current work is reshaping our understanding of the functions and meanings of art in the Roman world. The viewpoints of the scholars are sometimes outspoken, and often contradictory. However, the multivocality of this volume is a sign not of a fragmented discipline but of a vibrant one. There is no one way forward in the study of provincial art, and we offer here a wide-ranging selection of the debates and approaches that are currently informing the discipline.