Ancient Art and Its Historiography

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Introduction

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“May you live in interesting times.”
Apocryphal Chinese curse

The essays in this volume examine a broad range of historiographic issues relating to the visual arts of the ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome. In the study of ancient art, historiographic topics have usually been narrowly construed in terms of disciplinary or institutional history or the biography of scholars; in consequence, historiography tends to be regarded as of marginal interest and, however interesting and informative it may be, as having only limited relevance for the solution of current problems. The present essays demonstrate that historiographic concerns can in fact have direct bearing on the treatment of specific questions in the field of ancient art and can contribute significantly to current praxis. In other words, subjects such as the development of a particular style or the interpretation of a particular category of artifact benefit from considering the way in which the history of art has been and continues to be written.

The last quarter of the twentieth century saw changes in the humanistic disciplines that have led, depending on one's point of view, either to their reinvigoration or to their imminent extinction. The changes involved both new thematic concerns and new methodologies. Gender, ethnicity, and power emerged as major topics, and the theory and practice of interpretation became a central focus of investigation. If there is a common denominator among the new approaches, it is arguably the willingness of scholars to question the nature and capacity of our means
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of understanding. Seen in this light, the innovations are neither completely new nor utterly malign or beneficial; rather, they represent the latest episode in the cycle of confidence and doubt in human abilities that is a fundamental characteristic of the Western intellectual tradition.

The study of ancient art occupies a position within current academic structures that may be characterized as interesting, in the sardonic sense of that word as it appears in the apocryphal Chinese curse.¹ The subject occupies no consistent or secure place in the disciplinary and institutional frameworks that shape teaching and research. One might imagine that the study of ancient art provides an obvious opportunity for useful communication between art history and other disciplines, but too often it is effectively relegated to academic isolation.

Although many standard art-historical textbooks take ancient art into account, some departments of art history exclude the subject from their curricula, seeing it as the province of fields such as archaeology or classical studies. The exclusion is curious in view of the growing commitment of art historians to the inclusion of non-Western art in the discipline, to the critical scrutiny of Western culture, and to multicultural issues in a wide sense. The study of ancient art has much to contribute to all these areas of concern. It is not restricted to the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome: Egypt and the ancient Near East have long been and continue to be important subjects in the field. They offer the opportunity to study cultures that not only are emphatically non-Western but also had a decisive effect on the Greeks and Romans. The latter cultures are the foundation of the “Classical tradition” that is a central concern of both well-established and new approaches to the study of post-antique Western art and would therefore seem to call for formal curricular recognition.

The particular difficulties inherent in the study of ancient art have surely contributed to its estrangement from art history in the larger sense. That the fundamental elements of these civilizations – social organization, religious beliefs, and the like – are often manifestly alien to or subtly different from those of modern cultures makes it difficult to pursue the level of analysis that is customarily undertaken in the history of the art of more familiar and accessible eras and societies. Furthermore, the fragmentary and often poorly documented condition of the monumental
and textual record of ancient cultures makes interpretation on any level difficult for all but specialists. Despite the growing emphasis on contextual approaches in the history of art, the combination of fragmentation and strangeness has encouraged the perception that the major contributions to be made by the study of ancient art are limited to disciplines focussed on the specific cultures in question.

The fault does not lie completely on the side of art history. The institutional structures and intellectual convictions of related fields often contribute to isolating the study of ancient art. The subject is frequently taught in departments dedicated to the language and literature of specific cultures. A student in such a program who chooses to specialize in the art of a particular ancient culture might never be asked to undertake work in other fields of art beyond a superficial level, if at all. Another source of intellectual isolation is the failure fully to integrate art history within the disciplines involved in the study of particular ancient cultures. Art history is not inevitably part of the training in such fields at either the undergraduate or the graduate level. While the expectation that students of ancient culture will be able to approach the subject from a broad understanding is reflected in the existence of programs that draw faculty from several fields or departments, the current bricolage of academic structures has not been entirely successful in providing an adequate basis for the kind of interdisciplinary work that has emerged as the desired standard for research in the humanities. A student of ancient art is customarily expected to attain competence in the relevant languages and literatures, but a student specializing in Assyriology or Greek literature might never be required to take a course in art. Despite the commitment to crossing disciplinary boundaries, it has yet to be widely recognized within fields dedicated to the cultures of antiquity that the study of art merits more than casual attention. Even now, the legacy of certain nineteenth-century models of "Philologie" can be detected in the persistence of the attitude expressed by E. R. Curtius: "Pindars Gedichte zu verstehen, kostet Kopfzerbrechen; der Parthenonfries nicht." ("To understand Pindar’s poems requires severe mental effort – to understand the Parthenon frieze does not.")”

The problems attaching to what might be called the disciplinary dignity of the study of ancient art similarly emerge in its relationship to
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archaeology, another common institutional base for the subject. The rubric “archaeology” that is applied to the study of the physical remains of ancient civilizations includes approaches that are far from hospitable to the study of art. A wide gulf separates those whose work is grounded in the tradition of classical archaeology and those whose conception of the field (often orthographically distinguished as “archeology”) derives from anthropology.³ The gulf has not significantly diminished since Anthony Snodgrass addressed the situation in 1987.⁴ It is “art” as a concept that is problematic.⁵ For many anthropologically based archaeologists, the category of “art” has no place in the scientific study of social processes through material culture. The category of “art” also presents problems for classical archaeology: the privileging of certain categories of artifacts as “art” is widely recognized as the basis for the destruction of archaeological contexts through looting to feed both private and public collections, and the study of such “art” is seen as compromised by its long involvement with the exploitation of cultural heritage.⁶

For all these reasons, the study of ancient art exists uneasily in a disciplinary no-man’s-land. Within art history it holds a marginal position; within textually based disciplines it is seen as irrelevant; and within many forms of archaeology it is variously condemned as effete, exclusive, destructive, or simply lacking validity.

The unenviable isolation of ancient art is ironic in light of the history of the field. The kind of “Altertumswissenschaft” conceived and developed by scholars such as Friedrich August Wolf and August Böckh in the early nineteenth century was deliberately inclusive in terms of evidence and method, designed to achieve an integrated understanding of the phenomena of classical antiquity – interdisciplinary, it might be said, before its time.⁷ Although the model was not universally accepted and was adversely affected by institutional pressures toward ever-narrowing specialization, the need to deploy every available scrap of evidence, textual or material, to begin to make sense of the shattered remains of ancient cultures imposed a certain degree of readiness to cross disciplinary boundaries. That the study of ancient art has reflected destructive aspects of its social and intellectual matrices such as nationalism, imperialism, and racism is beyond doubt. It is also clear, however, that the wholesale condemnation
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of the scholarship rests on shaky ground and, furthermore, that much of the foundation for the current scholarly appreciation of diverse cultures is owed to this field of inquiry. The study of art has been fundamental to some of the most profound interpretations and reinterpretations of ancient cultures, and in some traditions of archaeology—the Italian tradition is particularly striking in this respect—art remains a central concern.

The question of the relationship between past and current scholarship is especially pressing in the study of ancient art, a field in which primary sources such as excavation reports and catalogues never lose their documentary value and in which the exhaustive review of secondary scholarship is still widely considered to be a sine qua non of any new study. The insistence on extensive accounts of the "state of the problem" as part of the apparatus of scholarship might give the impression that historiographic awareness within the field is acute, but such is not the case. The convention of surveying the history of specific problems encourages the evaluation of previous scholarship in terms of progress (or lack of it) toward a single "correct" solution; it is not designed to take account of the profound differences in historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts that made particular approaches or conclusions possible. There is, of course, no shortage of synthetic histories of scholarship that do consider such issues, often with considerable sophistication, but only rarely are they directly useful in treatments of specific questions. There is room for better integration of historiographic and general concerns; that is to say, the study of ancient art needs to be approached as part of intellectual history. That it is desirable to understand why we think as we do about ancient art, why we frame the questions we ask in the way we do, and why we adopt the methods we use is a modest assertion, but it can lead to surprising and productive consequences.

The idea for this collection of essays arose from two panels organized by the editors for the annual meetings of the College Art Association in 1997 and 2000 and from the responses to those sessions. The contributions treat topics ranging from Mesopotamia to contemporary cultural theory. They have in common the principle that the study of ancient art cannot be satisfactorily undertaken without consideration of the historical, cultural, institutional, and intellectual contexts that underlie past
and present approaches. The collection is far from comprehensive in terms of geography, chronology, or methodology, but it is intended not to bring the consideration of historiographic issues to a close, but rather to encourage discussion.

In her essay “From Whores to Hierodules: The Historiographic Invention of Mesopotamian Female Sex Professionals,” Julia Assante examines Mesopotamian reliefs with erotic scenes that have long been interpreted in terms of sacred prostitution. She shows that there is no evidence to support the existence of such a practice in antiquity and demonstrates the origin of the idea in nineteenth-century social and anthropological thought. Her study does more than correct a long-standing misapprehension. By clarifying the roots of this sensational episode in the long history of misinterpretation of the ancient Near East, she illustrates the bond between scholarship and its social context. The myth of the sacred prostitute is no less revealing of the situation in which it arose than Winckelmann’s wishful invention of an ancient Greece naked and gay; in both cases, the interpretation of antiquity was also a means of formulating social commentary that resonated even into popular culture. Behind the Mesopotamia evoked by J. G. Frazer in The Golden Bough loomed contemporary English realities such as child prostitution, the subject of a notorious exposé in 1885 by W. T. Stead, “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.” Assante shows how a complex of nineteenth-century moral preoccupations has had lasting consequences for modern interpretations of ancient Mesopotamia.

Jacob Isager continues his groundbreaking analyses of Pliny the Elder, whose Natural History became in the Renaissance the model for historical treatments of art. It is thanks to Isager’s research that we have come to understand that Pliny’s treatment of the visual arts, far from being a “transparent” documentary source, is in fact a complex social and moral commentary on his own society. Nonetheless, Pliny’s categories and analytic structures, together with the facts he gives about artists and their works, were taken over by post-antique writers on art and have continued to shape even present-day histories of Western art. In “Humanissima ars: Evaluation and Devaluation in Pliny, Vasari, and Baden,” Isager explores the accumulated traditions of ancient, Renaissance, and post-Renaissance
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European scholarship in the study of classical art. He offers as a case study the history of ancient Greek painting produced in 1825 by Torkel Baden, a Danish professor of fine arts, who used Pliny as a direct model. Baden’s work is especially interesting because, despite its pedigree as a product of the Danish Academy of Fine Arts, it does not belong to the first rank of significant scholarship but offers instead an opportunity to examine levels of art-historical praxis that are often lost to view.

The complexity of the post-antique adoption of Pliny’s conceptual structures is explored in Kenneth Lapatin’s essay “The Fate of Plate and Other Precious Materials: Toward a Historiography of Ancient Greek Minor (?) Arts.” The title alludes to the controversial reevaluation by Michael Vickers and David Gill of the high value assigned to Greek pottery since the eighteenth century at the expense of vessels executed in precious metals. Lapatin focusses on the problematic concept of “minor arts,” examining the contrast between the great value placed on luxury production in antiquity and the contrastingly deflating treatment it has received in consequence of its modern scholarly status as “Kleinkunst.” He explains the discrepancy in terms of historiographic conventions going back to the Renaissance adoption of particular Plinian structures: the treatment of the visual arts by medium, and the dominant theme of the evolution of naturalistic representation. The mythologization of the Greeks as “pure and simple” also encouraged disrespect for sumptuous work, and the archaeological provenance of a great deal of such production outside the Greek heartland further contributed to its modern devaluation. The discoveries in recent years of spectacular artifacts in precious materials thus lack an adequate basis for interpretation – hence the proliferation of essentially interchangeable museum blockbusters that showcase ancient “treasures.” Lapatin examines both the material and textual evidence for luxury production and suggests ways in which it might better be integrated into the history of classical art.

The history of Greek art has long been written on the model, again derived from Pliny, of an organic, linear stylistic evolution that culminates in the achievement of classical naturalism, only to collapse as the Hellenistic era begins a long period in which the earlier styles were mixed, matched, and manipulated in a way that was castigated as artistic
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“decline.” In “‘Der Stil der Nachahmer’: A Brief Historiography of Stylistic Retrospection,” Mark D. Fullerton offers a critique of the organic model of stylistic development and its attendant categories and terminology. He points to the employment already in the fifth century B.C. of specific styles in connection with specific subjects, questioning the conception of such appropriations as “retrospection” and suggesting new ways to approach them. He recognizes the persistence of analytic models that are clearly inadequate to the monumental corpus as a serious problem for the field of ancient art.

The study of Greek clothing is generally approached as a purely archaeological problem restricted to identifying the types of garments that are represented and matching them with textual evidence for their ancient designations. Mireille M. Lee, in “The Peplos and the ‘Dorian Question,’” shows here that one of the most familiar garments in the scholarly repertory, the “peplos,” was not so much discovered as brought into existence in connection with attempts to define the “Dorian” element of Greek culture. The distinction between Doric and Ionic styles of dress was initiated by Carl August Böttiger at the end of the eighteenth century and adopted by Karl Otfried Müller, whose work on the Darians opened the door to what Eduard Will called the “deformation” of German historical thought toward racist principles.14 Franz Studniczka in 1886 produced what has remained the standard definition of the “peplos” as the “Dorian chiton,” a formulation grounded in his conception of Indo-European culture and significantly at odds with archaeological and textual evidence. Lee demonstrates the way in which overarching theories can affect ostensibly positivist approaches.

Mary Beard brings to life the atmosphere of British classical studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in her essay “Mrs. Arthur Strong, Morelli, and the Troopers of Cortés.” Vivid contemporary sources illuminate institutional history and the personalities of leading figures in the emergence of classical archaeology as a modern scholarly discipline. She focusses on the contributions made by Eugénie Sellers Strong to the study of ancient art, which have been overshadowed by the productions of her contemporaries. Strong was, however, formidable in her own right, and her work was particularly significant for introducing continental,
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especially German, scholarship to the English-speaking world. Although her activities in the Roman sphere are now better remembered, her work also had an important effect on the study of Greek art. Beard shows that the introduction of Morellian method, regularly assigned in histories of the field to J. D. Beazley, should instead be credited to Strong. The essay sheds new light on the culture of scholarship and asks important questions about the intellectual pedigrees that are the foundation of its history.

Joanne Monteagle Stearns examines the controversy over Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*, which continues, more than a decade after the first volume appeared, to generate opposing claims about the moral and epistemological position of classical studies. In “Jargon, Authenticity, and the Nature of Cultural History-Writing: Not Out of Africa and the Black Athena Debate,” Stearns addresses the fundamental historiographic issues that underlie the controversy. Classical antiquity, as recovered through the practice of writing history, holds a normative position in Western culture; its centrality demands that we continually examine both the means by which it is interpreted and the use that is made of it. Beginning with Leopold von Ranke’s endlessly debated proposition that the task of the historian is to tell “what actually happened,” Stearns examines how thinkers ranging from Adorno to DuBois have wrestled with the problems of authority and authenticity in the historical enterprise. In place of the accusatory polemic that has characterized much of the present controversy, she proposes constructive ways to explore the contested position of classical culture in the contemporary world.

We do indeed live in interesting times, and there is no reason to exclude from our specialized studies the intellectual challenges that surround us. A century ago the pioneering and now classic studies of ancient art had much in common with the wider intellectual agendas of their time; the investigations of artistic form pursued by Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl, Julius Lange, Alexander Conze, and Emanuel Löwy were no less concerned with uncovering fundamental principles than was contemporary work in physics on the structure of matter, and studies of ancient art made full, even extravagant, use of the discoveries of anthropology and psychology that promised to elucidate the basic processes of human experience.
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At the start of the new millennium, we are no longer so optimistic that we can reach such comprehensive understanding, or even so willing to see such a goal as valid. The search for irreducible truths about human experience continues in new forms like the Human Genome Project, but it is balanced by a widespread distrust of the very concept of such universals that finds scholarly expression in the investigation of cultural forms and norms as contingent rather than inevitable. Our view of ancient art is further shaped by our awareness that the interpretation of the past has been implicated in the establishment and abuse of social authority; our specialized scholarship finds itself challenged by questions of who has the right to undertake such interpretation when the stakes are so high. In this book we express the conviction that the study of ancient art is not an isolated pursuit, but a vital part of intellectual history that is not without consequence for the present and the future.

NOTES
2. E. R. Curtius, Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter (Bern, 1948) 23; trans. W. R. Trask, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (Bollingen Series 36; New York, 1953) 15. Part of the context of the remark is a methodological debate over Wissenschaft and Geschichte. Curtius continues: "Dasselbe Verhältnis besteht zwischen Dante und den Kathedralen usw. Die Bilderwissenschaft ist müheilos, verglichen mit der Bücherwissenschaft." ("The same relation obtains between Dante and the cathedrals, and so on. Knowing pictures is easy compared with knowing books.") Noting the offense taken by art historians at these remarks (which appeared first in 1947 in the journal Merkur), Curtius (1948, 24 n. 1; 1953, 16 n. 11) clarifies his position: "[W]ährend Platons Schriften verloren, so könnte man aus der griechischen Plastik nicht rekonstruieren. Der Logos kann sich nur im Wort aussprechen." ("Were Plato's writings lost, we could not reconstruct them from Greek plastic art. The Logos can express itself only in words.") He calls (1948, 24 n. 1) for the reconsideration of the position of art history within the humanities ("Die Stellung der Kunstgeschichte innerhalb der Geisteswissenschaften scheint mir einer Revision zu bedürfen.") For the nineteenth-century situation, see infra n. 7.
3. See, e.g., P. Courbin, Qu'est-ce que l'archéologie? Essai sur la nature de la recherche archéologique (Paris, 1982); trans. P. Bahn, What is Archaeology? An
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6. See, e.g., M. Vickers and D. Gill, *Artful Crafts. Ancient Greek Silverware and Pottery* (Oxford, 1994; new ed., 1996) 192–193 for the effects of the concept of “Art (with a capital ‘A’)” on the study of Greek pottery and Cycladic figurines. For the latter, see D. W. J. Gill and C. Chippindale, “Material and Intellectual Consequences of Esteem for Cycladic Figures,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 97 (1993) 601–602: “Connoisseurship we define as esteem for, and appreciation of, beautiful artifacts, especially those that seem to fall into the domain of the fine and decorative arts. Archaeology we define as the study of past societies by means of their surviving material remains. . . . For the most part the two concerns have gone harmoniously together in the hybrid discipline of Classical art history (so often effectively equated with Classical archaeology), which has been central to Classical learning over the last centuries. But they are distinct studies, and their distinct concerns and priorities have distinct consequences.”


9. B. S. Ridgway has further reminded me of the important place of sculpture in Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli’s Marxist analysis of ancient societies. See Mark D. Fullerton’s essay in this volume for Bianchi Bandinelli’s contribution to the study of style.

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11. "Ripeness is All: Metaphors of the Classical Norm in Ancient Art" (1997); "Same As It Never Was: Issues in the Historiography of Ancient Art" (2000).


13. Vickers and Gill, Artful Crafts (supra n. 6) 77, chapter 3: "The Fate of Plate."

