Introduction: Approaching Hellenistic and Roman Ideal Sculpture

Ancient and Modern Perspectives

Entering any major city of the Roman Empire, a traveler encountered within its walls a panorama of gods and heroes. In the wealthy and well-preserved, but by no means atypical, city of Brescia in Northern Italy, for instance, a visitor to the city's monumental public spaces saw a martial yet sensuous Victoria in the forum, an acrolithic Minerva in the Capitolium, and Jupiter Ammon as architectural decoration in the theater (figs. 1–3).[1] Arriving at the market, the traveler handled the same images on coins he exchanged for goods; visiting friends in the luxurious townhouses of the city's residential quarter, he saw the gods as marble statuettes in gardens, as vivid yet durable mosaics adorning floors, and as brightly colored and finely detailed wall paintings (figs. 4, 5). And as he left the city, he saw them yet again on the markers for tombs. For the ancient viewer, these images of the gods were omnipresent; they permeated the public and private spaces of the empire as they do the rooms of modern museums.

In Brescia, and throughout the Roman Empire from Syria to Spain, viewers recognized these divine and mythological figures not only through their display contexts but also through their familiar visual formats and styles, inspired by Greek models in monumental painting and statuary. For Roman audiences, these familiar and indeed self-consciously retrospective images were not denigrated as derivative copies. Instead, as I will argue, they were appreciated as sophisticated and allusive works of art which explicitly acknowledged their place within a revered tradition. The divine figures analyzed here did not simply follow but referenced, appropriated, and transformed their Greek models. Their complex visual rhetoric rendered them both recognizable and authoritative, fitting ornaments for the eclectic, aesthetically sophisticated society of the Roman Empire. These images of the gods – often monumental in scale,

1. Statue of Victoria, Brescia, likely Augustan, with wings attached in the Flavian period. Brescia, Museo S. Giulia MR 369. Photo courtesy Musei Civici d'Arte e Storia di Brescia.

expertly crafted, prominently displayed throughout the empire, and far from uniform – were central to Roman visual culture.

This book takes as its subject these Roman divine statues and their relationship to Greek art. In so doing, it addresses a topic that has been the focus of much recent scholarship. Whereas earlier art historians described the sculptures as mechanical copies of lost Greek masterpieces,[2] more recently Romanists have questioned the assumptions underlying this approach, with its exclusive focus on *Meisterforschung*.[3] And they have suggested that the most highly valued

2. Head of an acrolithic Minerva statue, Capitolium, Brescia, first century A.D. Brescia, Museo S. Giulia MR 2. Photo courtesy Musei Civici d'Arte e Storia di Brescia.

statues in the Roman world were not exact copies of Greek models but emulative yet creative "Roman originals."[4]

The new scholarship has served as a useful corrective to earlier approaches. It is fundamental to my research, which both builds on and extends the revisionists' analyses of Roman divine statuary. At the same time, this book addresses certain limitations in the new scholarship, which have become apparent as it has developed over the past thirty years. In particular, I offer an account that is more historical, more extensive in its geographical scope, and more focused on the reception, rather than the creation, of Roman divine sculpture.

My analysis of Roman divine sculpture also has significant broader implications. In particular, it enhances our understanding of the process by which Classical art was transformed from a period and regional style (roughly that of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. in Greece) into a semiotic one, evocative of high culture and the authority of the past. Art historians have long acknowledged the significant *result* of this transformation: the visual language of classicism, which has been central to the Western artistic tradition, and remains so even today. But they have paid insufficient attention to the *process* by which it was achieved, and to the implications of this transformation for

3. Head of Jupiter Ammon used as architectural decoration, theater, Brescia, first century A.D. Brescia, Museo S. Giula MR 3053. Photo courtesy Musei Civici d'Arte e Storia di Brescia.

ancient patrons and viewers. This book redresses the balance by examining the historical evolution of a major sculptural type, known as the Aphrodite of Capua, and by using this as a case study through which to analyze a series of broader artistic receptions/transformations; these include, most notably, the transformation of Greek art in Rome, of metropolitan art in the provinces, and of pagan art in the newly Christian empire. First, however, it is useful to look a little more closely at both modern and ancient approaches to classicism.

COPYING OR EMULATION? MODERN APPROACHES TO ANCIENT IDEAL SCULPTURE

Let us take the question of modern approaches first. My focus in this book is on a particular aspect of Roman classicism – the deliberate citation and transformation of Greek models in mythological and divine statuary, so-called ideal sculpture – within a Roman framework, in order to reevaluate the connections between sculptural style, visual format, and historical meaning. Such a study is based on the assumption that Roman ideal sculpture is

worth examining. What justifies that assumption? The first answer must be that, as the description of Brescia earlier suggests, these divine and mythological figures permeated Roman material culture; without them, our view of Roman art is skewed. Second, because these works alluded to and adapted Greek prototypes, they offer a useful corrective to preconceived notions of Roman artistic production, with the long-standing emphasis on veristic portraiture, continuous narrative, and so on.[5] They challenge us to construct a broader and more inclusive narrative of Roman art, which accommodates both formally innovative works such as the frontal, linear, and hierarchical fourth-century panels from the Arch of Constantine, and deliberately retrospective creations such as the bronze Victoria from the Brescian forum.

4. Statuette of Aphrodite used as domestic decoration, Brescia, first to second century A.D. Brescia, Museo S. Giulia ST 17764. Photo courtesy Musei Civici d'Arte e Storia di Brescia.

Even if one grants the assumption that Roman ideal sculpture is worth investigating, it remains to be argued that the reception of a particular Greek sculptural type in Roman art is a valuable topic. Earlier studies of Roman ideal sculpture have offered a variety of approaches, examining for instance statues conforming to a particular period style (e.g., classicizing, or Pergamene "baroque")[6] or those common in certain contexts (villas, theaters, baths).[7] More recently, Roman writings concerning imitation and emulation have been examined, and their conclusions applied to art.[8]

My work builds on the conclusions of these scholars, but it provides a different perspective; it is the first monographic analysis of a Classical statue-type throughout all media and over time, addressing historical evolution and Roman adaptation for context rather than adherence to an original.[9] Although the specific conclusions arrived at here are of course valid only for the Aphrodite of Capua type, on their own they pose a challenge to the long-standing assumption that such works simply copy Greek masterpieces; at the same time, they indicate closer ties between the Greek model and Roman reworkings of it than most revisionist scholars would admit. My research thus calls into question the evidentiary basis for both absolutist positions, while pointing the way forward

toward a more nuanced interpretation of ideal sculpture as both retrospective and innovative in character.

In its scope as well as its conclusions, this book is conceived of as complementing – but also addressing the limitations of – recent research on Roman ideal sculpture. To begin with, it offers a counter to the ahistorical approach that has become one of the most significant limitations of recent scholarship.[10] Such an approach is problematic because it tends to "flatten out" the differences among historical periods by drawing indiscriminately on chronologically disparate sources; so, too, scholars have often neglected the Hellenistic era, a critical period in the transition from Greece to Rome. This book begins with the Hellenistic era, and then traces the development of classicism via a series of chapters focused on the early principate, the Antonine era, and late antiquity. Its organization thus allows for a more in-depth understanding of the contributions of each era, and in addition – as each reworking of past forms results in loss as well as gain – an appreciation of the selective and interpretive processes at work in the evolving visual language of classicism.

Just as scholars have paid insufficient attention to historical development, so, too, they have neglected geographical diversity. There has been little analysis of the differences between copying in the Latin West – where it involved the importation of a foreign tradition – and in the Greek East, where it proclaimed continuity with a revered past.[11] Furthermore, scholars have focused primarily on sculptural production in Italy, and to a lesser extent Greece and Asia Minor, as though these areas were characteristic of the empire as a whole.[12] My book has a broader geographical scope and more extensive analysis of particular local contexts. I draw on monuments from the provincial periphery as well as the metropolitan center in order to show how Greek iconographies and styles became part of Roman mass culture. And I demonstrate that the achievement of Roman artists lay precisely in their ability to create flexible and resonant images that spoke to an empire-wide audience.

A final limitation of the new scholarship is that it is still largely conceived of from the point of view of the artist; the focus has therefore been on visual innovation and the artist's creative role.[13] My emphasis is instead on the responses of patrons and viewers. This is particularly appropriate for an artistic system like Rome's, which was patron-driven and focused on communication. It is also helpful as it deemphasizes questions of artistic creativity, while highlighting instead processes of reception and interpretation.[14] After all, it is clear that Roman divine sculptures departed from their Greek models, but the most striking changes came in transformations of their broader contexts – as images based on Classical cult statues were commissioned to decorate Roman baths, homes, and funerary monuments – rather than in minute alterations of visual formulae. My approach thus permits an evaluation of both the innovative and the traditional aspects of these sculptures, that is grounded in the historical realities of the period.

5. Mosaic of Dionysos and panther, triclinium, House of Dionysos Brescia, second century A.D. Brescia, Museo S. Giulia. Photo courtesy Musei Civici d'Arte e Storia di Brescia.

This focus on reception also offers a useful complement to earlier scholarship on the visual language of Roman art. I am strongly indebted to this vein of scholarship, particularly Tonio Hölscher's seminal *Römisches Bildsprache als semantische System* of 1987.[15] But whereas Hölscher sought to articulate the overarching structure of the Roman language of images, I highlight instead the workings of that language in particular instances; my approach focuses on *parole*, not *langue*. And I pay close attention to a question Hölscher rarely raises: How and to what extent did viewers *understand* the complex visual language of Roman art? As reception theorists have often argued, the intended meaning of a work of art can only be transferred effectively when artist and audience have a

shared cultural background.[16] But in the immense, heterogeneous world of the Roman Empire, this was not always the case. My book traces the development of an empire-wide visual culture, from its origins in the Augustan period to its culmination in the Antonine era, as well as its transformation in late antiquity. And it allows us to appreciate how the visual arts *worked* in imperial Rome, as they helped to create the cultural values necessary for their correct reception.

Because the selection of material for this book is admittedly unorthodox, a brief discussion of its parameters is necessary here. Earlier treatments of Roman ideal sculpture have frequently sought to distinguish among "true copies," "adaptations," "eclectic combinations of several types," and so on; the goal has been to reconstruct lost Greek originals,[17] or alternatively to recognize those works that are most thoroughly Roman in character.[18] My aims and methods in this book are different. The goal is to illuminate the workings of retrospection within ancient artistic practice: to show how, and why, Hellenistic and Roman artists looked to the past. My method is in consequence to cast a wide net, in order to demonstrate the variety, attractiveness, and art historical significance of these forms based on earlier prototypes. In so doing, I have taken a deliberately broad view of "ideal sculpture" as a genre.

The term "ideal sculpture" (*Idealplastik* in German) was coined to refer to Greek-style images of gods and mythological figures in Roman art, without prejudging their degree of indebtedness to particular Classical models.[19] This seems to me a useful methodological position, given that, in my experience, the images need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, taking into account factors such as the style and iconography of the work in question, its function, and the circumstances of its commissioning and reception. However, in practice, the range of monuments included under the rubric of ideal sculpture can be quite limited; the focus tends to be on the overlifesize public statues that ornamented the great architectural ensembles of the Roman Empire, for instance, baths, theaters, and amphitheaters. Because this book aims to demonstrate the pervasiveness of classicizing sculpture in the Hellenistic and Roman world, it has a more extensive scope, covering not only public statuary but also coins and gems, sarcophagi and historical reliefs, domestic statuettes and religious votives. "A catalogue is an argument," and the argument here is for inclusiveness. This seems to me to present the most effective challenge to earlier modes of thinking about these familiar, yet insufficiently appreciated, works of art.

RETROSPECTION AND TRANSFORMATION IN ROMAN CULTURE: THE EVIDENCE OF THE ANCIENT LITERARY SOURCES

Although my approach to classicizing art is intended to complement and challenge modern scholarship on this issue, it has also been formed by readings in the ancient literary sources. This is hardly unprecedented, as previous scholars

of Roman ideal sculpture have frequently drawn on these texts. Most often, they have seen the texts as articulating a fixed and hierarchical system, beginning with *interpretatio* (literal translation of a particular work), and proceeding through *imitatio* (free rendering of the same) to *aemulatio* (a new creation inspired by multiple prototypes).[20] This approach has proved illuminating, but in my view somewhat misrepresents the flexible and contingent nature of the Roman use of Greek precedents. It furthermore tends to devalue precise copying while praising more "original" reworkings of past models, in a manner corresponding to modern tastes rather than ancient realities.[21] And, finally, it assumes that the practices documented for literary artists held for sculptors and painters also.[22]

The discussion here offers a different approach to the question, as a result of my focus on the reception rather than the creation of Roman ideal sculpture.[23] Setting aside the question of artistic practice, I use the written sources instead to illuminate the mentalities of ancient patrons and viewers. These texts give us a sense of the cultural predispositions viewers might bring to the analysis of works of art; in so doing, they reveal a system of values very different from our own. They consequently merit further investigation along these lines. The discussion here will focus first on Roman educational methods; I then turn to some of the different retrospective styles that permeated Roman literature, and were parsed, critiqued, and continually reevaluated in sophisticated and self-conscious passages of literary criticism. Finally, I analyze briefly an exemplary sculpture, the eponymous "Aphrodite of Capua," to show how an evaluation in the nuanced terms derived from Roman writers can illuminate the image more fully than can the characteristic modern approaches.

Roman methods of education, with their stress on the imitation of approved models, conditioned viewers from their earliest years to appreciate works of art which emulated and adapted canonical forms. As Raffaella Cribiore notes, "[t]he principle of imitation inspired ancient education from beginning to end."[24] Young children began by copying the alphabet, then gained familiarity with words, as well as handwriting practice, through the imitation of model sentences.[25] As they continued through the educational process, they learned famous literary passages by heart – Homer was a perennial favorite, although Quintilian favored orations and histories[26] – or paraphrased them, for instance turning poetry into prose.[27] So, too, for the Romans, translation from Greek literature was a popular exercise, initiated at an early stage but advantageous even to those long out of school. Pliny the Younger, for instance, recommended it to his friend Fuscus Salinator as a fitting activity for his retirement, and claimed that he would gain from the Greeks "a unique and brilliant vocabulary, an abundance of rhetorical figures, great power of explication, and beyond this, through the imitation of the best, a similar faculty of invention."[28]

These imitative exercises were complemented by others that, while taking their inspiration from past models, allowed the student greater freedom.

Aspiring young rhetoricians, for instance, might be assigned to compose an oration on a familiar topic such as the sacrifice of Iphigenaia, or one which advanced counterarguments to those profferred in a speech by Xenophon, some five centuries before.[29] The goal in this case was not close replication of the paradigm, but a more competitive revision of it; the later writer was urged constantly "to compare the two, and to consider sedulously what is more appropriate in yours and in his."[30]

These pedagogical methods encouraged educated Romans to judge works of art by methods very different from those in use today. They placed much less emphasis than we do on the artist's originality *tout court*, and much more on his ability to make use of earlier models in an allusive and inventive fashion. A comment of the Younger Seneca is particularly explicit but typical; in a letter, he urged his friend Lucilius to treat a favorite poetical topic, the description of Mt. Etna, and remarked that "[t]he last comer has the best situation. He finds the words to hand; differently arranged, they take on a new look."[31]

Comments such as Seneca's help to explain the central role of translation from the Greek within Latin literary texts. This practice can be traced back to the origins of Latin literature with Livius Andronicus's *Odusia*, and recurred in for instance the comedies of Plautus and Terence, Cicero and Varro's versions of Aratus, and Catullus's adaptation of Sappho. Such literary translations often deliberately cited their models, for instance in comic prologues;[32] nonetheless, as they turned Greek into Latin these authors radically adapted their predecessors' terms, customs, and *mores* to fit their new Roman circumstances. So Livius Andronicus began by invoking the Camenae, Italic water goddesses, instead of the Muses, and Plautus's impecunious young men were compelled by love to violate the characteristic Roman virtue of *pietas*.[33] Roman literary critics were highly sensitive to such translations/Romanizations; the locus classicus is Horace's *Ars Poetica*, where the author promised that "[t]he common material will become your private property if you do not . . . anxiously render word for word, a (too-) faithful translator . . . "[34] Horace's comment is revealing not only for its discussion of methods, but especially for his explicit enunciation of the goal of such translation: the transformation of what is familiar into a characteristic example of the writer's own work.

To push the idea of translation further, one might even adduce as such a central *topos* of Roman literary originality, the claim that the author was the first to adapt a particular Greek genre or meter into Latin. In preserved literary works, this claim can be traced back at least to Ennius,[35] and, as Gordon Williams noted, it was used subsequently by "Lucretius, Laevius, Virgil (both in *Eclogues* and *Georgics*), Horace, Propertius, Manilius, Ovid, and even the unassuming Phaedrus."[36] For instance, in *Ode* 3.30, Horace boasted that he was the first to adapt Aeolian song to Italian measures; he took great pride in this achievement, part of his claim to literary immortality in a poem that began, "I have built a monument more lasting than bronze."[37] The topos,