

Art and Rhetoric in Roman Culture

Rhetoric was fundamental to education and to cultural aspiration in the Greek and Roman worlds. It was one of the key aspects of antiquity that slipped under the line between the ancient world and Christianity erected by the early Church in late antiquity. Ancient rhetorical theory is obsessed with examples and discussions drawn from visual material. This book mines this rich seam of theoretical analysis from within Roman culture to present an internalist model for some aspects of how the Romans understood, made and appreciated their art. The understanding of public monuments like the Arch of Titus or Trajan's Column or of imperial statuary, domestic wall painting, funerary altars and sarcophagi, as well as of intimate items like children's dolls, is greatly enriched by being placed in relevant rhetorical contexts created by the Roman world.

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Art and Rhetoric in Roman Culture

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-00071-1 — Art and Rhetoric in Roman Culture
 Edited by Jaś Elsner, Michel Meyer
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107000711

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First published 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Art and rhetoric in Roman culture / [edited by] Jaś Elsner.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-107-00071-1 (Hardback)

1. Art, Roman. 2. Communication in art. 3. Rhetoric, Ancient. I. Elsner, Jaś editor of compilation.

N5763.A78 2014

709.37—dc23 2014007625

ISBN 978-1-107-00071-1 Hardback

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Preface

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Why a volume on Roman art that focuses on rhetoric? At first sight, the idea may seem awkward, because Roman art has rarely been seen as specifically or exceptionally rhetorical by contrast with other kinds of art, such as Greek. Yet the visual culture of Rome was a form of rhetoric designed to convey *romanitas*, grandeur, *imperium*, Roman virtues, and the legitimacy of the social differences that had been as prevalent as they were contested from the advent of the Republic. An *imperator* or a general had to display his victories, and he did this in various monuments erected for that purpose; a patrician had to show the nobility of his ancestry through *imagines* in sculpture or painting; a virtuous patron needed to exemplify the common virtues found in mythology, usually borrowed and adapted from Greek myth, through the frescoes on the walls of his house, for instance, or in the reliefs of his sarcophagus.

Roman art is a form of rhetoric because there can be no empire without the discourses that approve its legitimacy and justify the differences upon which it rests; without the visual affirmation of grandeur and majesty, victory and success with the statues of rulers represented as gods or saviours. In the Roman world, there is no city without magnificent buildings or imperial statues, designed to remind their inhabitants of the values they share with the rest of the empire; no villa without paintings or mosaics of mythological heroes reminding viewers of the virtues the owner is supposed to share with those heroes. One difficulty in seeing such products of visual culture as forms of rhetoric stems from taking as normative a Greek view of rhetoric, in which people debate controversial questions with arguments. On the basis of such a restrictive definition, Roman art can hardly be considered rhetorical. But can rhetoric be appropriately confined to such an outlook? The contrast with Greece should lead us instead to define rhetoric more sharply and more generally, in order to comprehend its specific Roman uses and its relation to the visual arts in particular.

What is the difference between Greek rhetoric and Roman rhetoric? Greek rhetoric, born in Athens, a city proud of its autonomy and unusual in its radical democracy, was focused on the problems that argumentative rationality could handle – such as questions that a free citizen could tackle

in confrontation with other citizens as free as himself. Roman rhetoric, on the other hand, is centred on giving answers that express but also give comfort to the social role of the speaker, what the Greeks called the speaker's *ēthos*. Rhetoric displayed in an indirect way (that is, through speech but also through painting, sculpture or architecture) the values and virtues that defined the identity of individuals in a strongly differentiated society. Art is a way of displaying without debating, an affirmation of the patron's identity to which viewers are free to respond. Both Greek rhetoric and Roman rhetoric deal with questions and the impact of their answers upon a given audience, but not in the same way. The Athenians based their rhetoric on conflictive discourse, while the Romans rather focused on the acceptability of answers, from pleading to showing. Politically, Roman rhetoric transformed the problematic into a set of answers in order to render it more socially forceful and obvious, as a way of warding off social threats and reinforcing the common *romanitas* of the societies under Roman dominion. This does not mean we should restrict our understanding of rhetoric to either of these conceptions, but rather that we should analyse why and how what we may consider rhetoric to be today offers an excellent approach for understanding Roman art in its multifariousness and originality.

Rhetoric is the way individuals negotiate their distance when questions arise – questions that can divide people, or unite them because they agree on what to think and say in response. An individual who addresses himself to others is termed the speaker (*ēthos*) and those addressed are called the audience or interlocutors (*pathos*). Since the speaker's address is also a form of response to the audience, *logos* is the way the individual or social difference between these parties is translated into a difference between question and answer. Rhetoric can be conflictive (it is then called dialectic or argumentation), and in that case questions must be dealt with directly, as in law courts where one debates the pros and cons of a case. But rhetorical questions can also be tackled by giving an answer, with the aim of swallowing the question through high style and eloquence, if not elegance, to show for instance that the question posed is not a real one or has already been solved. Answers make questions disappear. This model of rhetoric, conforming to the popular understanding of rhetoric as a set of tricks or a merely formal conundrum consisting of elegance, style and form, is the basic requirement for transforming the problematic into a non-problematic way of seeing things. That is why rhetoric, in this sense, plays a hugely significant role in politics, and is constantly used by those in power or at the top of social hierarchies. Rhetoric enables people in such positions to

please and flatter, and to give the impression (if only rhetorically) of a united and shared world, where the problems have been resolved or do not arise.

Should we then reject rhetoric, as Plato did, on the grounds that it is merely manipulative? This is a short-sighted view. For rhetoric is essential to any community, especially as an alternative to violence; and even when there is socially sanctioned violence (as in the amphitheatre), it may have its own rhetorical justifications. Asserting and reasserting the unity of a potentially divided community lies at the core of exclusion. The violence of the games exerted on foreigners, slaves and exotic animals in the arenas functioned to reinforce feelings of belonging within the Roman world. The Greek city-state, much smaller and more cohesive, had no need to resort to the violence of amphitheatres in order to create a sense of unity. Democracy, for instance, functioned as cement for Athenian society (in the periods when tyrants or oligarchs did not take control), while the Roman world, structured on a much larger scale through strong local hierarchies, needed quite different means to assert unity, not least because of the multiculturalism of its vast empire. In Athens, Greek mythology was transformed into varieties of literary fiction, the first form of Greek rhetoric; and the Athenian invention of a new *logos* to understand and explain the world, in place of myth, gave rise to logic and metaphysics, physics and rhetoric. Greek culture came to substitute *logos* for *mythos*, or at least to supplement mythic and ritual-centred modes of discourse with those governed by *logos*.

The Roman world inherited and adopted both that *logos* and Greek *mythos* as a rhetorical figure for the virtues any hero should have. But the deeper problem for Rome and the peoples beneath its sway was identity within society and within the empire. The Romans did not need to reinvent the sciences, as the Greeks had done. The Roman political framework was not democratic so much as oligarchic, and social differences, while being normal, were nonetheless subject to continual renegotiation throughout history. Greek civilization, most supremely in its Athenian democratic form, which would supply so much of the canonical literary and intellectual models for the Hellenistic kingdoms, was a culture of the *logos*; the Roman world was a civilization of the *ēthos*, in which social roles were questioned and disputed, and could only be legitimized through the resort to virtue (*ēthos*), which is to say through a culture of continually rhetorical claims and self-assertions. When differences are to be negotiated (peacefully) rhetoric is the key. Athenian culture developed dialectic as a democratic way of settling controversial questions between equals.

The Romans preferred rhetoric as a way of reinforcing the images of community and shared values, such as power and strength, but also virtue, valour and success. In Rome, the *ēthos* of the speaker was both a means and an end: Romans sculpted their ancestors at least as much as they did the gods, they displayed *ēthos* in public monuments from triumphal arches and columns to tombs and funerary reliefs, they figured *ēthos* in the mythological paintings of the domestic arena, where divine and heroic virtues are epitomized, as if the owner himself had a share in them or they had been bestowed upon him by virtue of his social role, as patron and paterfamilias. The repeated underlining of virtues (*ēthos*), often in the form of mythical and historical exempla, stressed as obvious and natural the differences that made up the social and political order. Text or image, art or speech, served equally in that undertaking.

No study of Roman art can avoid the question of its Greek legacy, and the issue of the differences between Greek and Roman art. This is more than a question of rhetoric. For the rhetorical nature of Roman art, as shall be presented in this book, may express that difference, but is not its source or cause. The roots of the difference between the arts in Greece and Rome lie elsewhere – not in the forms of visual art (such as stylistic eclecticism versus purity of style) or the manifestations of material culture, but in the structure of the respective societies and their value-systems, which images and material culture were created to serve. One key difference between the two societies lay in the nature and conception of political power. The Roman world always held to an aristocratic and hierarchical functioning of society, a form of oligarchy (although one which allowed significant social mobility among those who might come to comprise its elite). By contrast, the Greek world employed and experimented with a series of systems, among which monarchy may have won out in the Hellenistic period but where the spectacular achievements of Athenian democracy could never be wholly gainsaid.

These differences did not lead only to different conceptions of rhetoric, but also to different uses of rhetoric, most particularly in art. Greek rhetoric – especially in Athens, in the context of autonomous city states which preceded the monarchic hegemonies of the Hellenistic world – was more egalitarian, in the sense that every free citizen could question the others; in agonistic contests from the theatre to athletics, select representatives of every stake-holding community could make a response and win the game to be best. Dialectic is key – especially in what were to become the canonical works of Athenian literature in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, from the speeches in Thucydides and the dialogues of Plato to the debates

staged within tragedy and comedy, themselves genres of writing that were orchestrated within official civic contests. Democracy has difficulties with differences: they are easily seen as infringements upon the identity of the group. One function of theatre is to provide the spectacle of violated differences, those that all societies claim to respect, such as the differences of life and death, of parents and children, for instance – the existential differences giving rise to tragedy, the more down-to-earth and basic ones to the laughter of comedy. Drama highlights the negative consequences spawned by confusion of values. Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother, profaning the most sacred prohibitions, those against parricide and incest. The heroic characters of tragedy, and the burlesque figures of comedy, are far apart from the individuals we meet in everyday life (who has ever met an Oedipus, or an old man who thinks that his fiancée is a young virgin whereas she is a prostitute?); the Greek predilection for theatres on mountain slopes, between men and gods, far from the heart of the cities, gives topographical instantiation to the differences represented in plays, which threaten civic identity and the community's fundamental values.

We find nothing comparable in the Roman world. The Romans accepted social and political differences and relied on them to ensure the good functioning of society. Their theatres and their temples are built within cities, in the middle of forums for instance, without restriction; and they may even take the form, in miniature, of the whole forum, as a rectangle surrounded by arrays of columns. Sculpture in the city under Roman rule plays a different role from that in the era of Greek civic autonomy: statues or busts represent ancestors and benefactors rather than gods or votive dedications, even if they may be sculpted in a Greek style and manner. The difference between Rome and Athens is more deeply a matter of content than of technique or stylistic appearances. Roman art is not simply the decline of Greek art into a series of degenerate replicas as the long history of its art history repeatedly maintained until a generation ago. It is a true art in itself, undoubtedly using Greek techniques, but designed to convey an authentically Roman series of rhetorical statements, in sculpture, in painting, in architecture. Romans invented vaults, created arrays of columns whose aesthetic was exalted anew in the Renaissance; at the same time they borrowed models of painting and statuary from the Hellenistic world and refashioned them to suit the specific needs of an extensive, multicultural, socially segregated and hierarchical cultural system.