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ROMAN IMPERIALISM AND PROVINCIAL ART

Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art focuses on the art works created in the provinces of the Roman Empire. Heretofore marginalised, or at best understood in terms of emulations of the symbols, styles, and tastes of metropolitan Rome, provincial art is often portrayed as a poor copy of works created in the imperial capital. In this volume, the contributors address the diversity and complexity of the evidence and also offer fresh interpretations of mosaics, wall-paintings, statues, and jewellery in an effort to determine what these art works can tell us about the nature of life under an imperial regime. The broad geographical and chronological coverage allows unique insights into the social and political significance of visual expression across the Roman Empire.

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To Martin Henig

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Preface

In April 1997, we organised a session on ‘Art and Imperialism’ for the Roman Archaeology Conference (RAC) (hosted in that year by the University of Nottingham). The aim of this session was to bring together a group of speakers from various backgrounds (in traditional terms, a mix of art historians and archaeologists) who were all interested in similar things: how we go about the study of Roman art; how we seek to understand its meaning; and how to move beyond traditional approaches dominated from the centre. That is to say, we shared an approach to Roman art, which looked beyond the styles, influences, and messages emanating from the core province of Italy. We are very grateful to everyone who spoke on the day (John Barrett, Iain Ferris, David J. Mattingly, and René Rodgers) and also to Martin Henig, who chaired the proceedings. We both presented papers, too. Five of the papers presented at RAC 1997 (and here we much regret the loss of John Barrett’s contribution on ‘The Limits of Narrative’) form the kernel of the book you are now reading. We also extend our thanks to the organisers of RAC 1997.

The RAC session demonstrated that in many areas of Roman Studies a thorough examination of the social meaning of ‘Roman art’ is being undertaken. This suggested to us that the time was ripe for a book exploring the issues discussed at RAC. We therefore commissioned a further six papers by Miranda Aldhouse Green, Martin Henig, Shelley Hales, Catherine Johns, Zahra Newby, and Greg Woolf, which widened the geographical and conceptual scope of the original group of papers. We are very grateful to each of these additional contributors. Martin Henig, a scholar who has inspired and encouraged both of us for many years, deserves special thanks. He has kindly contributed a paper on the art of Roman Britain to this book, but in addition, we also asked him to write an epilogue; a ‘personal history’ of his own career in Roman provincial art. We felt that such a paper, charting the experiences of one who has so done so much to lay the foundations for the modern discipline, would be both an informative and fitting way to round off this collection of papers. We are, therefore, very grateful to Martin for his personal, and very entertaining, thoughts on ‘Art and Aesthetics’, which completes this volume.

xiv **Preface**

This book, made up of twelve contributions, provides a representative overview of the directions in which the study of ‘Roman art’ (an increasingly problematised concept) is moving. At the heart of the book lies the contention that we cannot understand the development of provincial art simply in terms of the emulation of the symbols, styles, and tastes of metropolitan Rome. Provincial art – despite its manifest diversity – often tends to be measured against a single metropolitan yardstick, and all too often it is found wanting. However, the crucial issue in studying provincial art should not be whether the mosaics, wall-paintings, statues, and jewellery we study should be judged ‘good’ or ‘bad’ art, but what they can tell us about the nature of life under an imperial regime. As a vital part of the material culture of provincial life, art has the power to tell us a great deal about the ways in which different peoples, at different social levels, interacted with ‘Roman’ culture across the Empire, thereby creating new identities.

What questions should we be asking of provincial art? The views presented here are often contradictory – because we have not sought to overwrite the contributors’ ideas with a comforting, but dull, editorial ‘consensus’ – but they are always challenging. We hope you enjoy reading them.

Finally, we would like to make some personal thank-you’s. Sarah Scott is extremely grateful to Graham Shipley, Neil Christie, and Graeme Barker for their comments on various drafts of her paper, and to the University of Leicester for research leave in the autumn of 2000. She would also like to thank Martin Henig for his support and encouragement over the past ten years. Jane Webster extends her thanks to the staff of the Department of History at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, Kingston, Jamaica for encouraging a growing interest in creolisation; to the British Academy, who funded a conference trip to Washington, D.C., which (by a twist of fate) introduced her to American and African colonial art, and to Rob Young for his enthusiasm and support throughout this project. Finally, we would like to extend our joint thanks to Graham Shipley, who compiled the index, and made many improvements to the text.

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