

Art in Europe to the Sixteenth Century

Discussion of Roman Art with Jaś Elsner's approach

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What is Roman art? When archeologists and artists research this theme, some of them regard it as a unique continuity of ancient Greek art since the ancient Romans are worshipers and imitators of ancient Greek art; and some of the researchers define Roman art by using the words like non-perspective, sacred art, political tool, artistic decline, and so on. However, these simple words are not enough to stand for Roman Art. Rome, an empire that developed to control the entire Mediterranean region across three continents, its art form absorbs various cultures and presents in different styles and modes. This essay aims to articulate Jaś Elsner's idea and approach and uses his approach to analyze two artworks to develop the interpretation of Roman art.

In Elsner's article: *The Art Historical Problem of Style*, he argues that Roman art is the ancestor of many recent art forms which includes medieval "symbolism", post-modernist "eclecticism", post-Renaissance "naturalism" (Elsner, 1998) and so on. What is more, he examines the idea of artistic decline and disagrees it withfor three reasons. Firstly, "decline" is inaccurate and inappropriate because it is a modern prejudice from the current tastes and aesthetics. He uses the artwork, *Arch of Constantine* to state that the term "decline" will bind and interrupt people's perception of Roman art. Then, he supports the idea that not all the breakdown of visual forms is due to the change in social structure, and these two concepts are independent of each other. Finally, he believes that the selection of artwork used in style comparison is an arbitrary selection, which is also dangerous, inaccurate, and maybe misleading because even in the same era, artworks can be performed in different styles.

Therefore, he uses his approaches: setting the time points to discuss the style, technology, and meaning of the artwork; ignoring some conventional, historical comparisons like “late-antique art” and “early Christian art”, but regarding the Roman art as an entirety to analyze. From the aspect of painting, few Roman paintings have remained but thanks to Pompeii in ancient Rome, artists still have the chance to trace the mural paintings in thousands of years before. Most of the artists list four types of Pompeii frescoes according to their different styles. For instance, the “*Dionysiac mystery frieze*” (See fig.1.1), in the second style that ended in 27 B.C.E, depicts a chamber to celebrate rituals and the Greek god Dionysus. As an artwork in the second style, “*Dionysiac mystery frieze*” had the characteristics of Greek art, and it is in Verism, a form of realism but in preference of daily objects. In the fresco, there are some mythological figures and there is not too much emphasis on idealizing the figures but using the life-size figures with the effect of illusionism. Therefore, all the walls in the room are filled with lively colors, especially in red to suggest a jubilant environment. There is no linear perspective, and the bright background pushes the figures to stand out in the front. It seems that the painter wanted to dissolve the room’s confining walls and create an illusion in the background setting. By analyzing these elements in the second style and the artwork itself, people started to recognize the mode of the paintings of Roman art.



Figure 1.1 Dionysiac mystery frieze, 2nd style, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii. Wall painting. c. 60-50 BCE.

In addition, perhaps architecture can be considered as the highest art form of Roman art. In the aspect of architecture, Elsner's approach still work. Tracing back to the 4th-8th century, there is a new empire of Romans, and the artworks during this period also suggest their own styles. For instance, the "*Arch of Constantine*" (See fig.1.1), is a triumphal arch used to celebrate the victory of the emperor Constantine. The architectural features are clear especially when people get a closer look at the recycled sculptures from four different times, and relief panels on the archways. "*Arch of Constantine*" moves the style of naturalism from earlier times away, and is used as propaganda, a political tool to enhance the power of authority.



Figure 1.2 Arch of Constantine, Rome. 312-325 CE (dedicated July 25, 315), 21x26m

To sum up, based on the analysis of two artworks above, it is clear to see that since the late Roman empire, western art began to undergo transformation. However, this transformation cannot be concluded as the artistic decline which is a prejudice against Christianity and a misunderstanding of history. People should not view the late imperial art changes as the decline of classical pagan, because it was just a change in style, an innovation in the past mode, a way to develop the new artistic style.

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