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Egyptian Art (as Greek Art) as Roman Art: historiographies and potential futures

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PEARSON, S. K. 2021. *The Triumph and Trade of Egyptian Objects in Rome: Collecting Art in the Ancient Mediterranean*. Berlin: De Gruyter. Viii + 264 pp. ISBN 978-3-11-070040-4.

In this 2021 monograph by Stephanie Pearson (P.), the author continues to advance the theory of her UC Berkeley 2015 dissertation that “Romans used Egyptian material as highly prized collectables” and expands that work by adding jewelry, textiles, and sculpture to the dissertation’s corpus of frescoes (vii). In the framework of a global pandemic, 2021 was a difficult time to release a book, especially one updating the highest student academic exercise to a relatable and informative scholarly volume meant for a readership well beyond the dissertation committee. I note this timeframe and contemporary global context because just as P. was eclipsing the pinnacle of her work as a student with her first monograph as a scholar, practitioners of the many humanistic and scientific disciplines of which it is a part felt the force of the world’s tragedies and reached a similar defining moment. Injustices/inequities stemming from Western structures of thought that could be held at personal arm’s length pre-2020 were harder, if not impossible, to ignore and fueled a desire for change in the profession of our scholarship. Recent publications in disciplines like those identified by *Triumph and Trade’s* publisher, De Gruyter, such as Classical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Classical Studies, Classical Archaeology, and Egyptology, concentrate more intently on restructuring colonial cores and remaking the fields anew.¹ This is similar for art history, and I situate P’s book most firmly within ancient art history and archaeology. The publisher also lists art historians as a primary audience. For 2020/2021+, we talk about pre-pandemic/post-pandemic; for the art history of the Roman world, and the many modern disciplines that deal with objects in the ancient Roman empire, we can talk about historiographies/potential futures. I see this book on the cusp in terms of this timeframe and these ideas.

¹ E.g., Langer and Matic 2023; Eccleston and Padilla Peralta 2022; Mazurek 2021; Friedland 2020.

Historiographies

P.'s argument that the "Romans prized Egyptian art because it was art, and the Romans were art collectors" (4) places the book within the historiographies of art history. To continue the long and well-worn dialogues about what is Roman art, to define it as "beautiful" and note that "it could conjure pleasurable associations" and "positively contribute to their [the Romans'] own constructions of self" (28), as "precious luxury goods" (47), relates to traditions and mechanisms used in the field to explain Roman material culture according to modern viewers' assumptions about "art." These traditions and mechanisms seek *modern* validation for the *modern* field of "Roman art" and are part and parcel of the work of Christopher Hallett,² who chaired P.'s dissertation committee and whose work she relies on throughout the book. For instance, in the 2015 overview article, "Defining Roman art," in Wiley's introductory companion to Roman art, Hallett finds that "Roman art" is a modern category that fulfills modern expectations of "art."³ While Hallett makes these caveats, and allows for a plurality of styles, they are illuminated from a "center" that is, to him, unequivocally, Greek art.⁴ If we boil it down further, this art is figural, represents humans, and is in the medium of sculpture. This definition comes from hierarchical systems of value created and dictated by the modern French Academy and Salon system, whose ranking of "fine" and "decorative" arts remained largely in place from the mid-17th c. through the early 19th c., then was strengthened by the ideas of the European Enlightenment and Romantic period (especially in J. J. Winckelmann's notorious 1764 *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*) and sustained by Western modern nationalism and rationalism of the 20th c. These systems are at the colonial core of the historiographies of art history and archaeology. While P. acknowledges these conditions, *Triumph and Trade* nevertheless proceeds along these lines and concludes that "Romans...considered Egyptian material to be 'art' just as much as they considered Greek material to be art" (5). Within these historical traditions and mechanisms of art history, P. equates Egyptian art to Greek art to make Roman art and demonstrably links the book to modern associations of luxury and elitism with "fine art," and to ethno-cultural containers stemming from modern national archaeological traditions. There are great opportunities to shed these colonial traditions and mechanisms in terms of potential futures of the discipline, as will be returned to below. For scholars interested in the long-running debate about what Roman art is, this book conclusively adds Egypt to the dialogue.

While Greek art (both historical and contemporary to the Roman period) is a well-known influence in Roman art, Egyptian art is not as commonly recognized, or is even disparaged if recognized. The author highlights this context in the introductory section of the book (8–12) and makes a strong case for combating this derision by bringing Egyptian art more to the fore. She does so by expanding the quantity of objects and types of media known and by "draw[ing] attention to Egyptian art in perhaps unexpected genres, such as jewelry, furnishings, and textiles, to show that Egyptian material in Rome was even more ubiquitous than has been recognized" (194). This is the most important success of the book and a welcome contribution to scholarly studies and public perceptions of this material. While I see the need to validate these artforms as "prized," "luxury," and

² Hallett 2015.

³ Hallett 2015, 19.

⁴ Hallett 2015, 14–15, 28–29.

“fine” as tied to modern understandings, there is no doubt that the author does a great service to the field in broadening the types of material as well as the kinds of details/views that were surely important parts of ancient viewers’ experiences.

Indeed, P. makes available a rich amount of material in one source with excellent color images and details. While we would expect such high-end production in the 20th volume in the Image & Context (ICON) series by De Gruyter, P. deserves commendation for the selection and organization of the impressive material in the book. Her attention to detail when it comes to objects as primary evidence is important to the field of art history, as part of its founding (historiographies), and its continual processes and practices (potential futures). Further, for ancient art history, P. revitalizes visual analysis as one methodology that is, broadly, an essential skill and part and parcel of the founding of art history – indeed, I see it as crucial to the transition from historiographies to potential futures for the discipline. P.’s use of visual analysis and close looking as a primary research methodology is refreshing and demonstrates the vitality and importance of this staple practice.⁵ P.’s visual acuity is apparent throughout the book and demonstrates her ability in terms of her primary methodology for dealing with the material.

The book consists of a preface, six parts, a summary, and back matter including a helpful index. Generally, the core content parts (II–V) deal with themes through the investigation of genres of objects. They progress through: frescoes, jewelry, furnishings (including lamp stands, vessels, and tables), textiles, statues and statuettes, gardens, and architecture and the built environment. This is an effective organizing principle, with the caveat that P.’s chosen order aligns with, rather than rejects, as is claimed, the modern Western categories of “lesser” to “finer” arts, with their culmination in “sculpture as a special genre (vii)” as it was included in the built environment.

Part I introduces the book and some of the primary scholarship about objects that were either made in Egypt and exported or made outside of Egypt and feature Egyptian subjects in the Roman period – what P. calls Egyptian art in Rome, and what many have termed “Egyptianizing.” P. rightly draws attention to the need to reframe that term and the thinking behind it and summarizes why this material has been deemed as a derogatory “-izing” version of Egyptian art. This critique and its reframing have been revolutionized in the last two decades by a number of scholars who profoundly changed scholarship about the Roman world writ-large and within the new field of *aegyptiaca* studies.⁶ P. situates

⁵ While this is true throughout the book, I do suggest the author’s identification of “wings” and “bells” in the frescoes of the so-called House of Augustus may be imaginative lotus and papyrus plants. In this visual reading, leaves are on either side of the crown for the lotus and the “bell” indicates the open-bell form of the papyrus plant. My suggestion comes from comparing the engaged lotus and papyrus plants on the pillars still standing in the center of the temple of Amun at Karnak. These are quite distinctive and rare, but the general lotus and papyrus are also seen in numerous other representations, especially on column capitals.

⁶ E.g., Barrett 2009; Clarke 2007; Meyboom and Versluys 2007; Swetnam-Burland 2007; Tybout 2003; Swetnam-Burland 2002; and Versluys 2002. This is scholarship that I found formative in the early-mid 2000s for *aegyptiaca* studies rather than a representative, up-to-date bibliography. A review of the many associations scholars have proposed may help P. navigate the confusing assertion that obsidian originated in Egypt and the Romans associated this stone specifically with Egypt (84, 92). M. Swetnam-Burland (2020, 104) writes about the many sources of obsidian in antiquity, especially Ethiopia, and notes that the material’s specific association with Egypt comes from Pliny (*NH* 36.67.196–97).

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Triumph and Trade among the work of these scholars and aims to take their work further by questioning overeager associations of politics (including associated fashions of the imperial court) and religion with the impetuses for the taste for *aegyptiaca* in the Roman Empire. An expanded review of the early–mid-2000s and current scholarship would have been helpful here, both in clearly describing the wide varieties of visual elements and associated meanings that scholars have proposed for this material (as a handy state-of-the-field reference for scholars and to assign for students) and in helping to organize the associations referenced in the book as well as the author’s system of styles. P’s system includes “pharaonic,” “Alexandrian,” and “Nilotic,” and is explained as a tactic to describe what is and is not included in the study (the former is, the latter two are not). An expanded review of the scholarship and main trajectories in the field may have solidified the already existing styles/subject matters/genres and bolster P’s use of “pharaonic.” As it stands, the definition of her “pharaonic” style is confusing and contradictory in usage in the book (13). For instance, there are a number of overlaps with styles purportedly not included (especially Nilotic) and not clearly defined (like Isaic), especially in the later parts of the book. Even with this confusion, P’s attempt to come up with a fresh take on the matter of style, which has long beleaguered the field, is appreciated. P. concludes the introduction with her new direction, which begins with finding “Romans’ motivations for acquiring and displaying Egyptian objects” (27) and forms the core of the book.

As briefly mentioned above, the core content parts of the book progress through a number of media of objects via which broad themes are discussed. Part II focuses on fresco painting as a way to introduce three-dimensional objects that were part of elite collections, like jewelry, vessels, tables, and lamp stands. P. argues that “fresco compositions are illusionistic versions of collectors’ showrooms... [that show] Egyptian objects are a part [of] Roman collecting culture” (31). Although some are now in museums, if provenance is known, the corpus of frescoes comes from Rome and Campania, including Pompeii, Boscoreale, and Oplontis. Part III continues the exploration of tables and vessels through visions of them in frescoes from the same locales. It introduces two key themes – a reason for collecting (banqueting culture) and a means of collecting (through Roman military triumph). The discussion of banqueting culture effectively outlines the propensity for luxury objects and various contexts of use beyond singularly religious ones. The discussion of the access to (and supposed preference for) luxury objects through Roman triumph, specifically the triple triumph of Octavian/Augustus in 29 BCE, is less effective and jarringly comes predominantly from textual rather than material evidence. This shift in approach disrupts the flow of the book and is problematic in a number of ways, especially considering the author’s justified criticism in the introduction to the book of relying on “vitriolic” texts about Egypt. Part IV introduces a series of related ways that objects stemming from the annexation of Egypt in 30 BCE were accessed (mercifully beyond Octavian’s triumph). These boil down to improved trade that spanned the ancient world, and long-lasting benefits to the economy empire wide. The medium highlighted in this part is textiles, and P. rightly emphasizes their preciousness in terms of the skill and expensive materials required to make them. P. returns to visual analysis and comparison of a number of frescoes with textile fragments of varying date and varying place to demonstrate that “decorative formulae [in textiles] were well-known and long-lived” (142). It was a pleasure to see the few objects in the book that are from Egypt in this part, a concern that will be returned to below. Part V is the final content section and transitions to the medium of sculpture within assemblages of other objects as known from archaeological records about find

spots, contexts, and locations. The increased discussion of context is welcome and expected here, as many of the frescoes that were included in previous parts are still *in situ*. This part does not rely on wall painting as much as the other parts of the book, and only includes one domestic fresco, the so-called House of the Golden Bracelet in Pompeii (177, fig. 92), and one religious fresco now in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples and originally from the temple of Isis in Pompeii (185, fig. 95). Rather than serving to illustrate objects that no longer exist, as in previous parts of the book, these two frescoes are used to establish the context of display of sculptures in gardens, both domestic and religious in (primary) function, and are employed by P. to situate the book's material across several associations, which for her could be religious, political, *and* part of elite Roman collecting culture.

Part VI concludes the book and asks why Romans more eagerly adopted Egyptian art than art from other areas of the world with which they had contact, like India (193). P. rightly acknowledges that Egypt's associations must have been more than general "exoticism," or abundance, or archaism, religious or political, and asserts her thesis that acknowledging "Romans approached Egyptian art *as art*... is a huge step" to better understanding the material and Roman art history (194). P. uses the remaining few pages to suggest ways to take this work further, some of which I see as transcending the point between historiographies and potential futures of ancient art history.

Potential futures

I ask two questions below, related to this book, that are important to the futures of ancient art history, among other humanistic and scientific disciplines that deal with objects from the Roman world. To highlight that I see these reflected in P.'s process of researching and authoring this book, I will take her statements from the conclusion to introduce the ways I see this project as moving towards potential futures of our disciplines.⁷

What can be art? "Our research must go beyond what is studied to how it is studied, recognizing our entrenched ways of looking at antiquity" (195).

One key way to act on this important statement is to see ourselves in the work that we do, which is something scholars of the ancient world conventionally rebuff. In digging deep into the process of positionality, that is, of personally recognizing our own commitment to fixed ideas, even the most basic structures can be illuminated as upholding entrenched ways of working. For instance, this book's framework that art is a category of physical objects understood in antiquity as luxury goods purchased and displayed by the elite (primarily men) situates this book firmly within entrenched ways of looking at art and thinking about antiquity. If we acknowledge that we are always part of our scholarship and carry bias, this may lead to ways of investigating that are actually more open to ancient voices than our own. Let us consider the question: what *was/is* art through the related question: what *can be* art in antiquity? For instance, the argument that things purchased for banquets were considered art is a good one, and P.'s addition of vessels, tables,

⁷ P. suggests gender studies and the modern methods of archaeology are possible fruitful directions for future research (200), which is undoubtedly true. Because there is a lively scholarly discourse in which gender studies has been brought into studies of the ancient world, I will cite just a few key works and helpful overviews: Budin and Turfa 2016; Matic 2016; Kampen 2015; Onstine 2010; Connelly 2007; Bahrani 2001; Fantham, et al. 1994.

and textiles to painting, sculpture, and landscape architecture (gardens) is important. What if we were to add things not made by humans to these artistic collections? P. mentions new plant species were sometimes brought back and paraded through a military triumph (as were physical objects) (100), and some knowledge of fish species to add to garden collections was acquired this way too (183). Further, the idea that Romans weren't interested in Indian art as much as Egyptian because we don't have evidence of physical objects from India in the same number as from Egypt on the Italian peninsula can be augmented if we look to other luxury goods like the wildly sought-after peppercorn.⁸ It is reasonable to think that spices were the art from India that was most sought after; this is especially logical to envision in banqueting culture. Additionally, through working with sensory studies and asking what objects did in the Roman world,⁹ we can explore how objects, plants, fish,¹⁰ foodstuffs, small finds and graffiti,¹¹ multiple viewpoints,¹² and even the time of year (in which different plants were in bloom, for instance),¹³ were each important elements to be encountered and experienced.¹⁴ From this, I propose an answer to the question of "what can be art in antiquity?" could be the ephemeral enactment of the banquet itself, with the objects (statues and peppercorns alike) as supports.¹⁵ In this view of ancient art, there is less chance of getting trapped in disciplinary biases that are tied to modern categories of value and privilege and in ethno-cultural categories defined by the modern nation state, like "Egyptian," "Greek," or "Roman."¹⁶ Here, vibrancy, distinctiveness, diversity, and individual examples are not colonially categorized, contained, or canonized.

Where is Rome/Egypt/Empire? "Just because an object is Egyptian in the Roman Empire outside of Egypt does not reduce its complexity to a single expression... [it is] multifaceted and personal" (193). "It has as many textures as any other piece of Roman material culture" (193), and can be "*polymita*, many-threaded" (195).

These quotes support my suggestions above and encourage further development – there is much work to be done in framing the Roman Empire, in which Romans were both local and global, as wholly of the world. This applies to those living on the Italian peninsula, from which Roman collectors traveled and envisioned themselves at the furthest reaches of the empire, *and* those living at the furthest reaches of empire. While the primary perspective brought forth by P. is homeowners who had means to collect objects and lived in Italy,¹⁷ one way to take action on the quotes above is to consider the perspectives of people who collected objects and lived in the other parts of the empire. Most obvious and most

⁸ Gates-Foster 2016.

⁹ Van Oyen and Pitts 2017.

¹⁰ I thank Summer Trentin for bringing my attention to J. Higginbotham's work on fishponds in Pompeian gardens as status symbols, including evidence of embedded amphorae for fish breeding (Higginbotham 1997, especially 30–33, 55–64, 198–202).

¹¹ Swetnam-Burland 2020, 98.

¹² Trentin 2019.

¹³ Graham 2018.

¹⁴ E.g., Betts 2017 and Barrett 2017.

¹⁵ Consider Whitney Davis's use of presence (2017, 88).

¹⁶ M. J. Versluys, for instance, has formulated an approach to *koine* as an additive, shared, and varied approach to style: Versluys 2015.

¹⁷ P. discusses collections, or objects that might have been in collections, from: Egyed (Hungary), Hildesheim (Germany), Ephesus (Selcuk, Turkey), Rome, Campania, Tivoli, and Tuscany.

important for this book is Egypt, which has long been left out of dialogues of the wider empire because of its supposedly special status.¹⁸ But as we know, each province was unique as there was unity in diversity across the empire,¹⁹ which means Egypt was one among many. Approaching Egypt this way goes further to de-exoticize than equating its art with Greek art, as P. does in this book. Indeed, taking Egypt out of Africa and equating it with another equally heterogeneous group of people effectively re-colonizes the land and its people (for both Egypt and Greece). To recalibrate, we may commit to global practices,²⁰ or pair universal with local in terms of collecting;²¹ consider C. Barrett's statement that "even as such collecting practices express Roman imperial claims on the provinces, they also represent those provinces' claims on Rome."²² There are opportunities in *Trade and Triumph* to represent those claims, including claims from those visiting, living in, and/or from Egypt.²³ For instance, in addition to expanding the stories of those cited by P. as living in Egypt (121–22, 136), we might describe what was seen in Egypt as it was annexed as a province in the form of numerous temples built for Octavian/Augustus as the first pharaoh of Egypt's Roman period and the first emperor. For example, there are column drums housed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, that were excavated at Coptos, and one has spectacularly well-preserved paint and gold leaf.²⁴ It is likely that people traveling on trade routes across Egypt and beyond would have seen and interacted with the structure that the Augustan column drum was originally a part of, because Coptos was a crucial trading town and the transshipment point in Nile Valley and Eastern Desert trade, especially in the Roman period. Additionally, the primary deity at Coptos, Isis of Coptos, was religiously linked to the Isis worshiped at Berenike, the primary trading city on the Red Sea Coast.²⁵ This contextual information indicates that the imagery and painted color on the column drum could inform P.'s "pharaonic" style and add to the discussion of the diversity of material collections.²⁶ Additionally, the "collection" of material on Philae Island in the Augustan period (this included new building across the island at the temple of Isis, the temple of Hathor, and the kiosk, and relief carving depicting Augustus as pharaoh complete with hieroglyphic epithets, and was complete with a podium temple with a Doric frieze and Corinthian columns) compares with the variety of objects and styles cited further north (187). Further, to align this material with future potentials of art history, and visualize the empire's full connectivity, we might expand the presentation of this material beyond the monograph with a digital project that documents and charts the locations and connections of objects and people in Egypt and elsewhere. There are a number of successful projects that add scholarly dimensions to

¹⁸ Peters 2019, 108–12.

¹⁹ Hingley 2005.

²⁰ Cassibry 2021, 8–11.

²¹ Barrett 2019, 164–67.

²² Barrett 2019, 178.

²³ A recent exciting application of global and local/individual that represents Egypt is Trimble 2017. Additionally, for pilgrimage and travel, see Ian Rutherford's article in the same volume: Rutherford 2017.

²⁴ Boston, MFA accession no. 24.1808.

²⁵ Kaper 2023.

²⁶ To further improve the author's "pharaonic" style, I suggest updating resources on crowns and regalia, including Beinlich 2008; Goebis 2008; Vassilika 1989.

ancient material and democratize access to it.²⁷ Opening access to material from *Trade and Triumph* could also aid in future-forward transparency about basic data for objects, including mapping locations for find spots, display, and trade, which would contribute to the important issue of provenance and legitimize museum collecting and other work that museums do.²⁸

Ultimately, this book represents historiography of ancient art history and archaeology at the cusp; it brings forward an impressive body of material and shines a light on what might become potential futures. The author charts exciting paths forward in the conclusion but seems bound by the historiographies of our disciplines for this book. *Trade and Triumph* puts important skills and methodologies that are essential parts of the discipline of art history (such as broadening the canon with unknown objects and employing visual analysis) into stark contrast with approaches and frameworks that need to be left in the past for the discipline to continue to be relevant and move into the future. This book provides an important exercise for anyone interested or invested in the many humanistic and scientific disciplines that study objects in the Roman world, especially art history – both the field’s historiographies and the active processes of remaking the field anew.

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²⁷ An example of a monograph with an open-access digital component is Cassibry 2021 with <https://wellesley-omeka-s.libraryhost.com/s/destinations-in-mind/page/Home>. Additional digital projects include: Bard and Yale’s IDEA – Dura Europos Digital Gazetteer at <https://duraeuroposarchive.org/duras-digital-gazetteer>, Stanford’s ORBIS at <https://orbis.stanford.edu>, UNC at Chapel Hill’s Ancient World Mapping Center at <http://awmc.unc.edu/wordpress>, and ISAW and UNC AWMC’s Pleiades at <https://pleiades.stoa.org>. Additionally, one way that De Gruyter can advance future-forward practices at the institutional level is to provide open access to the digital version of the book. In addition to democratizing access, it would be useful to be able to enlarge the color images through a digital publication, even though the reproductions are of high quality.

²⁸ Marlowe 2013.

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THONEMANN, P. 2022. *The Lives of Ancient Villages: Rural Society in Roman Anatolia*. Greek culture in the Roman world. Pp. 396. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781009123211.

In his book *The Lives of Ancient Villages: Rural Society in Roman Anatolia*, Peter Thonemann (T.) offers an in-depth analysis of the rural societies in western Anatolia during Roman rule. T. focuses on a region commonly referred to as northeast Lydia or middle Hermus in scholarly literature, uniquely naming it Hieradoumia to highlight its distinct characteristics. His study is grounded in epigraphic records, particularly funerary and propitiatory inscriptions, which reveal social and familial structures and are precisely dated between the 1st and 3rd c. CE. T.'s approach contributes significantly to understanding the differences between urban and rural cultures in the area.

T.'s work stands out from Ratté and Commito's *The Countryside of Aphrodisias*, which provides a broad historical overview and archaeological discoveries from adjacent Caria, and from Evangelidis's *The Archaeology of Roman Macedonia: Urban and Rural Environments*, focusing on urbanization and architectural evolution in Northern Greece.¹ Unlike Bowes's *The Roman Peasant Project*, which centers on archaeological exploration in Tuscany, T. gives priority to exploring familial connections and religious influences in Hieradoumia.² A notable distinction of T.'s study is its analysis of inscriptions, a vital source of information that is particularly significant considering that much of

¹ Ratté and Commito 2017; Evangelidis 2022.

² Bowes 2020.