

ROMAN SCULPTURE

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Greek and Roman sculpture. We are all familiar with some of the 'idealized' sculptures of classical Greece—smooth and universalized male and female forms in gleaming marble, stemming from the fifth century brilliance of such as Praxiteles; and though we know Greek sculpture would continue to evolve, from that point on, into more realistic 'genre' sculpture in the Hellenistic period, we are hardly prepared for Roman sculpture. It is tempting to draw a parallel between the 'concrete revolution,' which underlay the massive constructive power of Roman public architecture, and the move toward sculptural realism, which we find pronounced already in early Republican sculpture. (A few examples: the Altar of Domitius, from the late second century B.C.E., with its band of 'little people' lined up, 'realistic as everyday,' to be counted in the census; the even earlier—late fourth century B.C.E. 'Brutus,' in whose face the stark inscriptions of experience are completely unhidden, the beard carved and rugged, the large sub nasal facial wrinkles deep and aggressive, the neck bull thick; the particularly verisimilar male sculptural portrait from the earliest first century C.E.—7.11 in *The History of Art, below*—with its hollow cheekbones, tightly wrinkled forehead, and tough creased chin.) That move into sculptural realism configures with a society which, from its earliest days, put a premium on experience, and subjected its administrative representatives to a minimum age requirement.

Roman purchasers of Greek sculpture. The historical development of Roman sculpture was not without its Greek, i.e. idealized, phases. Throughout the second century, B.C.E., while the Roman conquest of Greece was gradually taking place, it was the pleasure of Roman aristocrats to buy up Greek sculptures (often copies of classical versions) and to have them transported to their villas in Rome. It was from this tradition that the Romans acquired the habit of stationing monumental personal statuary around their city.

Greek and Roman Sculptural Traditions. On many levels, from that of the *populus* itself to that of the imperial administration, the Greek sculptural tradition was increasingly incorporated into the more robust Romanic version of personality. In this regard one can look, with interest, at the Funeral relief of the *Gessii*, dating from the middle of the first century B.C.E. In that somber relief we see a slave-master surrounded by two freedmen whom he has released from bondage, and who, though now deceased, are both grateful and free. The plebeian sincerity of the freedmen, as pictured there, totally undercuts the tradition of glorifying sculpture. At the other extreme, one can look again at the Augustus of Prima porta (20 C.E.) with its classicizing salute to the virility and martial power of this Emperor. In this complex sculpture, which is in some ways true Roman 'realism', we also see the Hellenistic charms of wonderfully rendered robes, a richly symbolic breastplate, and the symbolic cupid and dolphin at his right foot—indicators of his origins in myth. The Greek element will never be withdrawn from the staunch Roman sculptural tradition, just as Roman architecture continued through the centuries to embody Greek columnar forms and pedimental artifices.

Roman sculptural traditions. As Roman sculpture flowers into its majority, in the three and a half centuries after the *Imperium* was established (27 B.C.E.), the sturdy Roman tradition prevails, though in a wide variety of forms. There is a great deal of popular relief sculpture, in the vein of the depiction of two freed slaves, above; for example the second century C.E. funerary relief of a butcher and his wife, rendering the plain nitty-gritty of everyday life; at the other extreme there are any number of sculptural tributes, scattered throughout every city and village of the empire, celebrating imperial as well as local leaders—a splendid bronze statue of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius on horse (second half of second century C.E.); a stylized portrait head of his wife, Faustina; the column of Trajan (110 C.E.) which recalls that Emperor's defeat of the Dacians, and does so by deploying a 650 ft. long narrative depiction of Dacian spoils and prisoners being transported back to Rome. It has to seem that each military victory is solemnized by an arch, a triumphal column, or a relief apotheosis. The Roman turn into the public, into showing (even more than telling) is prolifically illustrated throughout the course of Roman history.

Romans as practical and public. It is not, finally, a surprise that a culture which endured for almost a millennium deposited a vast number of both public monuments and decorative sculptures to serve as its

memorial. What strikes us is that from the start Roman architecture and sculpture were very much about real events, real people, and the concrete historical setting in which these objects of art had their existence. We will be trying out a definition of the Romans as a 'practical people.' Will we simply mean that they were a gifted, worldly people making real works of art, in a this worldly culture which was of value to them?

Readings:

Janson, H. W., *History of Art*, New York, 1962.

Zanker, Paul, *Roman Art* (Los Angeles, 2010). Read the whole book. This is an exemplary study of both the sculptural and domestic painting traditions in Rome.

Discussion:

What did Roman sculpture owe to the Greek achievement? Do the Hellenistic 'genre sculptures'—which depict, say, old market people or young children--contribute to the realistic, 'veristic' tradition in Roman sculpture?

Why, in your opinion, were the Romans so intent on commemorating military achievements with triumphal arches? What does this sculptural/architectural response have to do with military success?

Do you feel the influence of Roman sculpture and architecture when you walk through a large Western capital city? New York? London? Where do you see this influence?