

Hellenistic and Roman Ideal Sculpture: The Allure of the Classical. By RACHEL MEREDITH KOUSSER. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xv + 208. Paper, \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-521-87782-4.

This book is an in-depth examination of a widespread visual motif in ancient art, most famously represented by the Capua Venus and the Victory of Brescia. The work is divided into four chapters, chronologically ordered from the Hellenistic Period to Late Antiquity. The title promises a much larger project, which it does not really deliver, and the jacket blurb announces that the work “draws on contemporary reception theory.” Most of the time, however, Kousser (K.) takes the bird’s-eye view of the art historian; she only occasionally touches on the concerns of reception theory, that is, on the question of how viewers influence the appearance of art and how they bring to it interpretations not emphasized or intended by artist or patron.

Chapter 1, which considers the Venus–Victory motif in the Hellenistic Period, has some of the finest moments in the book as well as some of the most problematic. K.’s discussion of the Aphrodite of Melos (pp. 30–4) is fine scholarship. The evidence for whether Aphrodite carried an apple in her left hand and for the sculpture’s architectural setting is laid out clearly, and scholarly differences are acknowledged with respect. By contrast, perhaps the most problematic feature of this chapter is K.’s tendency to import evidence from other periods into an argument about Hellenistic sculpture. The debate over whether the Capua Venus replicates the Armed Aphrodite of Acrocorinth has reached a sort of standoff, and most of the comparanda K. adduces have already been employed both for and against this theory. More importantly, much of this evidence is Roman in date, and since the rest of the book demonstrates handily that this visual motif can be found in every corner of the Roman empire over many centuries, the fact that a few examples were found in Roman Corinth does not, to my mind, advance the argument much. The Hellenistic terracottas K. considers do not—at least based on the photos and descriptions provided—seem closely related to her visual motif at all.

With the Roman chapters, K. is generally on firmer ground and tends to be less speculative, though I do not agree with all her conclusions. Chapter 2 is devoted to instances of the visual motif in the Early Empire, and K. does touch on reception theory when she considers the famous Roman Mars–Venus groups based on the type (p. 52). When she wants to make sense of the pair that stood in the Augustan Forum, she points to lines from Ovid’s *Tristia* (2.295–6) that

might suggest that a depiction of Mars and Venus in the “Temple of Mars” could be misunderstood as an adulterous couple. Leaving aside the possibility that this reference might not be to the sculptural group in question, Ovid’s point in this passage is that it is possible to misread just about *anything*, including his poetry, if one tries hard enough. Though the poem presents interpretive difficulties, to my mind it runs counter both to Ovid’s argument and to his self-interest to read these lines as proof that the adulterous reading “...was, in fact, common and indeed inevitable” (p. 54). If the representatives of Augustus thought that the sculptural group in his Forum was commonly read as a pair of adulterers rather than as the progenitors of the Roman people, they would never have permitted the sculptures to continue adorning a space with such great personal meaning to the emperor and his family. The fact that, a century and a half later, Marcus Aurelius and Faustina the Younger had themselves represented as this divine pair on coins only underscores the point.

Unlike K., I believe that these groups lack the eroticism necessary for the subversive, adulterous reading. In fact, in spite of their nudity (in the various extant groups, his is a constant and hers is relatively rare), most of the pairs project the image of the campaigning, male politician with his wife: she looks adoringly at him, while he looks out at the world; one of her arms is draped around him, the other usually lightly touches some symbol of his military *virtus*, like his baldric. The briefest glance at a Mars–Venus pair created by Antonio Canova, on display in Buckingham Palace, is enough to make the point. His group, which was inspired by one of the ancient pairs, is highly erotic: gestures, drapery, sinuous proportions and direct, searing eye contact between the two lovers all contribute to this sense—and, by contrast, reveal the ancient groups for the tame, political pairs they are.

One detail: In her discussion of these groups, K. refers to the Mars figures as “a late fifth century type known as the Ares Borghese.” She seems unaware that Kim Hartswick made a full frontal attack on that attribution some years ago, since she neither disagrees with his view explicitly nor footnotes it. [[1]]

Chapter 3 considers instances of the motif from 100–250 CE, especially in Victory figures on the German *limes* and Aphrodite figures in Asia Minor, and so K. invites us to see what happens to the motif far from the center of power. She suggests that the motif “meant something different to those who lived on the German frontier than it did elsewhere” (p. 100)—and, in particular, that the theme of military protection took on greater prominence in this context. By con-

trast, she reads the Aphrodite figures from Asia Minor as symbols of their patrons' *paideia* and *humanitas*. One of her points in this chapter is that "private patrons freely and idiosyncratically adapted ... imperial images with narrowly defined meanings" (p. 107). But it would seem from the examples provided that these adaptations rarely contradicted the imperial messages established for this visual motif; instead they merely emphasized particular nuances more useful to the local population.

Finally, Chapter 4 considers Late Antique instances of the motif, casting them as deliberately retrospective, intended to identify "the new Christian order with a venerable tradition" (p. 135). This chapter is, in part, a continuation of the previous one's argument about aristocratic demonstrations of *humanitas*. It also offers some particularly Christian readings of the motif—on sarcophagi, for example—as emblematic of victory over death.

K. presents many intelligent and thought-provoking interpretations of individual works. Her argument proves less satisfying, however, when she attempts to broaden it from individual instances of one particular visual motif to a general consideration of the nature of imitation in Roman art. Especially in her clearly written but oddly combative introduction, K. exaggerates and at times misrepresents recent scholarship on imitation in Roman art, in an attempt to position herself as the moderate precisely in the center of two extremes. K. refers to the "absolutist positions" (p. 5) of her scholarly predecessors, and incorrectly claims that recent detractors of *Kopienkritik*, myself included, are concerned with praising the "Roman original" (p. 149). But one would be hard-pressed to find anyone in the "new school" of Roman art history seriously arguing that originality was a preoccupation of Roman artists, patrons or viewers. Many of these scholars have actually put a great deal of effort into explaining the cultural context that enabled the formulaic qualities of Roman art.

Such misrepresentations seem grounded in an unfortunate rhetorical commonplace of our field, namely, that one's own work is only useful or necessary if the scholarship of one's predecessors is inadequate. The force of this trope sometimes leads scholars, wittingly or unwittingly, to create straw men with which they then tussle. Most of those who have expressed their discomfort with traditional *Kopienkritik* have not done so simply because they do not believe its conclusions about the origins of individual visual motifs. The larger problem is that *Kopienkritik* was a methodology whose practitioners often claimed to know what was not (though perhaps in some cases simply not *yet*) knowable; and because they passed down to later

generations, in the guise of truth, what could only be a matter of speculation. The new school argues for a healthy skepticism that presents hypotheses as hypotheses, and does not transform them into received truth through the alchemy of a forceful personality. I believe that that healthy skepticism—that call to “show your work,” to borrow a phrase from mathematics—and not a correct position on the originality or repetitiveness of Roman art, is the *real* methodological revolution that has taken place in our field. And if that is what counts as absolutism, then sign me up.

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[[1]] K. Hartswick, “The Ares Borghese Reconsidered,” *RA* (1990) 227–83.