

BOOK REVIEW

Luxus: The Sumptuous Arts of Greece and Rome. By KENNETH LAPATIN. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2015. Pp. xii + 292. Hardcover, \$74.95. ISBN 978-1-606-422-1.

When envisioning ancient Greco-Roman luxury goods, often several specific pieces readily spring to mind: the golden larnakes from Vergina, the chalcedony intaglio of a heron by Dexamenos, the Gemma Augustea (along with the Grand Camée), and the Daedalic ivory kneeling youth from the Heraion on Samos. Of course, there are dozens of other large- and small-scale artifacts that one could easily reflect upon, both from the archaeological record and from literary passages, but the paucity of well-known objects leaves one with the impression that there is a dearth of luxury goods available for study. Kenneth Lapatin's *Luxus: The Sumptuous Arts of Greece and Rome* opposes this conceit, offering ancient visual and literary testimony that asserts the ubiquity of luxury craft production throughout antiquity.

As outlined in the Introduction, there are several explanations for the persistent exclusion of Greco-Roman sumptuous goods in modern studies and manuscripts. Beginning in antiquity, at the outset of production, a moral component occasionally accompanied these rare and costly items. While some praised their quality and craftsmanship, others denounced the luxury arts as corrupting and indulgent. Yet, it was not until the dawn of art historical study in the 16th century when these valuable products were truly relegated to the sidelines. As luxury crafts did not fit into the three primary categories of art history (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture), they were not incorporated into the traditional fold of Greco-Roman art. Additionally, particularly with regards to the Greek world, there has been the perception that the ancient Greeks were practical and reticent peoples, not likely the ones to utilize and celebrate luxury products. This assumption was further bolstered by the discovery of many costly artifacts in tombs *outside* of the Greek mainland. Not only did this suggest that they were created to suit barbarian tastes, but also since they dated to the "decadent" Hellenistic period, they were not believed to reflect a true Greek aesthetic. Classical temple records and representations, however, firmly contradict such notions.

In order to expand our understanding of the sumptuous arts and augment the familiar oeuvre of Greco-Roman examples, Lapatin assembles three forms of evidence in each of his three chapters: the preserved objects themselves, references to sumptuous items in ancient literary passages, and reproductions of luxury crafts in ancient depictions.

The first chapter of the volume treats metals. From very early times, the rareness and sheen of gold has made it a privileged material. Like other metals, because it can be melted down and refashioned, the contexts for golden artifacts from antiquity include tombs, hoards, destruction levels, and sometimes shipwrecks. Upon discussing the geographic zones that yielded large quantities of gold and mentioning some of the mining and refinery practices, Lapatin chronicles numerous Greco-Roman historical accounts of golden votive offerings and secular artifacts (e.g., the items dedicated at Delphi by Croesus, the pieces of furniture and objects found in the Persian camp after the battle of Plataia, the golden statues featured in the triumphal procession celebrating Rome's victory over Pyrrhus). Though not as precious as gold and more frequently employed for coinage, silver was still a valued metal that was used to create a variety of luxury items, like vessels and other pieces of table service that feature sophisticated mythological or ritual scenes in relief (e.g., the Berthouville hoard). Lapatin describes some of these items in more detail and emphasizes that these costly objects were not only made in sets but also likely meant to be read alongside one another.

In the second chapter of *Luxus*, the author discusses various semi-precious stones, their geographical origins, and the magical properties often associated with particular types of gems. Shaped into a variety of designs and forms using a granular slurry and reeds, Lapatin distinguishes intaglios (i.e. carvings that could be utilized as seals) from cameos (i.e., carvings in relief), and he explains some of the purposes of such forms—from rings and pendants, to gem-encrusted weapons and architectural moldings. Though we know the names of more than 70 engravers, only eight have been recounted by ancient authors, and all were noted to be of Greek origin. Indeed, considering that the highest esteem was reserved for Greek carvers, their Roman colleagues took to signing their own names in Greek with *epoie*. In the final sections of this chapter, Lapatin specifies the most popular stones utilized in the creation of cups and bowls (i.e., murra, emerald, garnet, obsidian, rock crystal, agate, and porphyry), and he describes sculptural portraits that were of varying sizes, either small works that could be inserted into objects or larger ones that could stand on their own.

Unfortunately, outside of particular regions and circumstances (i.e. arid climate zones, localities affected by volcanic eruption), the archaeological record is often unkind to organic substances. Yet, despite the lopsided nature of the evidence, Lapatin assures the reader that organic artifacts “survive in greater numbers than we might imagine” (171), and this is the subject of his final chapter. Sourced from elephants and hippopotami native to the Levant, North Africa, and India, the aesthetic qualities of ivory coupled with its rarity assured its top place amongst treasured materials, and it was fashioned into personal objects, furniture components, and sculpture. Interestingly, in addition to amber, pearls, and coral, the author discusses wood. Though this is a fairly common material and harvested for a great many useful items (e.g. water and land vehicles, weapons, vessels, furniture, etc.), some trees were privileged for their aromatic qualities, attractive wood grains, and divine associations (e.g. the piece of olive wood that fell from the heavens and was subsequently worshipped as Athena Polias).

Another surprising element of this chapter is Lapatin’s treatment of textiles. In addition to discussing elaborately woven scenes and the use of silk and golden thread, the author considers the harvesting of purple dye from murex shells. Although it was familiar to the Minoans and discussed in Homer, the color purple becomes strictly associated with imperial personages in later Roman and Byzantine periods.

Despite the fact that each type of exotic material is discussed in independent chapters, Lapatin clarifies in his Epilogue that these luxury products rarely existed or functioned in isolation. Rather, “they operated in a system ... bestowing status, prestige and cultural as well as economical capital on those who possessed and appreciated them” (221). One consumed and/or displayed an assortment of sumptuous goods at banquets, funerals, religious settings, or some other grandiose event (e.g., triumphal procession).

Overall, readers will appreciate the high-quality figures interspersed throughout the text and large format plates following each chapter. Aside from drawing attention to each plate within his discussion, the author also provides informative plate commentaries following the epilogue. (The plate commentaries feature the artifact’s material, date, dimensions, current location, “biography,” description, and brief bibliography). Sourced from both familiar institutions (e.g. the Getty, British Museum) and uncommon ones further afield (e.g., the Museum Vojvodine in Novi Sad [Serbia], the National Museum of Turkmenistan in Ashkabat [Turkmenistan]), all of these artifacts are truly worthy of admiration, and Lapatin

is to be congratulated for a volume rich in visual evidence as well as insight. Since the book offers such a nuanced perspective on Greco-Roman luxury crafts, their production, and their profound connection to daily life, it is highly recommended for all those who value the study of material culture.

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