

BOOK REVIEW

Classical Art: A Life History from Antiquity to the Present. By CAROLINE VOUT. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 359. Hardback, \$39.50. ISBN 978-0-691-17703-8.

This book describes how objects of ancient Greek and Roman manufacture have shaped an idea of classical art. Broad swaths of the story have been told before: in English, for example, by Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny (*Taste and the Antique*, 1981), Mary Beard and John Henderson (*Classical Art*, 2001) and Miranda Marvin (*The Language of the Muses*, 2008). Vout considers her book's "longue durée approach" to be "what marks its contribution" (243). I would add its authoritative voice, fine prose and good judgment.

The first chapter sets the scene with the Tyrannicides, while the second focuses on Hellenistic intellectual activity – Vout's narrative is the first of such scope to integrate the "aesthetic consciousness" of Posidippus's *Lithika* (41). Chapter 3 is mostly about Roman collectors and their development of critical distinctions: "Greek art was 'something' in the way that Egyptian was not" (59). Chapter 4 is more about the Roman state, then also the Byzantine and the Venetian. With the fifth chapter we attain the Renaissance, first represented by Cyriac, then by Florence.

Chapter 6, on European "courts" ("France, Spain and England," 131, also colonial empires), astutely identifies travel writing as ancestor to art history (141). Chapter 7 zooms in on England; its stated focus is the "country house," but Vout's readings of three portraits by Pompeo Batoni steal the show (151-56). The eighth chapter considers the new media, new audiences and new scholarly ambitions of the 19th century.

The ninth and tenth chapters form an extended coda on the 20th and 21st centuries. After some worry about "relevance" (219), Vout considers first the new autonomy of Roman art history, then the Mougins Museum of Classical Art, which holds "over seven hundred artworks, ancient, neoclassical, and modern, collected by British investment manager Christian Levett (b. 1970)" (230).

The territory covered is vast. Students preparing exams and teachers seeking a crib will be grateful for Vout's fair representations of the newest research on many topics. Of course, the point of view is distinct: "other narrators would have emphasized different parts of the life, making it less British, more obviously political" (243).

Vout's perspective is really east-English. Of the ca. 210 finely-reproduced photographs, I count 67 of objects presently in England, the great majority in London, Cambridge or Holkham. (Italy and the Vatican come in second, with 45, followed by the USA, with 33.) Liverpool (218-19) and Glasgow (206) make 19th-century cameos, while Hume and Smith appear *en passant* in the previous (174); not, however, Robert Wood, Smith's near-contemporary at Glasgow and pioneer of the archaeological elephant folio.

The English perspective confers advantages, including a rich dossier of textual responses to a small set of objects. Such sources underpin, for example, Vout's account of the construction of masculinity in dialogue with classical art. "Classical bodies" could "conjure an array of masculinities" (153), eventually allowing men "to explore a less heteronormative sense of the self" (204). This sounds like fun, even if it omits the obverse, e.g., the simmering threat of Buck Mulligan on Leopold Bloom: "I found him over in the museum where I went to hail the foamborn Aphrodite. [...] He knows you. He knows your old fellow. O, I fear me, he is Greekier than the Greeks. His pale Galilean eyes were upon her mesial groove" (*Ulysses* 9.609-615).

As for the "obviously political," Vout considers: "the 'new art history' of the 1980s, with its embrace of postcolonial discourse and microhistories, is now passé" (228). Her preface does observe: "it is arguably only in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, when Continental [and Insular! - BA] powers competed for ownership of the new world and defined the old world in opposition to it, [...] that 'classicism' became the Eurocentric model it is today" (viii). But Vout does not pursue this theme, barring brief mention of indigenous American artifacts in Florence's Palazzo Vecchio (112), and an 18th-century "stream of exotica... all of it pressing for reappraisal of the Greek and Roman; for reassertion of its hegemony" (162).¹

¹The actual relations were more complex and surprising. Note essays by Byron Hamann, Steve Kosiba and Giuseppe Marcocci in: Benjamin Anderson and Felipe Rojas, eds., *Antiquarianisms: Contact, Conflict, Comparison* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2017).

Is “classicism” today a “Eurocentric model”? For decades, art historians have written about the classical art of China, of Islam and of the Maya; they must think they are part of the discussion.² Others have explored the stranger passages – roads not taken, or leading out of the academy – in the reception histories of ancient objects. “A capacious and, to us, unfamiliar kind of ‘classicism,’” which Vout imagines in Hellenistic kingdoms (viii), is everywhere to be found.

What keeps us from getting to know this more capacious classicism? Vout believes: “as far as classical art is concerned, this freedom [of objects to act on us] is granted by the society, or the privileged few in society” (244). Yet she also chastises UNESCO for “constraining a market that relies on a ready supply of artefacts” (226). The reverse approach would be to protect ancient artworks from the vagaries of capital, while permitting them to act on more and varied people.

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² E.g., Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale, 1987), 11-12.