Mythological Group Portraits in Antonine Rome: The Performance of Myth

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Abstract
This article reexamines a series of Antonine mythological group portraits frequently identified as imperial commissions. Drawing on new archaeological evidence as well as sources for their findspots and restoration histories, I argue that they were private portraits suitable for the commemoration of married couples in house and tomb. The sculptures juxtaposed idealized divine bodies based on Greek statue types of Ares and Aphrodite with descriptive portrait heads of Antonine elite couples. In so doing, they offered patrons an unusual yet compelling means by which to represent the affective qualities of Roman marriage through reference to Greek myth and art. My analysis of the monumental groups in Mars-Venus format complements recent scholarship on single-figure mythological portraits to offer a fuller picture of the transformation of classical Greek imagery in Roman private art.*

INTRODUCTION
Sculpted groups of Roman couples in the guise of Mars and Venus offer a rare but illuminating example of the use of monumental mythological portraiture for the representation of married love (fig. 1). The groups, which date to the Antonine period, juxtaposed idealized divine bodies based on Greek statue types with descriptive portrait heads of Roman couples. In this way, the sculptures used allusions to classical art and Greek myths of Ares and Aphrodite in order to celebrate the conjugal affection of husband and wife. Recent scholarship has focused on single-figure mythological portraits, while monumental groups such as those in Mars-Venus format have received little notice. This article thus complements previous research to offer a fuller understanding of the adaptation of classical sculpture and Greek myth in Roman private art.

I analyze the sculpted groups in Mars-Venus format within their original context of Antonine private art in Rome and its environs. Scholars have traditionally identified the sculptures as Antonine imperial portraits and have connected them with cults of concordia celebrating the marital harmony of the dynasty’s imperial couples. Yet the portrait heads do not closely resemble the widely disseminated and easily identifiable imperial types. Nor is the action presented here comparable to more certain representations of concordia, shown on coins by a restrained handclasp. My reexamination of the groups, drawing on new evidence concerning the sculptures’ findspots and restoration histories, identifies them instead as private portraits suitable for the commemoration of married couples in house and tomb.

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1 Life-sized statue groups: Rome, Musei dei Fori Imperiali, inv. no. 2563; Rome, Museo Capitolino, inv. no. 652; Paris, Musée du Louvre MA 1009; Rome, Museo Nazionale delle Terme, inv. nos. 108522, 338732. A group in Florence (Museo degli Uffizi, inv. no. 4) appears to be a modern pastiche of two ancient statues, but carving marks on the Venus’ drapery suggest that she may also have formed part of a group.

2 See Halétt (2005a), concentrating predominantly on male portraits, which are the bulk of the evidence, and D’Ambra (1996, 2000) for female portraits.

3 On the groups as imperial portraits, see Moretti 1920, 65–6;


5 E.g., BMC 4:1xxxii, nos. 298–300, 1236–40, 1786, 1787; cf.

6 The recent full publication of the fragmentary group from the Forum Augustum (Rome, Musei dei Fori Imperiali, inv. no. 2563) and a newly excavated version associated with a Late Antique domus in Rome demonstrate that the sculptures had a broader and more enduring popularity than was previously thought. For the publication of the Forum Augustum fragment, see Ungaro et Millella 1995, 48. The Late Antique group, now in the Museo Nazionale delle Terme (inv. no. 338372), was recently excavated from a domestic context in the area of the via dei Maroniti, vicolo dei Maroniti, and the via in Arcione on the Quirinal Hill in Rome. On the house, see LTUR 2:105–6, s.v. “Domus C. Fulvii Plautiani”; Lissi Caronna 1985. New archival research has also clarified the restoration history of the much-debated Louvre group (Kalveram 1995, 210–11).
The first section examines archaeological and visual evidence for the groups in order to reconstruct, to the extent possible, their original contexts. The second section uses the insights gained from the first to analyze the groups in Mars-Venus format as characteristic examples of private patrons’ self-representation through classical statue types and Greek myth. Although the sculptures are unusually large-scale, high-quality works, their use of Greek forms to commemorate Roman married love finds parallels on other media such as sarcophagi and mosaics. The final section sets the sculptures within the broader context of the performative culture of the Antonine era. While text-based studies of this period (often referred to as the Second Sophistic) have burgeoned in recent years, there has been insufficient attention paid to concurrent and related trends in visual and popular culture.7

This article examines mythological portraiture as one means by which Roman elite patrons brought the Greek past to life and took on roles within it. At the same time, I highlight the importance of the Roman theater—above all, the wildly popular pantomime reenactments of mythological narratives—in conditioning viewers’ responses to Greek myths as they were presented in art.

Taken together, the discussion suggests the heuristic value of the groups in Mars-Venus format for an understanding of the Roman reception of Greek culture. Scholars of Roman art have tended to stress the critical role played by Augustus in the appropriation and transformation of the classical Greek heritage in Rome.8 The Mars-Venus portraits call attention instead to the role of private patrons, particularly those of the High Empire. While Augustus’ Greek-inspired monuments were political in nature, esoteric in their references, and of a novel, experimental character at the time, those of Antonine patrons were more varied in their functions, more accessible, and more thoroughly integrated into the visual culture of their day.9 They thus serve as a useful case study in the incorporation of Greek forms and styles within Roman art.

In addition, these groups illuminate the rarely examined world of Antonine elite culture in Rome and, in particular, its role in the revitalization of Hellenic tradition. They yoked together chronologically disparate statue types, added portrait heads, and selectively adapted, for the depiction of married love, an image of Greek mythology’s most famous adulterers. In this way, they testify both to the attraction of Greek myth and classical sculpture for contemporary Roman patrons and the thoroughness with which the Romans transformed Greek culture for their own purposes.

THE MARS-VENUS PORTRAITS: CONTEXT, CHRONOLOGY, PATRONAGE

The contexts of the Mars-Venus portraits merit consideration first. As noted above, scholars have traditionally identified the sculptures as imperial portraits, set up in temples to commemorate the concordia of the Antonine dynasty.10 While Kleiner has correctly challenged this theory, it nonetheless persists and continues to influence interpretation of the portrait groups.11 The following discussion reviews briefly the problems with an imperial identification for the Anto-
nine groups and suggests possible alternative contexts and commissioners for these sculptures.

Although the focus here is on the nonimperial contexts of the monumental Antonine portrait groups, it should be noted that some related artworks did indeed have imperial patrons. Most prominent originally was a sculpted group from the Forum Augustum, unfortunately preserved only in very fragmentary form; this is examined in the following section as a possible model for the Antonine groups. In addition, a series of coins—a rare single issue of dupondii—documents the use of the same type in the imperial mints during the Antonine era (fig. 2).  

The Augustan group and Antonine coins demonstrate that imperial patrons could, upon occasion, use the Mars-Venus format for official monuments. This has encouraged scholars to identify the over-life-sized portrait groups as imperial also and to connect them to sculptures and cults of concordia. Dio Cassius described one such cult, including an altar of concordia and silver statues that honored Marcus Aurelius and Faustina Minor in the Temple of Venus and Roma in Rome. An inscription also documents a similar altar in Ostia, celebrating Antoninus Pius and Faustina Maior for their concordia, and directing prospective couples to make offerings there.  

A series of coins contemporary with the Ostia decree likely commemorated this cult and provides the best evidence for the visual format of the sculptures. The coins depicted Antoninus and Faustina in contemporary dress, clasping hands, with the legend “Concordiae” forming an arch above them (fig. 3, right). In some coins from the series, the emperor and empress stood on bases and were thus clearly identified as statues. They carried attributes referring to the cult and to their public roles—a statuette of concordia for Antoninus, a scepter for Faustina.

The concordia coins—with their protagonists in contemporary dress, their restrained and formal gestures, and their prosaic rendering of Roman religious practices—highlighted the public and official character of Roman marriage, offering a representation of married love very different from that of the mythological portraits. Thus, the groups in Mars-Venus format should not be associated with statues celebrating the Antonine dynasty’s concordia, for which a different iconography was appropriate.

Just as the sculptures’ connection to imperial cults of concordia is problematic, so, too, is the identification of the portraits with members of the Antonine dynasty. As Kleiner has noted, the portrait heads resemble but do not accurately replicate imperial types. It is not necessary to review all Kleiner’s arguments here, but a brief examination of a group now in the Louvre offers a useful example of the problems involved with

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13 BMC 4:343–44, nos. 999–1001, 1005; RIC 3:347, no. 1680. The coins are categorized as “rare” (occurs rarely in major collections) in RIC. There are also a few preserved medallions contemporary with the coins (Goechhi 1912, 1:39, fig. 68; Toynbee 1944, 207). On the dating of the coins and medallions on the basis of the hairstyle of Faustina Minor, see Fittsch 1982, 37, 43.

14 Dio Cass. 72.31.
15 CIL 14 5326. The decree should date to shortly after Faustina’s death in 141 C.E., since she is described as “Diva” on it.
16 BMC 4:198, nos. 1236–40. The coins date to between 139 and 140 C.E., since Antoninus Pius is described as “Cos II.” He was elected as consul for the second time in 139 C.E. and for the third time in 140 C.E. (OCD, s.v. “Antoninus Pius”).
an imperial identification. In this case, the difficulties are particularly acute because the portraits resemble imperial family members from different reigns: Faustina Minor for the woman, Hadrian for the man (fig. 4). The face of the female portrait deviates sharply from the idealized rendering given to Faustina (figs. 5, 6). While the delicate and finely detailed waves of hair framing the face echo the hairstyle of the young princess ca. 140–150 C.E., the puffy cheeks, strong lines between nose and mouth, and prominent chin in no way resemble Faustina’s portraits from this period. Likewise, the rendering of the man’s hairstyle is different from that of the emperor: it shows the deep drilling and light/dark contrasts characteristic of later Antonine portraiture, and the face is longer and more oval (figs. 7, 8). Furthermore, in order to identify the portraits as imperial, one has also to assume that a group of Hadrian and Sabina was altered, at a later date, through the substitution of a later empress’ head. The woman’s head has indeed been broken off and reattached, yet in carving technique it is very similar to the man’s: the drilled pupils, the rather heavily carved eyebrows, and the carefully delineated strands of hair. A date in the 140s C.E. would do for both; the husband’s hairstyle would then look back to the recently deceased emperor Hadrian, while the woman’s, in more up-to-date fashion, emulated that of the princess Faustina. In this way, the Louvre sculpture serves as a useful reminder that private portraits do not uniformly follow the hairstyles of the reigning imperial family; the “Zeitgesicht,” as Smith has argued, is above all a “default setting.”

As this brief review of the evidence has suggested, the Mars-Venus portrait groups should not be identified as imperial commissions. Rather, the sculptures likely depicted wealthy private couples who looked to imperial models for the overall visual format of their statues (and sometimes for their hairstyles) but also adapted them, for instance, in their selection of more descriptive, less idealizing portraits. Evidence for the statues’ findspots supports this conclusion, as does an analysis of related works of art in Mars-Venus format; taken together, this information helps to suggest more plausible contexts for the monumental sculptures.

One appropriate context is indicated by the archaeological evidence for two sculpted portrait groups from Ostia. The findspot of a group now in the Capitoline Museum, uncovered in 1750, was within the Isola Sacra necropolis (fig. 9). As Schmidt has noted, this provenance does not necessarily rule out an imperial

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19 The large bun at the back of the head, which appears closer to hairstyles somewhat later (ca. 162 C.E. onward), is not ancient, and its evidence must therefore be discounted. On the restorations to the statue, see Kalveram 1995, 210.
20 Most comparable in appearance is the “Rollockenfrisur type” (type 3) portrait, shown here as comparanda (see figs. 7, 8), but the techniques of drilling seen in the hair, beard, and eyes give the group portrait a very different effect from that of the emperor. On the portraiture of Hadrian, see Wegner 1956.
21 de Kersauson (1996, 146–47) makes this argument but suggests Lucilla, about whose portraiture even less is known.
22 In addition, the marble on each side of the break fits together very closely, with complex contours and few bits of “filler”; this is technically different from most newly worked heads, which have straight-cut necks to simplify the process of attachment.
24 Schmidt 1968, 85.
identification, but in my view it makes a connection with private funerary sculpture more probable.25 A similar setting is likely for a group now in the Terme Museum, which was also excavated in Ostia, but not in situ (see fig. 1).26 It was discovered in 1918 within an Early Christian church but had clearly been moved there after being damaged, since in its complete state it was too large to fit through the church door.27 A funerary cippus was also found in the church, making a tomb context likely.28 And as Kleiner has argued, third-century C.E. sarcophagi replicating the group in Mars-Venus format demonstrate that these images were indeed used in the funerary realm (fig. 10).29

A distinctive though rarely noted feature of the sarcophagi is that the Mars-Venus groups are shown with pedestals; they are thus clearly to be identified as reproductions of statues. Due to this feature, the images on the sarcophagi can best be interpreted as small-scale adaptations of the monumental funerary groups for patrons who desired a similar form of self-representation, on a more modest budget.

Mythological funerary portraits similar to the Mars-Venus groups are a well-attested phenomenon of the High Empire.30 Statius, for instance, described the late first-century C.E. tomb of Priscilla, wife of an imperial freedman, which contained statues of the deceased as Ceres, Diana, Maia, and Venus.31 A similar tomb, dating to the 130s C.E., has been excavated from the Via Appia and included an inscription describing the portraits “in formam deorum” of the dead liberta Claudia Semne as Fortuna, Spes, and Venus.32 Wrede’s catalogue of the extensive visual evidence for mythological portraits demonstrates that they were widely popular and featured an extensive range of divinities.33 They

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25 Schmidt 1968.
26 On the excavation, see Moretti 1920.
27 Moretti 1920, 59-60.
28 Moretti 1920, 60.
32 Wrede 1981, 77; see also Wrede 1971.
33 Wrede 1981, esp. 159-60 for discussion of differing patterns of commemoration for men and women.
were used allegorically to express the virtues of the deceased, or to allude to the profession of the person commemorated; the latter option is especially characteristic for men, as, for instance, when a doctor is represented by an image of Aesculapius. The monumental portrait groups in Mars-Venus format should thus likely be understood against this broader background of mythological self-representation in funerary contexts.

While the tomb seems the most plausible context for the Antonine Mars-Venus portraits, there is some evidence for use of the groups in domestic settings also. Most significantly, a variant version of the groups—with the same female statue type juxtaposed with a cuirassed male instead of the usual nude Ares—was recently excavated from the area of a small but richly furnished Late Antique house in central Rome. In addition, the monumental group in the Louvre (see fig. 4) may have been created for an elite home, since it was found near Sta. Maria Maggiore on the Esquiline Hill in Rome, the site of many luxurious dwellings of the aristocracy; alternatively, it could have served a funerary purpose if its findspot lay outside the city walls. A series of unprovenanced statuettes from Rome are most plausibly interpreted as domestic decor, given their scale (<1 m high) and middling level of craftsmanship. Such mythological sculptures were popular in elite homes, serving as symbols of luxury and
prestige, as Neudecker has argued. They could also have a special meaning for the villa owner; Neudecker sees Trimalchio’s marble statue of Venus, described in the Satyricon, as a fitting deity for this nouveau riche patron because he rose to power by serving as the deliciae of both master and mistress. A sculptural group in Mars-Venus format could perhaps have a similarly personal meaning, representing the love of the couple who owned the house and connecting them with the elevated world of Greek mythology and art. The home thus remains a possible alternative setting for the monumental portrait groups, although it seems less likely than the tomb; the provenance is less secure, and the scale of the Antonine groups (> 2 m high and commensurately wide) would make them unsuitable for display in all but the largest homes.

The hypothesis that the Antonine portrait groups came from private funerary and/or domestic contexts fits well with what we know about the statues and about High Imperial image-making more broadly. It thus serves as the basis for my analysis of the portrait groups in Mars-Venus format and their use of classical sculpture and Greek myth.

**MYTHOLOGICAL SELF-REPRESENTATION AND MARRIED LOVE IN THE MARS-VENUS PORTRAITS**

The over-life-sized groups—with their idealized classicizing bodies and their finely detailed male and female portrait heads—can best be interpreted as visually impressive, if somewhat unorthodox, commemorations of married couples. This section considers their models, their overall visual effect, and their reception by viewers.

The groups’ relation to classical Greek art should first be considered. Traditionally, scholars have seen the bodies of the groups as based on classical prototypes, while their portrait heads were a Roman innovation. In recent years, Romanists have rightly challenged the assumption that all familiar Roman statue types copy Greek models; moreover, scholars have cast particular doubt on the connection between the Mars-Venus groups and classical originals. While these revisionist scholars are fully justified in questioning the assumptions upon which earlier approaches to Roman art were based, too absolute a skepticism regarding Greek models can be as misleading as previous credulity. So, in the case of the Mars-Venus groups, the new scholarship tends to stress the Roman resonances of the statue types and to insist upon the sculptures’

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38 Neudecker 1988, 122.
40 The Mars-Venus gems—small personal objects with an intimate connection to the wearer’s body—might also have had an autobiographical significance for their owners. In addition to a gem from the legionary camp at Xanten (infra n. 57), the Mars-Venus type is seen on two later imperial works: a carnelian in Florence’s Museo Archeologico (inv. no. 14722), and a gem in red jasper now in the British Museum (inv. no. 72.6.4.1367). The latter is particularly interesting in that it includes a figure of Amor holding a lighted torch and bears an inscription restored as “M[ar]cia et C[aius] ERSS”; both the torch and the inscription have been interpreted by Richter (1968–1971, 2:37–8, fig. 124) as references to a marriage. The ring might then have served as a wedding present, praising the bride and groom by comparing them to Mars and Venus.
41 This interpretation has its origins in 19th-century scholarship (e.g., Overbeck 1858, 258–59), and received its canonical treatment in Furtwangler 1895, 384–85. It has subsequently been adopted by most scholars; supra n. 3.
42 For the challenge to scholarly assumptions about “Roman copying” generally, see Marvin 1989, 1997; Ridgway 1984; and the essays collected in Gazda 2002. On the problems associated with Greek precedents for the Mars, see Hartswick 1990. On the groups, see Perry 2005, 128–49.
status as emulative yet creative works of art. This unduly limits the range and depth of resonance that these works had for viewers. While not denying the Roman aspects of the portrait groups, I would at the same time emphasize that their "Greekness"—in typology, style, and mythological reference—was a critical part of their appeal for patrons.

One clear signal of the Greekness of the groups was their combination of two familiar statue types, known as the Ares Borghese and Aphrodite of Capua (figs. 11, 12). The latter has well-documented origins in the Greek period, with a visual format that can be observed in the Venus de Milo (albeit with altered arms and a more sensuous Hellenistic style) and in a series of small-scale Hellenistic terracottas from Corinth. The style, body type, and pose of the Ares Borghese find good parallels in works by the followers of Polykleitos, although the type itself does not appear in preserved artworks prior to the Neronian era.

Just as the sculptures looked back to Greek art in terms of their iconography, they also recalled it in their styles. Both the male and female figures were rendered in classicizing styles, although from chronologically disparate periods: the male figure looked back to the late fifth century B.C.E., the female to ca. 350–300 B.C.E. Both types thus came from the highly valued Classical era, and their heroic nudity (or in the case of Aphrodite, half-nudity), their naturalistic yet idealized features, and their elegant and graceful postures made them characteristic examples of the achievements of Greek art.

Not surprisingly, the Ares and Aphrodite statue types were enthusiastically adopted by Roman artists, either separately or together. The Aphrodite of Capua

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43 This is the approach taken, above all, by Perry 2005, 128–49.
45 This argument is developed further in Kousser (forthcoming).
46 Venus de Milo: Musée du Louvre MA 399; on the statue and its relation to classical Greek art, see Kousser 2005, esp.
47 Hartswick 1990, 230 (Roman copies), 250–52 (parallels with works by the followers of Polykleitos).
48 These are the periods in which the Ares Borghese and Aphrodite of Capua types were likely created. For a discus-

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Fig. 10. Sarcophagus with Mars-Venus group from Rome, ca. 200–250 C.E. Munich, Künstlerhaus (courtesy DAI Rome).
type was used both as a sensuous Venus decorating Roman leisure buildings such as baths and as a more martial Victoria on imperial victory monuments such as the Trajan and Marcus Aurelius columns. The Ares Borghese appeared in single-figure honorific portraits, including one of Hadrian, and also as a god in temple decoration; one version of the type, dating to the Antonine period, was uncovered within the round Largo Argentina temple in Rome.

In addition to the classical originals and contemporary Roman images based on them, the portrait groups had a more direct precedent in a sculpture from the Forum Augustum (fig. 13). Although this sculpture is now difficult to interpret due to its poor state of preservation and limited excavation history, it deserves some commentary. The sculpture preserves part of the neck and upper chest of a male figure (nude except for a sword belt over the right shoulder) and the left hand and arm of another figure around his neck. These details are sufficient to indicate that the statue belongs to the series of groups in Mars-Venus format, as has been recognized since the fragment’s publication by L’Orange in 1932.

There is little scholarly consensus on the date and original function of this fragmentary Mars-Venus group. It was found during the large-scale excavations of the Forum Augustum in the late 1920s, and no precise record of its discovery is known. It has been proposed that the group was created around the mid second century C.E. on analogy with the better-preserved Antonine portrait statues and coins. It would then be a retrospective work meant to recall,
through the context and the divinities closely identified with Augustus, the first princeps and the golden age associated with his reign. There is, however, better evidence for an Augustan date for the fragment. The expert sculptural technique and monumental scale (the preserved dimensions are 0.32 x 0.39 x 0.25 m, commensurate with those of the life-sized groups) are appropriate for the forum complex, a major building project of the new Augustan regime. And as L'Orange recognized, the work was perhaps described by Ovid as standing within the Temple of Mars Ultor. The passage forms part of a catalogue of Roman sites observed by a female viewer:

Venerit in magni templum, tua munera, Martis, stat Venus Ultori iuncta, vir ante fores. . . .

Should she come into that temple of great Mars, your own gift, Venus stands joined to the Avenger, her husband before the doors. . . .

In addition, the type is replicated on a fragmentary carnelian gem with a secure terminus ante quem of 70 C.E., demonstrating that it was familiar well before the second century. The totality of the evidence thus suggests that the sculpture dates to the late first century B.C.E. or early first century C.E. and originally formed part of the decoration of the Temple of Mars Ultor. As an over-life-sized sculpture set up in a prominent public location, it offered an authoritative rendering of two gods central to Augustus' propaganda.

While the poor state of preservation of the sculpture obscures many details of its appearance, some significant evidence can be extracted from visual analysis of the fragment. Most notably, it is clear that an innovative formal aspect of the groups— their reworking via gesture and pose to link the two, initially separate, statues—was already present in the Augustan monument. As the remains of Venus' hand on Mars' neck demonstrate, the single-figure Aphrodite of classical Greece was adapted by the Augustan sculptor to embrace her consort; the gesture was one of intimacy.
and affection. To judge from the Antonine sculptures, Ares' slight downward gaze and the orientation of his body toward the right were accentuated in the groups to highlight his responsiveness to his partner; and his muscular nudity was emphasized through the contrast with the goddess' softer flesh and his weapons. The result was a majestic, retrospective work of art, based on Greek prototypes but thoughtfully combined in new ways.

Within the Forum Augustum, the monumental statues visibly embodied the authoritative yet attractive qualities of the new regime. To begin with, the sculpture's Greek visual format was appropriate to the classicizing and eclectic taste of the period. It fit well within the forum complex as a whole, complementing the evocation of the classical past represented by the copies of the Erecchtheum caryatids. And the allusion to Greek mythology served here, as in the treatment of the Aeneas legend within the forum, to insert the Romans within a well-known literary tradition. Furthermore, the group expressed a common theme of the princeps' propaganda: Augustus' establishment of peace, represented allegorically by Venus, ancestress of the Iulii, disarming Mars, ancestor of the populus Romani via Romulus.

The princeps' use of Mars and Venus formed part of a broader attempt to represent the new imperial order as divinely sanctioned and Augustus himself as uniquely qualified to rule because of his descent from Venus and from the new divus, Julius Caesar. The cult group in the Temple of Mars Ultor has been convincingly reconstructed as depicting Venus receiving the sword of Mars, with Divus Iulius standing nearby; the two gods also appeared together on the temple pediment and as statues in the round, with Julius Caesar again, in the Pantheon of Agrippa. Juxtaposed with their mortal descendents, the gods were celebrated above all as parents and tutelary divinities of the Roman state.

Yet the sexual content of the imagery should not be overlooked. In the fragmentary Mars-Venus group, for instance, the figures' nudity and physical intimacy would have reminded viewers of their fame as the most passionate lovers in the Olympian pantheon. This was a well-known myth, and one frequently alluded to in literature of the Greek and Roman periods. As recounted in its canonical form by the bard Demodokhos in Homer's Odyssey, the myth told how the goddess of love was unfaithful to her husband, the ill-favored Hephaistos, preferring instead the youthful, handsome god of war; the adulterous lovers were eventually caught in flagrante by the angry husband and publicly shamed (Hom. Od. 8.266–266). Given the myth's exalted literary ancestry, it is not surprising that it was familiar to the Romans also. At the time the Forum Augustum sculpture was created, it had recently been highlighted by Lucretius in the invocation to Venus in book 1 of his De Rerum Natura, where the poet describes Mars:

\[\text{in gremium qui saepe tuum se reicit aeterno devictus vulnere amoris atque ita, suspiciens tereti cervice reposta, pascit amore avidos, inhiens in te, dea, visus eque tuo pendet resupini spiritus ore.}\]

who often in your lap reclines, conquered by the eternal wound of love and thus looking up, with well-turned neck thrown back, feeds his desirous gaze with love, gaping at you, goddess, and his breath as he lies back hangs upon your lips.

This emphasis on the gods' romantic relationship and their adultery might be seen as potentially difficult to square with the Augustan program of moral renewal. And, indeed, Ovid's Tristia 2 suggests that the statues were liable to mischievous misinterpretation. This description of the group formed part of a larger catalogue of innocuous images that suggested not-so-innocent thoughts, with Ovid concluding that:

\[\text{omnia perversas possunt corrumpere mentes; stant tamen illa suis omnia tuta locis.}\]

64 On Tristia 2 and its social and intellectual background, see Nugent 1988; Barchiesi 2002.
All things are able to corrupt perverse minds; All things however are safe in their proper place.

Ovid stressed the potentially adulterous resonances of the image, with Venus joined to Mars with her husband immediately outside the door. This is a typically Ovidian interpretation of the work, which fits the poet’s polemical purpose: to argue that his poems, like Augustus’ religious donations, were in fact innocent and corrupted only those with impure minds. Elsewhere in Tristia 2, Ovid ostensibly rejects a lascivious reading of a major work of art, while at the same time indicating that such a reading was in fact common, perhaps even inevitable.66

The sculpture has appeared unduly lascivious for the Forum Augustum to many modern scholars, as well as to Ovid. It can best be understood as an experimental work, created at a time of flux and innovation in Roman art.67 For modern art historians, Augustan works of art often appear to be canonical—monuments that set the standard for later imperial art. But this perspective is available only in retrospect. To contemporary viewers, the commissions of the new princes would have looked rather different. They broke with established traditions of divine representation in Roman art and drew instead on a richer but less familiar combination of models: classical Greek statuary, Homeric mythology, and Hellenistic/Republican art from the private sphere.68 The Forum Augustum group should be seen as an illuminating if not entirely successful attempt on the part of its sculptor to synthesize these models into a new tradition of divine imagery.

The Antonine portrait groups retained, so far as we can judge, much of the overall visual form of their Greek and Augustan prototypes; the alterations are, however, significant. Most importantly, the groups personalized their models through the use of portrait heads; the goddess of love and the god of war (classical Greek deities, adulterous lovers, divine ancestors of Rome) were here deployed to exalt, by association, contemporary—and clearly mortal—individuals. The descriptive, often homely, portrait heads, with their crow’s feet and prominent chins, their thin lips and bulging eyes, can seem to modern viewers to sit rather awkwardly on the perfect divine bodies to which they were joined. But for their Roman patrons, these features were in no way problematic; rather, they

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67 Galinsky 1996, 8.
68 It is only in the visual culture of the private sphere (preserved, above all, in Pompeii) that we see images of Mars and Venus as lovers; see, e.g., the silver drinking cups from the House of the Menander at Pompeii, described in Maiuri 1932, 1:321–26; 2:pls. 31–6.
69 The Forum Augustum group had, of course, a strong political charge, but if it was indeed set up within the Temple of Mars Ultor, it would have served a religious function as part of the temple’s decoration.
70 For classical statue types adapted in Roman homes, see...
Empire, the same was true of their tombs, which were filled with portrait statues like those examined here, or mythological paintings, mosaics, or sarcophagi. Greek art was incorporated into Roman daily life in a more creative, more thorough-going, and above all more personal manner than was possible via imperially commissioned public monuments.

As the visual format and function of the statues became more personal, so, too, did their meaning for the audience. While the Greek originals were likely interpreted by viewers within a civic and religious framework and the Augustan group within a political and allegorical one, the Antonine portrait groups were insistently private and personal in nature; they told visitors to house or tomb about the love of the married couple portrayed. They consequently formed part of the richly varied Roman visual culture focused on the representation of married love.

To understand the connotations of the Mars-Venus portrait groups for contemporary viewers, it is useful to compare them briefly with other depictions of male-female relationships in Roman art. Among the most familiar are the scenes of Roman couples in contemporary dress on biographical sarcophagi (fig. 14). These clarify how husbands and wives were expected to be represented in a daily-life setting, in contemporary costume and with the actions and gestures appropriate to a particular event, the Roman wedding. As the protagonists clasped hands to signal the ratification of the dotal contract, the sculptures stressed the public and ceremonial character of Roman marriage.

In contrast to the biographical sarcophagi, the Mars-Venus portrait groups and related images on mythological sarcophagi and mosaics highlighted instead the affective qualities of marriage. They offered a range of options for the representation of the couple’s emotional experience, from desperate sorrow at the death of one partner—highlighted, for instance, by images of Achilles and Penthesilea or Admetus and Alcestis—to the pleasures and sensuous delights of reciprocal affection (as shown by the extremely popular images of Dionysos and Ariadne). In their overall visual effect, these mythological images were very different from the wedding contract scenes, as they made use of extravagant gestures and facial expressions to convey a strong emotional charge, while adapting familiar classical types for an impressive appearance. Within this range of options, the groups in Mars-Venus format are notable for their emphasis on the virtus and military prowess of the husband, metaphorically suggested through his identification with Mars; and the wife’s connection to Venus praised her beauty and desirability, while her action signaled her love for her husband, as she gazed at and embraced him.

As with other mythological couples, such as Achilles and Penthesilea or Admetus and Alcestis, the divine figures of Mars and Venus may seem a perplexing choice for self-representation, at least to modern scholars. Yet, since these mythological self-representations did occur—indeed, they permeated Antonine private art—we must try to understand their attraction for Roman patrons. In this regard, it is important to note first the value placed on the affective qualities of marriage in Roman culture; literary and epigraphic texts testify to a romantic ideal of marriage, which was intended to be emotionally satisfying for both partners. While a few contemporary-dress portraits sought to depict this ideal, it was more effectively shown through mythological self-representations. In these, patrons, freed from the constraints of real-life decorum, could take on new roles in a fantasy world of romantic passion. Thus, Greek-inspired images served to express certain important aspects of Roman marriage more fully than could works of art of a more purely “Roman” character.

In addition, it must be stressed that these Greek mythological images were interpreted selectively by Roman patrons and viewers. For modern scholars, conditioned by long training to accept the information derived from written texts as fixed and authoritative, this can be difficult to appreciate. But for Romans living in a more oral, less text-based culture, myths were fluid in their significance and lent themselves to frequent reinterpretation. The Mars-Venus portrait groups are a particularly striking example of this process of selective interpretation; but they are not alone. A useful comparison might be the sarcophagi with Achilles and Penthesilea, which spoke to the husband’s sorrow at his wife’s death but not his responsibility for it.

To sum up, the Mars-Venus portrait groups offered their commissioners a very powerful and attrac-

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72 On the biographical sarcophagi generally, see Kampen 1981.
tive means to depict the private, romantic aspects of their conjugal relationship. They were a complement and alternative to contemporary-dress portraits, with their stress on the formal, public qualities of Roman marriage.

To understand how Greek myths and images took on so central a role in Roman self-representation, it is useful to consider when and under what circumstances Romans of the Antonine era encountered these aspects of Hellenic tradition. They had many opportunities; Roman viewers could draw on literary texts (possibly with illustrations), oral accounts, or visual representations decorating major sanctuaries. One alternative that has been insufficiently explored, however, is theatrical performance.76 In Rome and its environs—and indeed, in cities throughout the empire—the theater played a central role in civic life during the Imperial period.77 It offered frequent performances (associated with religious festivals, imperial cult, and military triumphs), which attracted a broad and enthusiastic cross-section of the urban population.78

Given the popularity of theatrical performances, it is all the more significant that their content was by the Antonine period based primarily on Greek myths. As literary and epigraphic texts demonstrate, the dominant genre of the era was pantomime: the representation through dance and acting of a Greek mythological narrative. Pantomime thus offered an opportunity for Romans of all social levels to experience the Greek mythological past as a vivid and significant part of their own culture. This has, I argue, important implications for our understanding of Roman art.79

76 Some very insightful treatments do exist for “fatal charades” in the Roman amphitheater (esp. Coleman 1990). But in understanding the attractions of Greek myth for Roman mythological self-representation, these staged executions of criminals are less relevant than the pantomime performances examined here.

77 On the Roman theater generally, see Scodel 1993; Slater and Csapo 1995.

78 On appropriate occasions for theatrical spectacles, see Blänzdorf 2004, 120-27; on the (ever-increasing) number of days set aside for them, see Slater and Csapo 1995, 209. On the performative and theatrical qualities of central Roman ceremonies such as the triumph, see Beard 2003.

79 A few scholars have drawn attention to the importance of theater for an understanding of Roman art; see, e.g., Varner (2000) on Senecan tragedy and fourth-style wall painting, and Huskinson (2002-2003) on performance and theatrical mosaics in Antioch.
GREEK MYTHOLOGICAL NARRATIVES IN THE ROMAN THEATER

In the Antonine era, pantomime performances (already popular from the age of Augustus onward) attained a new degree of prominence and social acceptance. These song and dance spectacles increasingly replaced earlier forms such as comedy and tragedy in the roster of performances offered on major holidays; they were for the first time admitted into the dramatic competitions at the international sacred festivals. Scholars have often seen this as clear proof of the degeneracy of High Imperial theater, as the impressive literary tradition preserved in Plautus and Terence was replaced by performances whose highlight was mimetic dancing. Nonetheless, this development merits close scrutiny because of the widespread popularity of pantomime and its concern with mythological narrative, the broader subject of this article. This section examines the basic components of pantomime spectacle (the performer, plot, action) and its reception by the audience. While I do not intend to suggest that pantomime was the only means by which Romans encountered Greek myth, I do argue for the significance of this underestimated genre for High Imperial private art.

While variations existed, the genre of pantomime had by the Antonine period attained a clear and canonical form. It normally involved one central (male) performer who danced and acted out a narrative to the accompaniment of music and a chorus. He wore an elegant, loose-fitting silken costume and a series of masks; unlike those of comedy and tragedy, the mouths in pantomime masks were closed, to signal the performer’s silence. By switching masks, he played all or nearly all roles in the pantomime, though he was occasionally assisted by a supporting actor. His aim was to convey character and action through movement alone, and to choose appropriate movements for particular characters.

Lucian’s On the Dance, which includes our only extensive preserved description of a pantomime spectacle, provides very useful information about the effect of such a performer. Lucian relates that the performer “by himself danced the adultery of Aphrodite and Ares, Helios revealing the secret, Hephaistos plotting and catching the two, Aphrodite and Ares, in a net, and the gods coming in, each individually, and Aphrodite being ashamed, and Ares cowering and asking for mercy, and all that belongs to this story.” His performance was, according to Lucian, so thoroughly convincing that a Cynic philosopher in attendance shouted, “I hear the story that you are acting, man, I do not just see it; you seem to me to be talking with your very hands!”

This account, apocryphal or not, highlights several important aspects of pantomime performance. It suggests, first, the titillating combination of high culture and eroticism that often seems to have characterized pantomime; the subject matter referenced the famous song of Demodokhos in Homer’s Odyssey but also explored fully the sexual and voyeuristic aspects of the myth of Ares and Aphrodite. This choice of plot was not unusual, since pantomime drew above all on erotic narratives familiar from literary texts. Most prominent were myths told in Homer, Hesiod, and classical tragedy, although later authors such as Virgil might be used also. And we have occasional references to historical figures such as Cleopatra. Nonetheless, the emphasis was above all on Greek myth, and especially on myths concerning male-female relations; Lucian describes the ideal performer as someone who “before all else . . . will know the stories of [the gods'] loves, and those

81 For a discussion of changes in the Antonine period, see Robert 1930, 121; Barnes 1996, 167–68. For the prominence of the performers as attested in inscriptions, see Blänsdorf 2004, 108–13.
82 Robert 1930.
83 For the historiography of imperial theater, see Jones 1993, 39–40.
84 For a discussion of both the canonical form of pantomime and the difficulties inherent in generalization, see Slater and Csapo 1995, 369–70.
85 Lib. Or. 64.57, 64.87–89, 64.97; Lucian Salt. 2, 30; cf. Apul. Met. 10.29–34, which suggests that more elaborate spectacles with multiple performers were also possible; the preponderance of the evidence, however, is for single “stars.”
86 Lib. Or. 64.52; Lucian Salt. 2, 29. For images of pantomime performers in the visual arts, see Kokolakis 1959, 36–40; Jory 1996.
88 Lucian Salt. 67.
89 Lucian Salt. 63: “αὐτὸς ὑπὸ ἅπαντος ὅρχησατο τὴν Ἀφροδίτης καὶ Ἄρηος μοχεῖαν; Ὁ πλοῖον μηνύοντα ὡς Ἰρὰστον ἐπιβο- νυλεύοντα καὶ τῶν δεσμῶν ἀμφότερος, τὴν τιν Ἀφροδίτην καὶ τὸν Ἄρην, σαγηνεύοντα, καὶ τῶν ἐφετῶτας θεόν ἐκκαίνουν αὐτῶν, καὶ αἰδουμένην μὲν τὴν Ἀφροδίτην, ὑποδηδοκεῖτα δὲ καὶ ἱκτεύοντα τὸν Ἄρην, καὶ ωσάτι ἡ ἱστορία ταύτη πρόσετον.”
90 Lucian Salt. 63 (Harmon 1913–1967, 257): “Ἀκούσα, ἄνθρωπε, ἄπω τοὺς ὅμοιον κυρίου, ἀλλὰ μοι δοκεῖς τοῖς χεροῖς στίχοις λαλεῖν.”
91 On eroticism as characteristic of pantomime, see Lucian Salt. 2–3; Seneca Q Nat. 7.32.3; Lada-Richards 2003. This brought on attacks by the church fathers (Puchner 2002).
92 On this, see Montiglio 1999, 265; cf. TrGF 1, 344 ad 14a (inscription from Tivoli, 199 C.E., with a list of roles based largely on Euripidean plots). For Roman plots, see Suet. Nero 54.
93 Lucian Salt. 37.
of Zeus himself, and all the forms into which he changed himself, and also all the tragedies in Hades.94

These myths of love and passion were represented in spectacles that drew upon the performer’s ability to communicate and provoke a strong emotional response from the audience. Indeed, stories about “barbarians” who viewed pantomime and comprehended the action perfectly demonstrate the high value put on the performer’s capacity to convey the myth through purely visual means;95 the musical accompaniment was intended to enhance the effect, but no more. As the Cynic philosopher’s comment in Lucian demonstrates, the greatest praise for such a performer was to suggest, metaphorically, his “speaking” power; he was expected, though silent, to communicate all the more effectively through gesture.96 His abilities were particularly appropriate to the society in which he performed: the diverse, heterogeneous world of major cities during the High Empire, where Italian provincial governors might rub shoulders in the audience with Athenian aristocrats and sophists from Africa, Gaul, or Syria.

But the talented pantomime performer was not expected simply to communicate a given myth to his audience; rather, he was to act it out so vividly as to arouse their intense emotions. As literary and historical evidence shows, theatrical spectators tended to respond strongly to pantomime, whether with applause, acclamation, or ad hominem critiques of unsuccessful performers.97 Occasionally, they rioted, with violent and often fatal results; the pantomime performers of Rome were in consequence regularly banned by irate emperors.98 But the strong emotions stimulated by pantomime could also be viewed positively, as a release from the monotonous tensions of everyday life, a unifying force for the heterogeneous elements of High Imperial society, or as a source of pleasure and edification.99

These positive benefits were the more significant because the theater drew together members of all social classes; it provided a rare opportunity for the general populace directly to encounter the emperor or local elite. Therefore, pantomime performance helped create a shared frame of reference for all members of civic society that was grounded in Greek myth and the cultural values articulated therein. The results of this process are signaled by an illuminating if somewhat tongue-in-cheek passage in Libanius:

As long, then, as the race of the tragic poets flourished, they went into the theaters as joint teachers of the people. When they went into decay, only the better-off part of society could share the education in the Musea while most were bereft of it—until a god took pity on the lack of education for the many and introduced dancing as a teaching resource of history for the masses. The result is that today the gold smith will not have a bad conversation about the house of Priam or Laios with someone from the schools.100

This brief discussion of pantomime is useful for the analysis of mythological portraiture in several ways. It suggests one way in which Romans of the High Empire might encounter the mythological narrative underlying the group portraits in Mars-Venus format and enhances our understanding of the horizon of expectations viewers brought to the images. While these expectations were also conditioned by other experiences—for example, by state-sponsored ceremonies and images celebrating Mars and Venus as progenitors of the Roman people—pantomime performances were particularly effective due to their broad popularity and strong emotional charge. Viewing these statues, Romans of all social levels could recall a myth made vivid by theatrical spectacles and could then evaluate its appropriateness for their own lives as well as for those commemorated. In this way, Roman viewers could experience a more powerful connection to the mythological portraits than would have been possible through, for example, literary texts alone.

The eclecticism and selectivity of pantomime—which encompassed the whole of Graeco-Roman myth-history and constantly reinterpreted its subject matter in new ways—also provides a useful parallel for works such as the Mars-Venus portraits. In both cases,

95E.g., Lucian Salt. 64.
98E.g., Dio Cass. 57.14.10; Suet. Tib. 37.2; Domit. 7.1; Tac. Ann. 1.54, 1.77, 6.13, 13.25. For an analysis of the riots, focusing on the era of Tiberius, see Jory 1984.
99Release from tension: Lib. Or. 64.57; unifying force: Lucanian Salt. 6, 72; Lib. Or. 64.57; source of edification: Lib. Or. 64.112; Lucian Salt. 6; cf. Haubold and Miles 2004.
100Lib. Or. 64.112 (Haubold and Miles 2004, 31): “ἔσος μὲν οὖν ἄγεθε τὸ τῶν τραγῳδιοκότων θέτον, καὶ διδάσκαλοι τοῖς δήμοις εἰς τὰ θέατρα περιήγησαν· ἐπειδὴ δὲ οἱ μὲν ἀπήχθησαν, τῆς δὲ ἐν μοισείοις παιδεύσεως ὡσον εὐδαιμονετέρων ἐκοινώνησε, τὸ πολὺ δὲ ἐκείρησε, ἐπειδὴ τίς τινῆς τῶν κολλῶν ἀπάτευσεν ἀντιστίχες τὴν ὁργήν καὶ διδάσχειν τινά τοῖς πλήθεσι παλαιῶν πράξεων, καὶ νῦν ὁ χρυσοῦς πρὸς τὸν ἐκ τῶν διδακτάκλειν οὐκ ἔκειται διαλέγεται περὶ τῆς ὀικίας Πρώτου καὶ Λαίου.”
models of diverse origins could be combined into a new synthesis, in a manner that has seemed peculiar to modern scholars but was clearly appreciated in antiquity. In addition, pantomime performers, like their comrades in the visual arts, worked constantly with familiar mythological subjects but were encouraged to create their own distinctively individualized interpretations of them. Both art forms testify to modes of aesthetic evaluation characteristic of Roman culture and very different from our own. They demonstrate the high value placed by the Romans on works of art that acknowledged their place within a revered tradition, rather than on those that radically broke with established, canonical forms. Such eclectic, classicizing artworks were appropriate to the society of the High Empire. They drew on—and indeed, helped to create—the common culture shared by the empire’s numerous and diverse inhabitants.

CONCLUSIONS

The portraits in Mars-Venus format offer a new perspective on a question that has recently attracted scholarly attention: the Roman replication/emulation of Greek art.\(^\text{101}\) This article contributes to the debate in several ways. First, it complements previous investigations by highlighting the contributions of the understudied Antonine era to the Roman transformation of Greek models. Without negating the importance of Augustan public art, I would, however, stress that Antonine private monuments, such as the funerary and domestic sculptures examined here, deserve a prominent place in our history of Roman classicism. My comparison of the Mars-Venus group from the Forum Augustum with the later Antonine portraits helps suggest why. If my analysis of the Augustan monument is correct, this innovative artistic creation presented considerable problems of interpretation for its first viewers; its references to the Greek past were too new, too numerous, and too varied to be easily understood. By contrast, the Antonine portrait groups were both more familiar in their visual language—since classicizing sculptures were by this time omnipresent in Roman public and private art—and more comprehensible as narrative images. They formed part of a broader popular culture characterized by abundant opportunities for mythological role-playing, both in the visual arts (e.g., sarcophagi and mosaics as well as statues) and in theatrical spectacles such as pantomime. As Romans of the Antonine era took advantage of these new opportunities to act out roles within the fantasy world of Greek myth, they experienced a closer and more intimate connection to the Hellenic past than was possible for their Augustan predecessors. In this way, the Antonine period merits investigation within the course of any history of classicism that takes account of the mentalities of Roman viewers.

While complementing earlier studies, this article also poses a challenge to some current scholarly orthodoxies. Most importantly, it offers a fresh perspective on the vexing question of the originality of “Roman copies.” Many scholars have recently argued for originality at the level of visual detail, as artists altered, adapted, and recombined their Greek prototypes for new Roman creations.\(^\text{102}\) This approach is useful in that it allows for a new appreciation of monuments previously denigrated as eclectic, insufficiently faithful copies. However, it tends concomitantly to devalue the many technically superb and visually impressive works of art that were clearly intended as copies (e.g., the replica series based on Polykleitos’ Doryphoros and Myron’s Diskobolos). My analysis of the Mars-Venus portrait groups offers a different avenue of approach. While I do discuss some significant changes in the statues’ visual format, I have focused particularly on alterations in function and meaning; these seem to me the works’ most striking and original aspects. Such an approach—focusing on how Greek myths and images, some six centuries old, were deployed to express contemporary, thoroughly Roman, values—could fruitfully be employed more broadly; it highlights one of the central achievements of Roman art.

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