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# The historiography of Roman art and the “modern copy myth”

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MIRANDA MARVIN, *THE LANGUAGE OF THE MUSES. THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN ROMAN AND GREEK SCULPTURE* (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 2008). Pp. viii + 304, 266 ills., approximately half in colour. ISBN 978-0-89236-806-8. \$100.

In the first pages of her book, M. Marvin makes clear her central argument:

Roman [sculpture] workshops could and did copy earlier works, but copies were a minor part of their total production ... There is no reason to believe ... that Roman sculptors were substantially more engaged as pure copyists than were other Roman artists (3).

The argument has significant implications for the field of ancient art. A major part of Roman sculptural production consists of Greek-style statues of gods and mythological heroes. These works have generally been excluded from histories of Roman art — which have tended to focus on more characteristically “Roman” works, such as portraits and historical reliefs<sup>1</sup> — and have instead been incorporated into histories of Greek art, where they are often claimed as faithful replicas of lost Greek works. Beginning in the 1970s, scholars have sought to analyze these sculptures as Roman artifacts, elucidating, for example, the semiotic connotations of particular Hellenic styles, or the deployment of such works in characteristically Roman contexts, such as villas, baths and theaters.<sup>2</sup> With the new millennium has come a particular focus on questions of emulation and replication in Roman sculpture, together with more forthright attacks on the assumptions underlying the belief in “Roman copies”.<sup>3</sup>

*The language of the Muses: the dialogue between Roman and Greek sculpture* is an extensively researched, emphatically argued, and beautifully illustrated contribution to the debate. It focuses particularly on historiography, tracing the belief in the priority of Greek over Roman sculpture back to Roman writers themselves, and forward to the late 19th c. The aim is to demonstrate the problematic assumptions underlying what Marvin terms “the modern copy myth” (chaps. 1-7). The book then examines the relation between Greek models and Roman works of art in four other fields — architecture, “the luxury arts” (silversmithing and gem-carving), painting, and literature — arguing that they provide parallels to, and methodological models for, the case of sculpture (chapt. 8). It concludes with a sketch of what the field of “Roman ideal sculpture” might look like if it were considered independently of Greek art, as a response to distinctively Roman needs and values (chapt. 9). The book will be of interest to specialists in ideal sculpture and to Romanists curious about the development of their discipline.

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- 1 E.g., D. Kleiner, *Roman sculpture* (New Haven, CT 1992). J. Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian triumph* (Oxford 1998) is a notable exception.
  - 2 Among the most important earlier contributions to this debate are: M. Fuchs, *Untersuchungen zur Ausstattung römischer Theater in Italien und den Westprovinzen des Imperium Romanum* (Mainz am Rhein 1987); H. Manderscheid, *Die Skulpturenausstattung der kaiserzeitlichen Thermenanlagen* (Berlin 1981); R. Neudecker, *Die Skulpturenausstattung römischer Villen in Italien* (Mainz am Rhein 1988); B. Ridgway, *Roman copies of Greek sculpture: the problem of the originals* (Ann Arbor, MI 1984); R. Wünsche, “Der Jungling vom Magdalensberg,” in J. Scholl (ed.), *Festschrift Luitpold Düssel* (Munich 1972) 45-80; P. Zanker, *Klassizistische Statuen: Studien zur Veränderung des Kunstgeschmacks in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz am Rhein 1974); and T. Hölscher, *Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System*, vol. 1987.2 (Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Kl., 1987), translated by A. Snodgrass and A. Künzl-Snodgrass and revised as T. Hölscher, *The language of images in Roman art* (Cambridge 2004).
  - 3 E. K. Gazda (ed.), *The ancient art of emulation* (Ann Arbor, MI 2002); E. E. Perry, *The aesthetics of emulation in the visual arts of ancient Rome* (Cambridge 2005); J. Trimble, “Replicating the body politic: The Herculaneum Women statue types in Early Imperial Italy,” *JRA* 13 (2000) 41-68.

The historiography of Roman sculpture is a cautionary tale: it demonstrates the problems inherent in a history of art that privileges literary texts over archaeological remains; it also suggests the dangers of reading works of art as expressions of a cohesive national character.<sup>4</sup> The problems began with the Romans themselves, who famously denied any special expertise in the visual arts; at the same time, they assiduously recorded the achievements of Classical Greek artists, and appropriated many Hellenic masterpieces to adorn their capital.<sup>5</sup> Later writers, from the Renaissance through the 18th c., pored over these accounts of Greek achievement and sought to square them with the ancient remains in Rome and Italy. While the texts were limited in number and produced an essentially static picture of art, focused on the achievements of the Greeks, the archaeological remains were more numerous. So too their ever-increasing quantity and variety presented a challenge to antiquarians, and fostered a more dynamic tradition of scholarship. In Marvin's view, however, both approaches, celebrating Greek masterpieces while denigrating the abilities of Roman sculptors, remained flawed (54).

With J. J. Winckelmann these philological and antiquarian traditions were united. His *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* revolutionized ancient art history by combining the analysis of preserved works of art with the historical structure outlined by ancient writers. Marvin stresses Winckelmann's vivid, almost incantatory language, as well as his rhetorically charged exaltation of *Freiheit*, but downplays his significant methodological contributions to the field (105, 114). She puts greater emphasis on E. Q. Visconti, whose 7-volume catalogue, *Museo Pio-Clementino* (1782-1810), offers an early example of the assumptions underlying the "modern copy myth" (127-33). Marvin summarizes his arguments thus (131):

A work can be identified as a copy even if there is no particular original to link it to. The reason for making a replica is to own a copy of a famous work, and therefore the existence of a replica series proves that a noted Greek original lies behind it. Even unique works can be copies if the quality of their execution is not up to the quality of the design. Copyists introduce novelties, either by design or ineptitude. Many marbles copy bronze originals.

Visconti's method of approach to Greek-style Roman sculptures was certainly shared by later scholars, above all by A. Furtwängler in his highly influential *Meisterwerke der griechischen Plastik* (1893). These scholars receive the bulk of Marvin's attention in her historiography, while other recent authors (e.g., S. Marchand in *Down from Olympus: archaeology and philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* [1996]) have placed greater emphasis on the rôle of institutions such as museums, archaeological societies, and universities in shaping scholars' conclusions. These two approaches are indeed complementary, since both individuals and institutions contributed to the creation of a consensus regarding so-called Roman copies. The result was an impoverishment of both Greek and Roman sculptures, as Classical Greek masterworks were represented through statues created some 600 years later, and as Greek-style works were excluded from histories of Roman art.

If, as Marvin has argued, previous approaches to Greek-style Roman sculptures are flawed, what is to replace them? Those who seek to incorporate such works within the history of Roman art have tended, in recent years, to fall into one of two camps. Some argue that Roman sculptors aimed not simply to copy, but to rival and surpass their Greek models. Taking inspiration from Roman literary terminology, they describe this as "emulation," and highlight the creative potential inherent in it.<sup>6</sup> With a literary *imprimatur* and emphasis on Roman

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4 The latter problem is astutely noted by O. Brendel, *Prolegomena to the study of Roman art* (New Haven, CT 1979), in his prescient contribution to the historiography of Roman art. Much of the debate current today can be traced back to the nationalistic, universalistic, and pluralistic theories analyzed by Brendel (92-137).

5 For a perceptive literary analysis of both the ancient and the Renaissance humanist sources, see L. Barkan, *Unearthing the past: archaeology and aesthetics in the making of Renaissance culture* (New Haven, CT 1999).

6 This theoretical model was pioneered by Wünsche (supra n.2), popularized in English-language scholarship by Ridgway (supra n.2) especially 82-84, and promulgated in recent years particularly by E. K. Gazda, "Roman sculpture and the ethos of emulation: reconsidering repetition," *HSCP* 97 (1995) 121-56, and Perry (supra n.3). It should, however, be noted that not all contributors to Gazda's edited

creativity, this approach has proved very appealing to many, but it gives us no tools with which to address the many replica-series preserved in the Roman artistic record, some of them clearly copies of Greek statues such as the Athena Parthenos, Aphrodite of Knidos, and so on. A second, less popular, and perhaps more radical position is that not only the emulation but also the copying of sculptures was valorized by the Romans: what is characteristically Roman about such works is less their visual form than their patronage, reception, and context.<sup>7</sup>

Marvin champions the first, "emulative" theory, yet her analysis of Roman ideal sculpture lends some support also to the second position. An excursus on Polykleitos considers two famous examples of replica-series based on Greek originals, the Diadoumenos and the Doryphoros, as well as additional works, Polykleitan in style, that appear to be Roman inventions (151-64). A discussion of portraits highlights the importance of copying in this quintessentially Roman genre and suggests analogies with ideal sculpture (225-28). Marvin also considers at length the uses of replication in Roman visual culture, as familiar images were deployed to communicate personal or political messages more effectively (231-47).<sup>8</sup> In so doing, she looks forward to a new future for the study of ideal sculptures, one in which these works will be fully and unapologetically incorporated into the history of Roman art. Given the historiography Marvin details here, this future has been a long time coming.

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volume (supra n.3) endorse this position unequivocally; M. Koortbojian, "Forms of attention: four notes on replication and variation," (173-204), for example, seems in many ways closer to the second camp.

7 C. Hallett, "Emulation *versus* replication: redefining Roman copying," *JRA* 18 (2005) 419-35; R. Kousser, *Hellenistic and Roman ideal sculpture: the allure of the Classical* (Cambridge 2008), especially 136-51, and my review of Perry's book (supra n.3) in *caa.reviews* (2006), <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/866>.

8 Marvin's willingness to acknowledge here the significance of replication within Roman art comes as a surprise following her protests against "the Roman copy myth" elsewhere in the book. As her discussions of Polykleitos and of replication for political purposes demonstrate, the "copy myth" is not simply an artifact of modern scholarship. Rather, it reflects a genuine situation in Roman art in which replication played a critical rôle. There is, and should be, debate concerning why copying occurred and what it meant within a Roman context. But the fact of replication cannot be dismissed simply as a modern myth.