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Sol

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Chapter 2

Classical Art, Roman Religion, and Visual Meanings

Sol was a relatively minor, and primarily symbolic cog in the Roman cosmic order, but he was by no means negligible. One need but think of the roles of Apollo and Sol in Augustan religion, the range of symbolic meanings attached to the imperial radiate crown, the rise of Mithraism, the particular interest in Sol expressed by emperors such as Aurelian and Constantine, or the adoption by Christians of the winter solstice as birthday of Christ, to realize that the sun is a topic of considerable interest to the history of Roman religion and culture. Sol, then, is well worth studying. And so readers will perhaps be disappointed to find that this book is not really about Sol. This is not a comprehensive historical treatise about the Roman sun god, dealing with the broad themes and history of the cult of Sol in Rome. In this book all I offer is an analysis of the main image types of Sol - grounded in a lengthy catalogue of images that in and of itself is as basic as it is boring - and a number of case studies concerning the deployment of those images.

With such a limited scope, why write this book, and why read it? Some reasons have already been given in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I discuss some of the theoretical and methodological issues that in my opinion both justify a monograph such as this one, and that arise from it. They range from my views on how Roman art should be “read” to concerns with certain inherent and inherited problems in Classical scholarship. Some may feel that I am belabouring the obvious here and I certainly do not claim to be saying anything revolutionary. My goal is to contextualise the work presented in this book by highlighting some of the issues and concerns that I believe can be addressed with a concerted production of studies of this type. For although this study itself is limited in scope, it does, I believe, address an important issue for our discipline, namely how to equip ourselves to make better use of that family of sources that has hitherto been inadequately exploited in the study of Roman solar cult and indeed of Roman social and religious history in general: the iconographic and material remains.

Reading Visual Sources

Iconographic sources constitute a rich trove of potentially informative “texts”. The problem is that we are still in the process of developing a consistent and convincing interpretative strategy to extract from them the type of sociohistorical information they can provide. We cannot, for instance, begin to interpret complex iconographic compositions, far less integrate our interpretations into broader sociohistorical contexts, before we have achieved a solid understanding of the individual elements of which such compositions are comprised. Just as it is difficult to grasp the subtleties of a written text if one’s knowledge of the vocabulary used is inadequate, it is difficult to comprehend a visual one if one’s understanding of the individual elements comprising the image is lacking. Yet I would contend - and I believe that this study illustrates this - that in the case of Roman visual texts this is precisely what we often do: we attempt to interpret complex images of Roman art without truly understanding the visual vocabulary and syntax with which the images were composed, assuming that their meanings were somehow self-evident. “Scholars have simply put themselves in the place of the ancient

observer”, according to Paul Zanker, and as a result “the viewer is often only an ideal construct”.¹

This comment goes to the core of problem at hand. If we want to consult visual evidence as a source for Roman history, we must concentrate on what Romans saw, not what we see. We need to reflect more critically on the types of meaning ancient art conveyed, how it conveyed those meanings and what role ancient viewers played in that process. Classicists have long had a tendency to tacitly imbue the ancient viewers with a method of viewing that upon reflection is quite remarkable and rather improbable. It has been common practice, in Classical scholarship, to turn to texts in order to establish the meaning if a given image. At its best this approach can yield classic Panofskian iconographical analysis, for which Panofsky considered knowledge of the appropriate literary sources to be critical.² On the other hand, at its worst this approach can be quite disconcerting. Most would agree, I think, that to rely solely or primarily on texts to interpret an image in isolation is problematic. Roman viewers did not consult texts the moment they saw an image. They relied on visual factors such as the visual vocabulary and tradition of the representation, the visual associations and connotations, the style and material, and the physical context of the object. These factors are not ignored in Classical scholarship, but it is not exceptional to come across images interpreted primarily or even solely on the basis of textual parallels, especially in older Classical studies, with results that are still widely accepted as correct today. A good example is the famous mosaic supposedly depicting Christ as Sol in mausoleum M in the Vatican Necropolis, which I discuss in chapter eight.

Yet even at its best this approach is not unproblematic. To begin with, Panofsky of course had tailored his approach to Renaissance art, and the relationship between, say, a Christian Renaissance painting and a biblical text cannot serve as a paradigm for all religious art of any culture.³ But, more importantly, the knowledge of relevant literary sources mandated by Panofsky itself depends on the viewer being in some sense an “ideal” one, insofar as it can result in the text rather than the viewer being the driving force in the establishment of the meanings of the image.⁴ The viewer - ancient or modern - is not examined as an integral part of the process of viewing and as a result can be overlooked in favour of the text.⁵ This becomes clearer if we look briefly at Panofsky’s famous three steps of interpretation (pre-iconographical, iconographical, and iconological). The first step is pure description of the image (Panofsky uses the example of a painting depicting thirteen men around a table). This is followed by the second stage in which the image is analysed in the narrower sense (the thirteen are Jesus and his twelve disciples). This is the stage that requires knowledge of the relevant literature such as the bible and Panofsky is careful to distinguish this iconographical analysis, which is still descriptive, from the analysis of the content or intrinsic meaning of the image which he terms the iconological analysis. This

¹ Zanker 1997, 179.

² Panofsky 1961.

³ Weissenrieder & Wendt (2005, 5-20) offer a thoughtful evaluation of Panofsky’s method from the perspective of ancient art. Cf. Mitchell 1986; Bal & Bryson 1991; Fernie 1995: 181-3.

⁴ Weissenrieder & Wendt 2005, 11

⁵ Boymel Kampen 2003, 377-9, 381.

constitutes his third stage and deals with such matters as the patron's reasons for commissioning such an image and other aspects of its social and cultural meanings. It requires, in Panofsky's terms, synthetic intuition, based on a solid understanding of the "essential tendencies" of the mind.⁶ In other words, what the viewers themselves saw in the image and what the image meant to the viewer in sociohistorical terms is, Panofsky suggests, understood by the expert intuitively as a result of his expertise, experience and understanding of human nature.⁷

This summary of Panofsky's approach is far too brief to do him justice, but my point is not to criticize his method. My question is simply whether Panofsky's methodology for the analysis of Renaissance art, even if we accept it as valid per se, could provide us with the best tools for the tasks we face when analysing Roman art. I see two main problems. The first is practical and concerns the role of relevant literary texts. The important word here is "relevant". In the case of Roman art we rarely have truly relevant literary evidence, and as a result classicists often adduce texts of at best dubious relevance upon which they base questionable interpretations (illustrated in chapter 8). The second problem is more fundamental and concerns the "intrinsic meanings" of images, that is, what the Roman viewer actually saw in the image when she viewed it, and how she did so. Panofsky's "synthetic intuition" and his suggestion that we rely on the essential tendencies of the human mind is problematic insofar as it opens the door to reifying the viewer. Indeed, Panofsky comes close to inviting us to place ourselves in the ancient viewer's place, which is precisely what Zanker identifies as one of the central problems of Classical art history.

We need to take a step back. Rather than assume that Romans viewed as we do, our working hypothesis should be that art in the Roman world may in fact have been perceived very differently from the way our modern eyes perceive it. In other words, we cannot take the Roman viewer for granted, but should place her centre stage. We need methodologies that enable us to study what meanings Roman viewers sought and found in the rich visual culture around them, and how they did so. Hence the search for Roman perspectives on Rome's art and in particular its role in social, political, and religious discourse is currently an important concern in Roman art history.⁸ The aim of this study is to contribute to our understanding of the role of images of Sol in Roman visual discourse. It is thus primarily an exploration of actual images, rather than of the theoretical issues involved in the analysis of visual meanings. But one does not undertake such an exploration in a theoretical vacuum, and in this chapter I wish to set out my views on some of the principal issues involved. But before we pursue this, it is worth considering for a moment how Roman art history arrived at the stage it is currently at.

Modern views of Roman Art

Roman art has generally been treated as the heir of two important and conceptually very different

⁶ Panofsky 1961, 15-16.

⁷ On Panofsky's "synthetic intuition" and his methodology in general cf. Wood 1991; Fernie 1995, 181 - 183; Bann 1996; Hatt & Klonk 2006, 96-119 (with useful bibliography).

⁸ Hölscher 1987; Elsner 1995, 2007; Clarke 2003; Stewart 2003; Zanker 2004; Wassenrieder & Wendt 2005; Liverani 2007. On the ancient viewer; cf. Elsner 2002b, 360, quoting Riegl.

artistic traditions. The closest tradition, geographically as well as artistically, was that of Etruscan and central Italian art. But it is the other influence, that of Greek art, that has most interested scholars. The reason for this is rooted in the views on Classical art history that took shape in the latter part of the 18th and the earlier part of the 19th centuries and whose influence lingers even today. In these views, Rome was seen as unrivalled in its military and political ability to build empire, but as culturally inferior to its illustrious predecessor, Greece.⁹ The contention that Rome was capable only of absorbing and disseminating the superior culture of the Greeks resonated widely. It resulted in a “de-Romanisation” of those areas of Roman - especially imperial - art and literature that were clearly inspired on Greece, and a denigration of those areas that were not.¹⁰ Discussions of Roman art and literature were framed in terms of imitation, stressing above all Rome’s debt to Greece.¹¹ Of course, these unflattering views of Roman culture to some extent echo those of many Romans themselves, who saw the Orontes flowing in the Tiber, and complained that *Graecia capta Romam cepit*. Nonetheless, the modern view of Roman art as a (declining) continuation and (poor) imitation of the Greek was rooted more in the assessments of aesthetic quality championed by Winckelmann and his successors, than in an analysis and acceptance of ancient attitudes. Modern scholars have deemed Greek art to be the better not because that was what the Romans thought, but because they themselves idealized it as the more simple, unspoiled, and genuine, possessing, in Winckelmann’s inimitable terms, that all-

⁹ For a typical expression of this view, cf. for example Baumgarten *et al.* 1913, 219: “Wohl keinen größeren Gegensatz kann es zwischen zwei derselben großen europäischen Völkerfamilie angehörigen Völkern geben, als zwischen der griechischen und der römischen Nation. Ausgezeichnet durch größere körperliche Festigkeit, als der Hellene, hat der Römer vermocht, einen Menschheitstypus herber Männlichkeit zu entwickeln, wie er in gleich selbstbewußter Weise schwerlich unter der Kulturnationen der Welt wiederkehrt (...). Da sich nun die große Energie des nüchtern denkenden Volkes in überwiegendem Maße dem Staatsleben zuwandte, so ist es bis jetzt keinem Volke wieder vergönnt gewesen, eine Weltherrschaft über Kulturnationen aufzurichten wie es die römische war. (...) Die Menschheitskultur freilich konnte Rom nur verbreiten, weil dieses Volk mit seinem eminenten Staatsbewußtsein, seinem stolzen Selbstgefühl sich nicht im mindesten fremder Kultur verschloß. Das gilt vor allem dem Hellenismus gegenüber, aber auch die Kultur des Orients (...).”

¹⁰ Habinek 1992, 227-230, focusing in particular on Latin literature; cf. Boymel Kampen 2003, 375.

¹¹ Cf., typically, Bolgar (1984, 431-2), “The emergence of this new version of Greek culture based on another language was perhaps the most important result of Rome’s attempt to unify the Mediterranean world. Roman imitative effort had covered a wide area, comprising in the main literature, thought, scientific knowledge, and the fine arts. From the lifetime of Livius Andronicus to the Silver Age, Latin writers had been primarily concerned to reproduce and adapt Greek models. (...) They blended these borrowings with Latin elements and produced, as we know, an amalgam that was recognizably in the Greek tradition and yet recognizably new. (...) [In] the fine arts we see a development that parallels the one we have observed in literature. Here the Graeco-Roman world was the natural heir of the Hellenistic empires, and the tradition it inherited altered in its keeping. The problem of assessing the significance of the changes that occurred has inevitably caused some trouble. Were they due to a specifically Roman taste for realism and architectonic effects? Or were the transformations we see simply transformations in the Hellenic tradition due to the passage of time? (...) The answer hardly matters. It is plain (...) that Roman art owed an enormous debt to the Greek, and that its products, which until the last century were better known than those of Greece, did much to transmit Greek techniques to future generations.”

important edle Einfalt and stille Grösse.¹² Greek art, characterized by its ability to look beyond the mechanistic imitation of physical reality to explore ways to capture some divine, ineffable essence of beauty and truth, represented, in this view, all that one should wish for in true art.¹³ Roman art by comparison was inferior because it deviated from this path, even when it imitated Greek art. It often ignored such essentials as due proportions and natural relationships between bodies and space, and in its dryness distinctly lacked Greek art's focus on what art historians saw as true beauty. No matter that many surviving "Greek" works are in fact Roman; it is the Greek genius that makes noble simplicity and quiet grandeur shine through in even so tortured a figure as that of the Laocoon, just as it was Greek genius that allowed the divine spirit of beauty to be captured in and evoked by that greatest masterpiece of all: the Apollo Belvedere.¹⁴

To a degree, this is a perfectly valid approach to ancient art which is, after all, as much our art today as it was their art then. But treating those views as facts rather than opinions, and attributing to them universal validity, is a different matter. Problems are bound to arise when our subjective opinions are imposed on the supposedly objective analysis of Roman art. In the eyes of anyone holding such normative views regarding the artistic and aesthetic superiority of Greek art, such typically Roman works as Republican veristic portraiture, the census frieze on the so-called Ahenobarbus relief, funerary art in the style of the Haterii reliefs, or the processions on the sides of the column base of Antoninus Pius - not to mention the porphyry statues of the tetrarchs - can hold little interest, far less attraction. This is logical because if one elevates one's opinions concerning the superior quality of Greek art to the level of universal validity it inexorably follows that Romans would always want to imitate and emulate the art of the Greeks, which they knew intimately. The fact that they often did not do so must then be taken as a sign that they could not, rather than that they would not. In other words, it was the decline and fall of the Roman Empire that must have caused art (understood to be Greek art) to degenerate.¹⁵

The choice, then, was to either deny the subjectivity of such opinions concerning Greek artistic superiority or to devise a different approach to Roman art. For a century and a half the former choice was made and the dogma of Greek genius reigned unchallenged. Indeed, it lingers

¹² Cf. Morrison 1996, 64-67, for a clear description of Winckelmann's Platonic ideal of art. See also Scott 2006, 631-2.

¹³ On the notion of nature as art's ultimate *exemplum* cf., e.g., Philostratus Maior, *Imagines*, 294 K 8-10, praising the invention of μίμησις of painting as the ῥημα πρὸ σβύτατον καὶ ζυγγνέστατον τὸ ὑστέρησι. Winckelmann felt that artistic development can be broadly understood within the framework of a "loss of" and "return to" nature (Käfer 1986, 99-100). Cf. Käfer's discussion (1986, 87-91) of Lessing's views of art, Homer, and nature.

¹⁴ Laocoon: Brilliant 2000, 50-62. On the traditional approach to Roman art cf. Ridgway 2005, 63. On the practice of analyzing Roman statues as copies of Greek masterpieces and hence a source of insight in those masterpieces: Trimble & Elsner 2006, 202-4 (with useful references in notes 7 and 8), cf. Gazda 2002.

¹⁵ Cf. Riegl's (1927, 6-7) discussion of previous views on late Roman art: "Die bildende Kunst wäre von dem hohen Stande der Entwicklung, zu dem sie es bei den Mittelmeervölkern gebracht hatte, durch das zerstörende Eingreifen barbarischer Völkerschaften im Norden und Osten des römischen Weltreiches herabgeschleudert worden, so daß sie von Karls des Großen Zeit an eine aufsteigende Entwicklung vom neuen beginnen mußte." On the problem of quality as an intellectual category cf. Boymel Kampen 2003, 377 and n. 33.

even today.¹⁶ In the early twentieth century, however, two protagonists of the antinormative Viennese school, Franz Wickhoff and Alois Riegl, famously rejected the aestheticizing opinions about artistic quality that had dominated the debate until then.¹⁷ They argued that in particular the anticlassical art that was so typical of the later Roman empire was not decadent but different, rooted in a shift in the *Kunstwollen* - to use Riegl's untranslatable term - of the age.¹⁸ Wickhoff and Riegl thus became the prime movers in a gradual rehabilitation of late Roman art - indeed of Roman art in general. Nonetheless, Riegl's notion of a shift in *Kunstwollen* sustained the sense of a chronological evolution and differentiation of styles, and, by extension, on their exclusivity.¹⁹

This monolithic view of style as an index of a specific region, group, and/or period continued to inform much subsequent study of Roman art history.²⁰ Some of the most important work focussed on determining the unique qualities that made Roman art Roman. By the middle

¹⁶ Neatly summed up by Stewart 2004, 1-4. Two decades earlier, Ridgway (1986, 11 n. 28) pointed out the same, writing with regards to Roman "copies" of Greek sculpture: "Regrettably, the entire issue is still beset by prejudices, since most scholars prefer to assume that a Roman work copies a Greek original, even if poorly, rather than accepting the possibility of an outright Roman creation. Indeed, Roman work - if not in the realm of portraiture, sarcophagi, or historical reliefs - is still considered aesthetically "inferior" to Greek." Cf. Ridgway 2005, 63. One should bear in mind that the "objective" study of ancient art as an historical phenomenon of scholarly interest was not really the concern of 18th and 19th century Classicists. For them antiquity was in many respects primarily an *exemplum*. On Winckelmann's view of his organic scheme of stylistic development as the inevitable outcome of a law of nature, and on the "logical acrobatics" he needed to make the ancient sculptural evidence fit the postulated universal scheme, cf. Fullerton 2003, 98-100

¹⁷ Riegl (1927, 11) set out the reasons why previous scholarship had misunderstood late Roman art in particularly clear and damning terms: "Was ist es nun, das (...) Forscher (...) verhindert hat, das Wesen der spätrömischen Kunstwerke mit unbefangenen Auge zu würdigen? Nichts als die subjektive Kritik, die unser moderner Geschmack an den uns vorliegenden Denkmälern vornimmt. Dieser Geschmack verlangt vom Kunstwerk Schönheit und Lebendigkeit, wobei die Wage abwechselnd nach der ersteren oder der letzteren Seite neigt. Beides hat die vorantoinische Antike besessen (...), keines von beiden aber, (...) die spätrömische Kunst. (...) Daß jemals auf Häßlichkeit und Leblosigkeit, wie wir ihnen in der spätrömischen Kunst zu begegnen glauben, ein positives Kunstwollen gerichtet gewesen sein könnte, erscheint uns vom Standpunkte des modernen Geschmackes schlechthin unmöglich. Es kommt aber alles darauf an, zur Einsicht zu gelangen (...) daß das Kunstwollen noch auf die Wahrnehmung anderer (nach modernen Begriffe weder schöner noch lebendiger) Erscheinungsformen der Dinge gerichtet sein kann." Twenty five years earlier, Otto Seeck had still argued that in late antiquity, Roman society had been characterized by "eine entsetzliche Trägheit des Geistes. (...) Weder in der Landwirtschaft, noch in der Technik, noch in der Staatsverwaltung ist seit dem ersten Jahrhundert nach Christus eine neue Idee von irgendwelcher Bedeutung aufgetaucht. Auch Literatur und Kunst bewegen sich ausschliesslich in einer öden Nachahmung, die geistig immer dürftiger, technisch immer schwächer wird." (Seeck 1910, 270-1).

¹⁸ For examples and discussion of attempted translations of *Kunstwollen*, cf. Elsner 2002b, 359-60.

¹⁹ Riegl (1927, 18) emphasizes the arbitrariness of giving specific dates defining specific periods, but in general supports the notion of an evolution of styles: "Es möge ... sofort ... bemerkt sein, daß manche charakteristische Züge der Kunst des vierten Jahrhunderts sich in stetig abnehmender Dichtigkeit bis in den vorchristlichen Hellenismus zurück verfolgen lassen ...". On Riegl cf. Elsner 2002b; Iversen 1993.

²⁰ By far the best analysis of the history of Roman art history up to the 1950s and 60s is by Brendel 1979; cf also Boymel Kampen 2003, 371-9.

of the 20th century, two major streams had emerged. The one continued to emphasize the debt to Greece of Roman art. A good example of this is Strong's insistence that "... at least until the late Empire, the Greek tradition is basically unchallenged, not simply because the artists were generally of Greek nationality but because classical Greek art was the acceptable standard of the Roman patron."²¹ This school of thought continued to treat Roman art as essentially a continuation of the Greek in form, if not in achievement, and it downplayed the existence of any specifically Roman or Italian elements.²² Hanfmann (1964, 19) goes so far as to deny the very existence of "Roman" art prior to Augustus, there having been only "art in Rome" that was, he feels, no more than "a marginal province of the frontiers of Greek art".²³ Not surprisingly, such scholars continued to discuss the art of late antiquity in terms of a decline from the Greek norm.²⁴

In continental Europe, German and Italian scholars in particular developed a rather different approach, that stressed the dual nature of Roman art, its perceived tendency to eclecticism, and consequently its difference from Greek art.²⁵ Alongside the undeniably important influences of Greek artistic practice and traditions, these scholars pointed to what they saw as the continued vigour of an Italian tradition. Long associated with the lower strata of society as *Volkskunst* (Rodenwalt) or *arte plebea* (Bianchi Bandinelli), this Italian tradition was seen as having increasingly encroached on official or "high" art, so that by the third century it permeated all levels of artistic production in Rome. While much debate focussed on determining what formal elements and spatial concepts characterized the Italian elements of Roman artistic traditions, and on establishing when and how they were adopted in "high" art, there appears to have been less interest in determining why the Italian and Greek artistic traditions were so different. For Bianchi Bandinelli (1976, 58), the class connections are paramount, and he argues that in the "plebeian" art of the first century AD we see

“...il germe fondamentale di taluni aspetti artistici che preverranno quando l’apporto ellenistico si sarà esaurito e quando, respinta ai margini l’antica classe patrizia avversata dagli imperatori di quel tempo, le classi plebee formeranno la nuova ossatura dell’impero,

²¹ Strong 1976, xix.

²² Strong 1976, xx-xxiv; cf. Hanfmann 1964, 15-18.

²³ Stewart (2004, 1) quotes an unnamed "distinguished Oxford professor" who expressed an identical opinion to him. Cf. Scott (2006, 628-30) and Gazda (2002, 3) on the perpetuation of such concepts through museum displays.

²⁴ Cf. Hanfmann (1964, 31): "'Folk art,' confined to carvers of shop signs and painters of wall posters under the early empire, had subsequently played its part in the art of the lower status carried by the Roman legions to western Europe. Its 'anti-classical' expressionistic forms began to reach higher levels of art in the Antonine era, just as vulgarisms of common speech were becoming part of written literature in the *elocutio novella* of an Apuleius."

²⁵ Cf., e.g., von Heinze (1972, 5-13) whose emphatic pronouncement that Roman art "is anything but a continuation and culmination of Greek art" stands in marked contrast to the views expressed by Strong four years later. For a good overview of these schools, cf. Felletti Maj 1977, 19-39.

nel III secolo”.²⁶

Others, like Felletti Maj (1977) stress ethnic connections.²⁷ In effect, therefore, there is, underlying these studies, still a concept of culture as something essentially immutable and intimately intertwined with specific ethnic or social groups.

(Greek) Style and (Roman) Art

While such social or ethnic explanations for the coexistence of divergent styles are not necessarily impossible, they failed to adequately explain one key characteristic of this phenomenon, namely that, in Central Italy at least, the coexistence of different styles in the same context was already a characteristic of archaic Etruscan art, and continued to be so throughout antiquity.²⁸ From the outset, Etruscan art was clearly influenced by developments in Greece. The similarities are often striking. In archaic statues we see the same pose, the same enigmatic smile, the almond shaped eyes, the formalized braids of hair. Subsequent stylistic developments in Greek art make their appearance in Etruscan art as well. Indeed, Etruscans imported many of their prized possessions directly from Greece, and there were also Greek artists at work in Etruscan centres. Of course there were also significant differences between Greek and Etruscan art - archaic Etruscan males are clothed, not nude, for example - but such differences have generally been understood as differences in cultural practice or as the result of regional necessities (the lack of local marble leading Etruscans to rely heavily on terracotta, for instance). The important point is that the stylistic development of Etruscan art is usually understood and discussed in the same terms as Greek art. Indeed, it is often discussed as a poor and peripheral province of Greek art.

And yet, throughout we see, in Etruscan art, a distinctly “ungreek” willingness to forego mimesis. There is evident influence of archaic Greek art on the heads and upper bodies of the couple reclining on the famous sarcophagus from Cerveteri, now in the Villa Giulia museum (pl. 1.1), but in the transition to the lower body and the articulation of the legs there is no attempt at natural proportions and positions whatsoever. This willingness to forego natural proportions did not diminish in subsequent centuries. In the later fifth century BC, various Etruscan workshops produced warrior statuettes in bronze that have bodies and limbs so sketchily defined that they are more reminiscent of geometric Greek bronzes than contemporary Classical ones (pl. 1.2), and yet the Etruscans were perfectly capable of working in Classical Greek styles as well - one need

²⁶ Cf. L’Orange (1965) who argues for a close link between the artistic changes and the sociopolitical transition from Principate to Dominate. Bianchi Bandinelli’s emphasis on the marginalization of the ancient elite and the rise to prominence of the plebs is remarkably reminiscent of Seeck’s (1910, 269-307) discussion of the “Ausrottung der Besten”, although their evaluations of the effects of this process differ fundamentally.

²⁷ Cf., e.g., Felletti Maj 1977, 37: where she states that in the emergence of the anti-classical tradition in imperial art in the later 2nd c. it is obvious that “...ideatori ed esecutori [sc. of the new style] non provengono direttamente dalle officine ‘italiche’, ma dalla schiera degli artisti più rappresentativi delle officine romane, nelle quali l’insegnamento classico era stato costantemente alimentato da artisti greci...”.

²⁸ As Boymel Kampen (2003, 371) puts it: “Sometimes every conceivable style short of Abstract Expressionism seemed to be happening all at once at some spot in the empire”. On the continued vigour of “classicizing” art throughout the 4th c. AD, cf. Kiilerich 1993.

but think of the so-called Mars from Todi in the Vatican. In the fourth century and beyond the contrasts are even starker, with, for instance, such portrait sculpture as the so-called Capitoline Brutus,²⁹ or the master draughtmanship displayed on mirrors, co-existing with elongated “ribbon”-statuettes and the like (pl. 1.3). And we need but think of the strangely proportioned and at times even grotesquely malformed figures atop many a cinerary urn to see that this continues right into the first c. BC (pl. 2.1-2).

No wonder then that just as with Roman art, we see in discussions of Etruscan art the problems caused by that normative paradigm that elevated Greek art to the pinnacle of ancient artistic achievement. It is beyond dispute that the Etruscans were acutely aware of Greek art and were inspired by it, and from the normative perspective one would expect no less. How could the Etruscans not be inspired by the “superior” art with which they came into contact? It is, however, equally undeniable that Etruscan art could digress radically from Greek practice. From the archaic canopic urns to the “ribbon”-statuettes of the third and second centuries BC, the Etruscans obstinately maintained the - to many scholars unsettling - habit of producing art-forms that cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered Greek, or even influenced by Greece.

It is interesting to observe how scholars attempted to explain this phenomenon without subverting the paradigm of Greek artistic superiority. Dealing with the earlier phases of Etruscan art, they resorted rather quickly to describing un-Hellenized works as the products of primitive indigenous traditions of a not yet wholly Hellenized artistic community.³⁰ For later periods (Classical, Hellenistic) proposals ranged from class arguments³¹ to suggestions that works produced in an un-Greek style were “ritually archaizing” or the product of “isolated backwaters”.³² In short, as with late imperial art, anything typically “Etruscan” in central Italian art of the Classical and Hellenistic periods was traditionally viewed as a problem - indeed, Pallottino (1978, 166) saw Etruscan art as a whole as a “problem” - with scholars attempting to explain in various ways how it could be that Etruscan art fell so far short of the aesthetic ideal embodied by the Greek art with which they were so well acquainted.

²⁹ Cornell 1995, 392 fig. 31.

³⁰ Cf., e.g., Pallottino 1978, 166-71.

³¹ Bianchi Bandinelli 1973.

³² On Etruscan art as “peripheral” to Greek art, cf. E.g. Boethius 1950. Hus (1980) argues that in all ages there are “cultures directrices, créatrices des formes nouvelles et dispensatrices de progrès” and that in antiquity this was the role of Greek culture. Cultures that were “less advanced”, such as Etruscan culture, “s’inspirent des modèles qui leur sont ainsi proposés et imitent, à la périphérie du foyer créateur, les techniques et les formes que celui-ci a élaborées”, He proceeds to state that when, in the second half of the 5th c. BC, political and economic decline had cut off Etruscan contacts with the Greeks, they missed the essential lessons of Classical Greek artistic development, reverting for that reason to their own more primitive, traditional forms. Brendel (1995, 36, 330) speaks of cultural backwaters, ritual archaizing, and “creative error” of Etruscan artists who do not grasp the inner logic of Greek art, in order to explain the formal and stylistic “peculiarities”. Others, like Torelli (1985) use a model of decline and decadence to explain the “dissolution” and “incoherence” of form that characterize disproportionate figures produced in Etruscan art of the Hellenistic era.

Style and Message

There is an alternative, of course, and that is to assume that the Etruscans simply were not as enamoured with Greek art as we feel they ought to have been, and that on the countless occasions that they “sinned” against Greek artistic norms they did so not out of ignorance, eccentricity, or lack of skill, but because their concept of the role and nature of art was a fundamentally different one. The reality is that in the six centuries of so-called Etruscan art (7th-2nd c. BC) the Etruscans consistently display perfect mastery at producing art *à la grecque* in one breath with art that militates with the most fundamental principles (as we have understood them) of Greek aesthetics. There is no lack of genius here, but simply a difference of aims (or of tradition in achieving aims that were perhaps more similar than the differences in form imply). For it must surely be the case that any Etruscan of the third or second century BC who could afford an elaborately decorated alabaster cinerary urn could afford to have it carved in the Greek style. Hence the fact that so many of the urns produced in this period were, in fact, idiosyncratically non-Greek must mean that many Etruscans did not want one with Greek sculpting, not that they could not have one.

One could argue that style was not so much a matter of taste as a matter of topic and that the main purpose of such urns was not to emote aesthetically but to express socially. The choice of style - “Etruscan” rather than “Greek” - could be subordinate to the intended communication.³³ Style itself becomes a medium for the message of the art-work, rather than an expression of some ineffable aesthetic desire of the artist or society. This emphasizes the role of works of art in Etruscan social discourse, and is thus akin to the position increasingly expounded in the last two decades by those who stress craftsmanship (as opposed to artistry).³⁴ But we must take care to avoid the misconception that the Etruscan “artisans” producing these works were somehow inferior to Greek “artists”, and that this is reflected in the “pedestrian” quality of their products. If style is subordinate to meaning, the specific style of a given object is a function of its social role, not its artisan’s ability. This would help explain why in the case of many cinerary urns (pl. 2.1-2), for example, the bodies of the deceased on the lid are strangely proportioned, but the figures in the scenes on the side are not. There is no sign here of lack of competence, no reason to speak of decline or dissolution. One glance at the reliefs is enough to show that clearly the Etruscan artisans who produced these works were perfectly capable of sculpting well-proportioned figures in a range of poses if they so desired. Hence the fact that they did not do so in the case of the figures on the lid was a matter of choice, and a common choice at that.³⁵

Of course, this view of style as a tool requires that we abandon the monolithic and unwieldy connections between style with ethnicity, region, class or period, inherent to many older approaches. If we wish to speak of Etruscan or Central Italian art we cannot focus on form, but on expression. A third century mirror from Praeneste, incised in a rich “Hellenistic” manner, is as integral to central Italian art as the contemporary, almost abstract ribbon statuettes, the terracotta Apollo-Helios from Civita Castellana (cat. A1b.1), cinerary urns with their

³³ Fundamental for the notion of style as communicative tool in ancient art is Hölscher 1987.

³⁴ Massa-Pairault 1985. On the social role of archaic Etruscan tomb paintings, cf d’Agostino 1989.

³⁵ On the specific role of Greek mythology and mythological imagery in Etruscan social discourse, cf. Massa-Pairault 1999.

disproportioned figures reclining on the lids, the winged horses of Tarquinia, etc. A major characteristic of art in this region happened to be that quite different styles of depiction could coexist not just contemporaneously, but actually within the same monument or composition.

This was the tradition that Rome was a part of and out of which Roman art evolved. Not an isolated or peripheral region that was incapable of doing more than garble the superior (Greek) art practices with which it came into contact, but a region with its own distinct artistic conceptions and, importantly, its own philosophy of art. Exploring that philosophy is well beyond the scope of this essay, but one point should be made here: central to it, apparently, was the potentially symbolic rather than mimetic nature of the visual. For one consistent characteristic of Italian art is the ability to signify some concept or reality through art with little attempt to approximate that reality mimetically in the artwork. Art, in this tradition, is, or at least can be, autonomous in that the connection between representation and the represented can be to a significant degree arbitrary rather than iconic. At the same time, recognizability remains paramount. This is not abstract art, but visual communication bound by social conventions in which form is subordinate to meaning. It is effective, because its conventions are understood by society and individual artists are scrupulous in their adherence to established systems of depiction. Hence comprehension is always ensured, but the aesthetic qualities of Greek art are not necessarily desired. In short, the choice of style was dictated at least as much by the message and intended audience as by taste, which explains the characteristic coexistence of diverse, even conflicting styles throughout ancient Italian art.

Greek Art and Roman Tastes

But where does this emphasis on style as communicative tool leave Rome's documented admiration for Greek art? Surely it is clear from written sources that the Romans were not impervious to the aesthetic allure of Greek masterpieces. Caesar did not pay 80 talents for two paintings by Timomachus because of their efficiency in conveying a message.³⁶ And if that is not evidence enough, are there not the countless Roman copies of Greek originals?

The issue is not quite so straightforward. While it is certainly true that Romans prized Greek art, Roman ambivalence towards the admirability of "great art" clearly shines through in their own assessment of the processes by which they discovered it. Pliny describes the earliest paintings in Rome as primarily informative victory tableaux and relates that Mummius was clueless when it came to appreciating the true value of the art he had plundered from Corinth.³⁷ Others famously ascribe the beginning of Rome's admiration for Greek art to the sack of Syracuse in 212 BC and the art-works sent back to Rome by Marcellus as booty.³⁸ What matters is not the accuracy of such assessments, but their symbolic function in Rome's understanding of

³⁶ Plin. *NH* 7,126, 35,136.

³⁷ Plin. *NH* 35, 22-24. When king Attalos paid Mummius 100 talents for one painting (of Dionysus) by Aristides, Mummius assumed that there must be some quality to the painting of which he was unaware (*aliquid in ea virtutis, quod ipse nesciret*), and revoked the sale.

³⁸ Liv. 25, 40. For the sentiments expressed by Livy, cf. Pol. 9,10; Plu. *Marc.* 21. On Polybius' remarks, cf. Stewart 2003, 140-1

its own past. For historians like Livy, ignorance of Greek artistic norms signalled the rustic simplicity prized in the Republican heroes, while the sophisticated tastes which admired Greek art heralded the abandonment of the mores that had made Rome great. Plutarch has the more dignified Romans complaining that Marcellus' booty was leading the Romans to idly converse about art and beauty, where formerly they had been rustic farmers who knew only how to till the land and defend it.³⁹

By the first c. BC, of course, Caesar was not the only Roman spending large sums of money to acquire Greek art. In the spring of 67 BC Cicero wrote to Atticus in Greece, asking him to acquire suitable statues and herms in Greece for his lecture hall ("quae γυμνασιώδη sunt") at his villa in Tusculum, and thanking him for the herms and Megarian statues he had already acquired on Cicero's behalf for the sum of 20 000 sestertii.⁴⁰ "Arcae nostrae confidito", he tells his friend. In this correspondence, Cicero is asking Attalus to spend substantial sums of money on his behalf to buy art which Cicero has never seen. Not surprisingly, therefore, the emphasis in Cicero's letters is on "suitable" or "correct"⁴¹ rather than beautiful art. This does not mean that low quality or poor artistry will do. Cicero writes that he places his trust in the *elegantia* of Atticus, presumably referring not just to the latter's good taste in matters of theme, but also in matters of artistic quality. But Cicero is already delighted with Atticus' purchases sight unseen⁴², stressing their aptness, and displaying no interest whatsoever in their style or artistry.⁴³ Indeed, when many years later Gallus managed to acquire some masterpieces for Cicero, the now retired statesman grumpily complains that they were far too expensive, and that he had no idea what to do with them.⁴⁴ Again Cicero displays no interest in the artistic quality, but stresses his desire to

³⁹ Without, apparently, any irony intended, Plutarch (*Marc.* 21) quotes a line of the *Lycymnius* of Euripides (Nauck, *Trag. Graec. Frag.* 2 p507), comparing the Romans, whose transformation the dour traditionalist elite lamented, to Euripides' Hercules as "plain, unadorned, in a great crisis brave and true".

⁴⁰ On Cicero's correspondence with Atticus concerning the acquisition of art for his villa, cf. Marvin 1993 [1989], in particular 180-184, letters 4 and 5. Assuming 6000 denarii to the talent, this is less than 1 talent (24 000 denarii), a paltry sum compared to the price Caesar was later to pay for his masterpieces. Cicero is delighted with Atticus for acquiring suitable sculpture for him at such a low price ("parvo") (Marvin 1993, letter 8).

⁴¹ "Dignum Academia quod te videbitur" and "quae γυμνασιώδη maxime sunt" (Cic. *Att.* 1.9(5), 68 BC); "quae tu intelleges convenire nostro Tusculano" (Cic. *Att.* 1.5(1), early 67 BC); "velim...signa et cetera quae tibi eius loci et nostri studi et tuae elegantiae esse videbuntur" (Cic. *Att.* 1.8(4), after Feb. 13th 67 BC); "ο ον eius loci" (Cic. *Att.* 1.10 (6), middle of 67 BC)

⁴² "Hermae tui Pentelici cum capitibus aëneis, de quibus ad me scripsisti, iam nunc me admodum delectant" (Cic. *Att.* 1.8(4), after Feb. 13th 67 BC).

⁴³ This is clearest in his discussion of a Hermathena that Atticus had acquired for him, first expressing his delight before he had seen it (Cic. *Att.* 1.4(9), spring 66 BC): "Quod ad me de Hermathena scribis per mihi gratum est. est ornamentum Academiae proprium meae, quod et Hermes commune est omnium et Minerva singulare est insigne eius gymnasii". Location is again paramount once he has seen the statue. He says nothing about the statue itself, but writes Atticus (Cic. *Att.* 1.1(10), shortly before July 17, 65 BC): Hermathena tua valde me delectat et posita ita belle est ut totum gymnasium eius vá ημα videatur.

⁴⁴ Cic. *Fam.* 7.23.

acquire ornaments suitable for the spaces they are to decorate and congruent to his personality; what is he, a man of peace, supposed to do with a statue of Mars, he asks with exasperation.

Cicero is, of course, but one case and Gallus, one assumes, did not feel that the statues he had acquired for Cicero were overpriced or unsuitable. Many of the Roman elite were willing to spend large sums to acquire top pieces.⁴⁵ But as, among others, Bergmann (1995) has argued, we must not project our own understanding of art even on these connoisseurs. Stewart points to the issues of power (and its abuse) as among the many factors that were involved in the appropriation, by whatever means, of public works of Greek art for the embellishment of private Roman properties or public Roman spaces.⁴⁶ Other considerations played a role as well. Scholars are now largely in agreement that the whole process of Roman appropriation of Greek “masterpieces” on the one hand, and Roman “copying” of those masterpieces was a more complex and multifaceted phenomenon than allowed for in the traditional approach which viewed it simply in terms of Rome’s admiration for Greek artistic genius and her more or less faithful attempts to copy that. In particular the longstanding scholarly practice of *Kopienkritik* has been the object of harsh criticism bordering on ridicule.⁴⁷ The traditional interpretation of the handful of ancient sources that discuss (Greek) art in Rome has also been criticized as too narrow and bent to fit assumptions of Greek artistic superiority.⁴⁸ More recently the implications of the literary genre of ekphrasis have begun to receive greater attention, for instance for the light they shed on images as readily recognizable types or *topoi*. It can be argued that these literary “descriptions” of works of art imply that many Roman “copies” were not, in fact, replicas of some brilliant Greek original but simply image types which adhere to a basic, established pattern for reasons of recognizability rather than imitation.⁴⁹ The ekphrasis draws (and plays) on its audience’s knowledge of such types.

This moving away from the notion of Roman copying of superior Greek art is an aspect of the broader and rather substantial shift in attitude towards Roman art that has been underway

⁴⁵ On collecting in the Roman world cf. the papers in Fabbrini 2001 (focusing on the late Republic); Bounia 2004.

⁴⁶ Stewart (2003, 140-3). The difference between private and public is of course not a straightforward issue in the Roman sphere. Cf. Stewart 2003, 259-60.

⁴⁷ For a concise and blistering critique, cf. Trimble & Elsner 2006, 202-4. Cf. Marvin 1993; Stewart 2003, 231-6 (with a good discussion of other recent critiques). The practice of *Kopienkritik* is defended by others - particularly in Germany. While a degree of defensiveness is detectable, many of their arguments deserve to be taken seriously. The validity and usefulness of many aspects of *Kopienkritik* in the realm of ancient portraiture, for instance, is hard to deny, and there is no reason in principle why that cannot be extended to certain other works of art as well. Cf. Boschung 1993, 4-7 or Bergmann 1978, 13-14 for the basic principles of *Kopienkritik*. Beard & Henderson (2001, 221-4) discuss the locks of Augustus (the importance of counting locks (*Lockenzählen*) is defended by Boschung, *loc. cit.*). For potential and problems of *Kopienkritik* in the study of the portrait of Augustus: Smith 1996.

⁴⁸ Stewart 2003, 225; Trimble & Elsner 2006, 208. On Pliny and art cf. Isager 1992.

⁴⁹ Cf. Boymel Kampen 1995; Stewart 2003, 236-249. On *ekphrasis* see Graf 1995, Elsner 2002, and Trimble & Elsner 2006, 208.

for some time and has gained momentum in the past few decades. By moving it out of the shadow of Greek art the way has been opened to viewing Roman art on its own terms, which means that we must view it with very different eyes. In fact, the whole notion of “Roman” art as the unified or unifiable subject of a grand narrative has been largely abandoned. In its place a whole range of new approaches have emerged and continue to emerge focussing on gender, ethnicity, spectacle, power, emotion and the like as mediated by different strands of art in the Roman world.⁵⁰

Stock images

A significant area of interest in this regard is the long-acknowledged communicative role of art the Roman world which, mostly for the sake of convenience, I will continue to refer to as “Roman” art.⁵¹ One can reasonably postulate that much of Roman art was primarily or even predominantly about communication, and hence concerned more with the visual meanings of the image than its aesthetic quality.⁵² It is for this reason that Roman art in particular was characterized by a strictly defined and highly durable iconographic toolbox, from which artists could, or indeed were obliged to draw to compose their images. The rigidity of this iconographic vocabulary was such that it was as impossible for a Roman artist to depict Sol with a beard as it was to depict Jupiter without one, or to place an owl (or any other bird) rather than a peacock next to Juno. It was this rich toolbox of standardized iconographic types that allowed Roman

⁵⁰ For examples of newer approaches cf. Hölscher 1987, Elsner 1995, 2007, Stewart 2003 and the wide range of examples discussed by Boymel Kampen (2003, 379-383).

⁵¹ Boymel Kampen (2003, 377) speaks of “Roman art as the arts of many social strata, ethnic groups, and power relations”. This does not mean that there is no place for an element or notion of Romanness in the production of art in the Empire, just as there are clear Roman elements in other realms of imperial culture, such as law, government, religion, language, and the like. We must take care, however, with how we approach the “Roman” aspects of the arts of the empire. The concept of romanization is undergoing a thorough reevaluation, much needed and focusing in particular on the empire’s multiculturalism (Webster 2001, 2003, Hingley 2005, Wells 1999). The deconstruction of the binary opposition Roman <-> provincial naturally has profound consequences for our understanding of “Roman” art. One problem that I think is often underestimated, however, is the extent to which art (in the broadest sense) was ephemeral. From body tattoos to tapestries and from wooden carvings to precious metalwork, a very large proportion of, in particular, “provincial” art has left virtually no trace. What has survived the best is pottery and stone, two areas in which the arrival of Roman rule often revolutionized indigenous practices, especially in the western half of the Empire. This makes the evaluation of the “provincial” character of surviving regional art especially problematic. There can be no doubt about the hybrid nature of, for example, Nehalennia reliefs, Jupiter columns, or even the Adamclisi monument, from a Roman perspective. But locally all are exponents of profound, even revolutionary Roman innovations, ranging from the Latin of the inscriptions to the use of stone, the ornamental articulation (metopes, Corinthian capitals, aediculae), the figural conception, and the like. We simply do not know how this compared to pre-Roman and, perhaps, ongoing art production in less durable materials such as wood or cloth, making it very difficult to evaluate local attitudes towards such works in stone. It may well be that many of the surviving works were more “Roman” than we think. Certainly we must be aware of the risks involved in using what are essentially Roman innovations as sources for regional culture. This is, *mutatis mutandis* uncomfortably similar to using Roman “copies” to learn about Greek “originals”.

⁵² Holscher 1987; Boymel Kampen 2003, 381; Tanner 2000, 2006, 235-300; Giuliani 1986. Tanner (2006, 233) describes art in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods as an “autonomous province of meaning”.

artists to produce the readily recognizable images that played a major role in the construction of the social ideologies of the communities in which they functioned. The main thrust of each image was readily apparent to a broad range of the viewing public, and each element of the composition contributed to making it specifically meaningful.⁵³

The strength and durability of this system were impressive. The description Cicero gives of the iconography of Juno Sospita (supra, n. 55) is borne out in every detail by contemporaneous coin-images and remained as valid two centuries later under Commodus (plate 80.1-2). In the case of Sol, the Roman iconographic conventions governing his depiction remained essentially unchanged for over half a millennium, from the 1st c. BC (and in many respects earlier) to the 4th c. AD and beyond.⁵⁴ What is more, it did so irrespective of style. From the sketchiest of productions to the most refined works, Sol was depicted with the same basic characteristics throughout this period and throughout the Roman Empire. In short, depictions of Sol were readily recognizable to the Roman viewer.

The mere fact that the Romans maintained the iconographic conventions for “Sol” over

⁵³ On the recognizability of iconographical conventions, cf. Cic. *ND* 1.81-3: “Nobis fortasse sic occurrit, ut dicis; a parvis enim Iovem, Iunonem, Minervam, Neptunum, Vulcanum, Apollinem, reliquos deos ea facie novimus, qua pictores fictoresque voluerunt, neque solum facie, sed etiam ornatu, aetate, vestitu. (...) Quid igitur censes Apim illum sanctum Aegyptiorum bovem nonne deum videri Aegyptiis? Tam, hercle, quam tibi illam vestram Sospitam. Quam tu numquam ne in somnis quidem vides nisi cum pelle caprina, cum hasta, cum scutulo, cum calceolis repandis. At non est talis Argia nec Romana Iuno. Ergo alia species Iunonis Argivis, alia Lanuinis. Et quidem alia nobis Capitolini, alia Afris Hammonis Iovis. [83] Non pudet igitur physicum, id est speculatorem venatoremque naturae, ab animis consuetudine inbutis petere testimonium veritatis? Isto enim modo dicere licebit Iovem semper barbatus, Apollinem semper inberbem, caesios oculos Minervae, caeruleos esse Neptuni. Et quidem laudamus esse Athenis Vulcanum eum, quem fecit Alcamenes, in quo stante atque vestito leviter apparet claudicatio non deformis: Claudum igitur habebimus deum, quoniam de Volcano sic accepimus.” [To us, perhaps, the suggestion is as you say, for from our childhood we have known Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Neptune, Vulcan, Apollo, and the other gods, under the aspect which painters and sculptors have laid down for us, and so with regard to their insignia, and age, and attire. But the Egyptians, the Syrians, and almost the whole of the uncivilised world have not so known them. You would find amongst them a firmer belief in certain animals than amongst us in the holiest temples and images of the gods, for many a shrine has, as we see, been plundered by our countrymen, and the images of the gods taken away from the holiest places, but no one has even so much as heard tell of a crocodile, or ibis, or cat having been dishonoured by an Egyptian. What, then, is your opinion? Is it not that Apis, the sacred ox of the Egyptians, is regarded by them as divine? Of course he is, as much as your Juno Sospita is by you, that Juno whom you never see even in your dreams without a goat-skin, a spear, a small shield, and shoes turned up at the toe. As, however, neither the Argive Juno, nor the Roman, is of that description, it follows that the goddess is known under different forms by the Argives, the Lanuvians, and ourselves. The form, moreover, of our Jupiter of the Capitol is different from that of the Jupiter Hammon of the Africans. Are you not ashamed, then, as a man of science, that is, an explorer and pursuer of nature, to seek a testimony to truth in minds imbued with habit? At that rate it will be open to us to say that Jupiter is always bearded, and Apollo beardless, that Minerva has grey eyes, and Neptune blue. There is, too, at Athens a much admired statue of Vulcan by Alcamenes, a draped, standing figure, in which a lameness which does not amount to deformity is slightly indicated. We shall, therefore, since we have received that account of Vulcan, think of the god as lame.] (Translation Francis Brooks, London, 1896). Note how Cicero stresses the conventionality of these iconographic practices. How widespread and profound the knowledge of the actual conventions was matters less than the acknowledgment and expectation of such conventions. Everyone knew that there was a right way to depict Juno Sospita, even if in most parts of the empire they would probably not know what that right way was.

⁵⁴ On the significance of the introduction of the raised r. hand in the 2nd c. AD as iconographic characteristic of Sol, cf. chapter three.

centuries is itself the clearest possible indication of the importance of that recognizability, and hence communication in Roman art. Roman artists worked within a framework of fixed conventions that spanned many generations over centuries, and Roman viewers viewed with the existence of those conventions in mind. These conventions extended well beyond the rules covering the iconography of individual figures. Complex compositions and image-types were likewise covered by detailed conventions that significantly limited artistic choice.

This can be well-illustrated with ephrastic literature. In it we see how Roman rhetors counted on the audience's knowledge of the image-types so characteristic of Roman art in order to achieve the desired effect.⁵⁵ In his *Imagines* Philostratus, for example, clearly expects his audience to grasp the manifold literary, philosophical and visual allusions that permeate each of his "descriptions", challenging them to compose in their mind a "conventional" image that is wholly imaginary, yet brilliantly vivid. The extent to which he is playing his audience is particularly clear in the fifth description of book 1, concerning an image of the Nile in flood (Πήχεις).⁵⁶ First, Philostratus describes a reclining, bearded river-deity of the standard three-dimensional type in Roman art, with little putti (the so-called πήχεις of the title) clambering over him and getting entangled in his beard (fig.7). But in a pun on the multiple meanings of πήχυς,⁵⁷ the putti gradually become little babbling streams and rivulets, and the Nile becomes the river in flood of the panoramic two dimensional type well-known from the Palestrina Nile-mosaic (fig. 8). The description culminates with a god standing sky-high astride the river's source and unleashing the annual flood. As described the picture is actually impossible, because it conflates

⁵⁵ In my opinion Philostratus' rhetorical tour de force was not, as Lehmann-Hartleben (1941) and others would have it - and as Philostratus facetiously presents it - a series of straightforward descriptions of real paintings in a specific villa at Naples (cf. Kalinka & Schönberger 1968). Philostratus is purposefully vague about the actual location of the paintings he "describes", stating simply that he stayed in a villa in an unnamed "suburb" of the city (295K 19-20: the villa is "... ξω το τείχος ν προαστεί τετραμμέν ς θάλασσαν"). This careful avoidance of specific information concerning the location and ownership of the villa would be most surprising if the paintings he is describing were real and could really be viewed. He sustains the vagueness in his subsequent description of the setting of the paintings, stating only that they were in the veranda-like stoa of "four, I think, or five levels" (π τετάρων ο μαι κα πέντε ροφ ν) and leaving both the host himself and the host's son (to whom the descriptions are nominally addressed) unnamed (295K 20-23). (Given Philostratus's Sophistic background as well as the numerous Platonic references in his frontal attack on the Platonic view of art in this introduction, my colleague Selina Stewart suggests that it is tempting to view these four or five *stoai* as a reference to the four or five schools of philosophy). Shortly afterwards, in the opening lines of his first description (Scamander), Philostratus states almost explicitly that the whole exercise is not about *real* paintings, to be viewed physically, but about the virtual images he hopes to evoke in the mind's eye. After stating that the painting of Scamander is "all Homer", his very first command to his fictitious 10-year-old (!) disciple is to *look away* (πόβλεψον) from the picture in order to "see" all on which the image is based (σον κε να δε ν, φ' ν γραφή. Philostratus, *Imagines* 296K 6-10).

⁵⁶ Philostratus, *Imagines* 300K 23 -301K 20.

⁵⁷ πήχυς = forearm, the length of the forearm, cubit, any small amount, and "cubit folk" metaphorically representing the rivulets of inundation of the Nile. Cf. Luc. *Rh.Pr.* 6.

two mutually exclusive, but equally common image types with which Roman art conventionally depicted the Nile: the three-dimensional reclining, bearded personification of the river with little babes clambering all over him, and the panoramic, two-dimensional bird's-eye views as in the mosaic of Palestrina. What his ancient audience admired was the skill with which Philostratus masked these impossibilities and tricked one into imagining these contradictory images.⁵⁸

The suggestion that Philostratus' *ecphraseis* are meant to evoke virtual images in the mind's eye has clear implications for the nature of Roman viewing. It supports, and exploits, the contention - for which there is much empirical evidence - that Roman art is composed to a significant degree of the kind of stock image-types that Philostratus can expect to evoke. One need but think of the rich mythological art, so well-known from Pompeii, for example. Many Roman depictions of a particular myth not only share the same iconographical conventions to identify the participants, but are also compositionally closely related. In terms of Roman viewing practices the origin or the prototypes for these compositions were far less important than the recognizability of the basic typological schemes. To be sure, it is perfectly possible that an educated Roman viewer was aware that there was, for example, a famous painting of Medea in Rome by Timomachus of Byzantium. But even if we are correct in identifying two paintings from Herculaneum and Pompeii as copies or variants of that Timomachean masterpiece, this does not mean that the contemporary viewers viewed them as such. And for all we know Timomachus himself may have painted his Medea along the same lines, not as his invention but because they had already been established long before. That his painting's fame was due to his exceptional skill is clear, but that does not necessarily imply typological originality.

What was important to the Roman viewer of the Pompeian or Herculanean Medeas was the immediate recognizability of the type. Here is Medea in mental turmoil, in a deceptively calm scene immediately preceding her horrific murder of her two unsuspecting sons. Such images would evoke a range of associations in the educated viewer, but that does not mean that she would see these frescoes primarily as "copies" of some "masterpiece" any more than Galla Placidia would have considered the preening doves in her mausoleum to be a copy of Sosos' famous mosaic in Pergamum, produced some six centuries earlier. How such visual conventions came to be established could vary. No doubt famous "originals", such as Sosos' preening doves, had a role in this process, but there is no reason to postulate an artistic masterpiece as source for each conventional treatment of a topic or theme. Once established the conventions were just that: conventions that were sufficiently uniform for a Roman viewer to visualize their basic composition in his mind's eye simply at the mention of a theme or topos.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ It will be clear that I do not accept Moffitt's (1997) suggestion that Philostratus is not only describing a real painting, but actually one that was a copy of the Nile mosaic in Palestrina. To support this Moffitt alters the Nile-mosaic itself, postulating that there was once a depiction of a huge statue at the top of the mosaic representing the deity astride the source and unleashing the flood (it was no doubt lost, according to Moffitt, in one of the radical restorations of the mosaic), and he suggests that a reclining Nile statue of the Vatican type was set up in front of the mosaic. The painting described by Philostratus somehow copied this dual composition. On the Nile mosaic, cf. Versluys 2002, 52-5.

⁵⁹ Marvin 1989; cf. Beard & Henderson 2001, 26-31, 100-105. The two frescoes of Medea from Pompeii and Herculaneum are in the National Museum at Naples, Inv. 8976 and 8977; cf. Beard & Henderson 2001, figs. 21 & 22. On Timomachus, Medea, Gutzwiller 2004; on the preening doves of Sosos, cf. Plin. *NH* 36.184.

Visual Meanings

But what do these images then mean, if anything, beyond “Medea about to kill her sons”, or (to return to the topic of this study) “Sol”? Analysis of the meaning of such images has long been text-based. This is problematic, for the relationship between text and image is always a complex one, and this is preeminently the case in Roman art.⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, therefore, the Romans themselves show a clear interest in the different communicative potentials of word and image, as well as in the processes involved. Philostratus’ *Imagines*, for example, can be read as an exploration of verbal and visual modes of signification. For not only does Philostratus use words to evoke images, but he has those images evoke sensations beyond those a picture is actually capable of. Throughout his descriptions Philostratus has us “see” movement, “hear” sounds, “smell” scents, and “feel” textures supposedly transmitted by the images he evokes,⁶¹ clearly exploring how, in the type of discourse between image and viewer that he postulates, metatexts can emerge that engage the viewer in both non-verbal and non-visual ways. In this way Philostratus challenges his audience to ponder not only how we hear and allow words to construct virtual images in our minds, but also how we view and how meaning arises in these images that he/we constructed in our mind’s eye purely under the impetus of his rhetoric.

Philostratus does not provide an answer, and the issue is no less debated today. But so much is clear: we cannot, in our analyses, assume that an image - of Sol, for instance - merely illustrates a word or verbal construct like Sol or sun god. There is now basic agreement that material culture in the broadest sense cannot be thought of as simply reflecting externally defined concepts and meanings. On the contrary, material culture is actively involved in constructing them. That this is so is quickly apparent if one considers, for example, a statuette of Menelaos and Patroklos of the Pasquino type. It would be wrong to interpret this simply as a visual rendition of one of Homer’s key passages (e.g. P 1ff or 717ff). The statuette is an object, not a text, visual rather than oral or aural, and as such it evokes and constructs its own traditions. It is an example of a statue type of which the potential “meanings” could vary greatly, depending on whether a statue of that type was displayed in, say, a military barracks, a Greek library, among sculptural masterpieces in sumptuous imperial baths, or by a shrine to Antinous in one of Hadrian’s private gardens. Likewise its meanings change greatly over time. A modern viewer, for example, may well be reminded of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, and other connotations today include freedom of speech, from the practice, especially in times of censorship, of posting anonymous, satirical poems on one particular and rather ruinous version of the statue type on a street corner in Rome. The very term for such poems, *pasquinade*, is derived from the name of that particular statue, *Il Pasquino*. Obviously references to the *Iliad* would be of absolutely no assistance to anyone attempting to interpret, say, a cartoon of Silvio Berlusconi wishing to add *Il Pasquino* to his media empire.

At a different level of discourse the differences between image and text are equally profound, given that no conceivable text - whether Homer or any other - has the potential to

⁶⁰ Boymel Kampen 2003, 378-9.

⁶¹ Movement: 1.2.2 (297K, Komos); texture: 1.2.3 (297K, Komos), sound: 1.5.1 (300K *Pêcheis*); smell, taste: 1.6.1-2 (301-2K *Erotes*); etc.

affect viewers in exactly the same manner as the Menelaos-and-Patroklos group in the different contexts suggested above.

It follows that in our analyses the image, rather than associated texts, should take centre stage. Extracting visual meanings from the image is not a "second-best" approach to which we can resort whenever we lack relevant verbal or written testimony on which to base our understandings. The meanings encased in material remains, including images, often operate at levels for which verbal communication is poorly suited and which upon analysis may even prove to be in contradiction with what is verbally avowed.⁶² Thus analysis of material culture is not a substitute or supplement for the study of verbal reports and communication. The various types of information complement each other, each with its own strengths and weaknesses.

Like all material culture texts, then, each individual piece of Roman art is meaningful per se, but beyond that I believe we can safely say that Roman art was consciously constituted as a complex communicative system. This sets it apart not just from most material culture but even from many other artistic traditions. As I see it the image-types of Sol that I propose to study here formed part of a Roman iconographic system of signification that allowed artists to actively deploy them in their construction of meanings through visual means. They could do so as components of a more complex image, as part of a broader physical setting within which the image was placed, or both. This is important. Invariably the image of Sol is but one component of a whole range of elements mustered by the artist, owner, and others, including the size, the setting, the style, the material, any other figures or images that form part of the composition, evoked traditions, accompanying inscriptions and the like.

It is not my goal to study this whole spectrum of constituent elements in the case of the images collected and discussed in this volume. What the concepts or meanings were that the artist wished these individual works to construct and reveal, and how they were perceived by subsequent viewers, are the complex questions with which this book will not, indeed cannot deal. My aim is simply to study the range of basic potential meanings that the Sol-icon could contribute to the image as a whole. One could say that the images collected in this volume themselves are texts or passages, in which the Sol-icon has the place of a single word. I am not writing a commentary on each of these passages, but refer to them to write a dictionary-type definition of that one image-type they include.

Why my book is so limited will be obvious, for it should be clear by now why even so limited a goal is a demanding task. We cannot take a shortcut and expect to arrive at meaningful interpretations of the image types studied here by equating them with a verbal utterance such as the Latin word Sol. Material texts - in the broadest sense - are separate and independent agents in social discourse, contributing to the construction and dissemination of their own types of meanings in their own specific ways. We must, therefore, analyse the image types of Sol as material texts in their own right. For while both verbal and material texts deal, inevitably, with cognate social concepts and both are, equally inevitably, interdependent, neither one is predicated upon the other.

⁶² Hodder 1999, 66-79. On the contradictions between verbal and material evidence cf. the examples in studies by W. Rathje, quoted by Hodder (1999, 73-4).

Visual meanings and verbal communication

Some may feel that I am carrying this division between the verbal and the visual too far. They may argue that while it is true that images in Roman art communicated, their power to do so was far inferior to that of words. It is argued, for instance, that pictures can neither assert nor deny and that therefore language is the superior communicative system, to which the visual is subordinate.⁶³ I disagree, but the issue is complex. Certainly the dichotomy text <—> image is too facile.⁶⁴ Against the background of recent theory on material culture meanings it is impossible to ignore the “textual” nature of material culture.⁶⁵ At the same time the “non-textuality” of much that is predominantly verbal equally clear.⁶⁶ Beyond the discussions of material culture meanings in general, current inquiries into the specific nature and modalities of visual meanings in art, diverse though they are, also stress or at least explore the role of art as actively and independently communicative in social discourse. It is central to visual semiotics,⁶⁷ but it is also inherent to the wide range of psychologically oriented inquiries and their concern with the nature of viewing.⁶⁸ And it is, in a different way, stressed by those like Merleau-Ponty or Lyotard who focus on the ineffable nature of the visual and its perception.⁶⁹

It is that widely perceived inexpressibility of the visual, making it both communicative and uncommunicative at the same time, which may lie at the root of the apparent academic uncertainty when it comes to dealing with the visual, be it as source or tool.⁷⁰ For it is in the nature of academic discourse that it is primarily, if not exclusively, verbal. This means that when we rely on art as a source, we translate the images’ information into words. Thus when we use art or other material culture to make a point, the visual is subordinate to and supportive of our text, and more importantly, our texts define or even redefine the image’s meanings. This invariably leads to a tension between text and image, because such an approach excludes from analysis

⁶³ Gombrich 1982, 138, 175; Gombrich 2000; cf. Chandler 2002, 49-52.

⁶⁴ On this dichotomy, cf. Roberts 1998, 132, quoting Merleau-Ponty.

⁶⁵ Buchli 1995.

⁶⁶ Indeed, the very “verbalness” of verbal communication is often ambiguous. As Versnel (1990, 18) points out “... a great number of enunciations are not even intended to impart precise information”. Versnel is referring on the one hand to words which are inherently vague (cf. all those former Communist states which felt a distinct urge to include some variant of the word “democratic” in their official names) and on the other hand to words or remarks which are primarily “social” or “expressive” rather than descriptive (not all that is “cool” actually has a low temperature). Add to this the typically Canadian “eh”, the Greek avoidance of a direct “no” (“no”) for an answer (deploying instead the purely visual gesture of an almost imperceptible upward flick of the eyes and eyebrows), etc. and the fuzzy borders between the verbal and non-verbal come into clear focus. Cf. also Boymel Kampen 2003, 378-9.

⁶⁷ Bal & Bryson 1991; Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; Sage 1998.

⁶⁸ Robert 1998, 129, with refs.

⁶⁹ Robert 1998.

⁷⁰ MacDougall 1997, 282-3, with emphasis on the visual in anthropology.

essential aspects of the art in question. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but it cannot be replaced by even ten times that number, any more than the text in this book could be replaced by pictures. And this is not just the case with images only: whether it is the nature of a house, the furnishings of a room, or the bric-a-brac on a desk, material culture in all its facets disseminates a rich palette of messages and meaning that cannot and never will be duplicated in words.⁷¹

The point is that one can verbally describe the impact that an image - be it a painting or a mansion - may have on a viewer, but one cannot, with words, achieve the same effect. Material culture speaks to us with its own voice, in its own language, and even if we leave aside for a moment the fact that there are aspects of art that can never be captured in words, we should bear in mind that there are countless contexts in which art has the greater communicative power. This point is central to my approach to the images of Sol, and I will return to it below.

This difference between the visual and the verbal would appear to be self-evident, and in related fields of study it is indeed a commonplace, as is its logical corollary, that art and material culture sources must somehow be treated as informative on their own terms and in their own manner.⁷² The same cannot yet be said of Classics. There has certainly been a shift in this direction in the last two decades or so, but in general practice many classicists still tend to treat material culture texts implicitly or explicitly as secondary sources of information, dependent upon, and in the shadow of the primary sources that are verbal.⁷³ Written sources define past events and concepts. Non-verbal sources are treated as a reflection and depiction of those verbally defined concepts, and when the verbal and non-verbal sources appear to contradict each other it is almost always the interpretation of the non-verbal source that is revisited to bring it in line with the perceived meaning of the verbal ones.⁷⁴

We can see these problems as clearly in the field of Roman religious studies as in any within classical studies. Art and material culture have certainly not been ignored in the study of Roman religions. On the contrary, they are frequently accepted as the prime source of information. Mithraism is a fine example. But almost invariably this acknowledgement is predicated upon there being a dearth of written sources, counterbalanced by an exceptionally rich material data-base. Neither happens to be the case with Sol. Written sources, while meagre, offer sufficient material for interesting studies, and the material record is rich but fragmented, lacking the coherence and seemingly narrative structure of, for instance, Mithraic iconography. Typically, therefore, art has had little role to play in the study of Sol. Both Halsberghe (1972) and Fauth (1995), for example, provide extensive appendices listing relevant textual passages, but do not include a single illustration of Sol. More recent scholarship has shown a greater interest in visual

⁷¹ Cf. Hodder 1999, 73-79.

⁷² Cf. E.g. the essays on visual anthropology, collected by Banks & Morphy 1997.

⁷³ On the tendency to grant primacy to texts: Elsner 2002b, 361; Derks 1998, 23-4; Huet 1996, 21; E. Scott (1993, 19) terms this a "...dependence on literary sources as «objective text»...". Examples of a shift in new directions: Hölscher 1987; Taylor 1987; Zanker 1990; Elsner 1996b; Derks 1998; Wells 1999; Tanner 2000 and 2002.

⁷⁴ Sancisi-Weerdenburg (2000) illustrates this tendency with an interesting example.

evidence, but too little regard for the problems of its interpretation.

This can be well-illustrated with Wallraff's (2001) otherwise excellent book on the sun in early Christianity. Wallraff devotes considerable attention to visual evidence, but as I discuss in greater detail in chapter eight, he is insufficiently aware of the strict iconographic principles governing depictions of Sol and the precision with which they were maintained. As a result, he sees solar imagery in early Christian art where, in fact, there was none.

That I single out Wallraff here is not to criticize his scholarship. On the contrary, from our perspective his misinterpretations of visual evidence are interesting precisely because his scholarship is strong and his main (text-based) thesis convincing and well argued. Why, then, does Wallraff fail to find visual confirmation to support his contention that early Christianity was strongly influenced by solar theology? The answer lies in the essential differences between verbal and visual modes of expression. When one speaks of Jesus as *Christus Sol verus*, there can be no doubt who is meant (Christ) and how Sol is to be understood (metaphorically). The problem is that Wallraff (like many others before him) is trying to find a similar metaphorical use of Sol in early Christian art without realizing sufficiently how difficult, if not impossible, it is to translate verbal metaphors of this type directly into images. He is hard-pressed to find good examples simply because the type of image he seeks cannot be, at least not in the Roman world. Wallraff's study thus illustrates two of the major problems in the analysis of Roman art that we have identified. Wallraff, like so many before him, places himself in the shoes of the ancient observer without adequate knowledge of how the images he discusses were viewed and apprehended in antiquity, and he does so in a quest for images to illustrate his text(s) without taking into account that images speak in a substantially different manner.

Semiotics of Roman art

Wallraff had no choice. He could not fall back on the type of studies he needed in his search for visual evidence because they do not (yet) exist. The aim of this study is to help fill that void by taking our first steps towards a firmer understanding of solar imagery in Roman art. In particular my aim is to provide a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of what the three basic image-types of Sol could mean in the Roman world. I propose to do so by treating the basic image types in the first place semiotically, as signs. This is one of the basic assumptions on which this study is based: that we can approach Roman art as a semiotic system in which carefully defined image types constitute some of the basic units of signification.

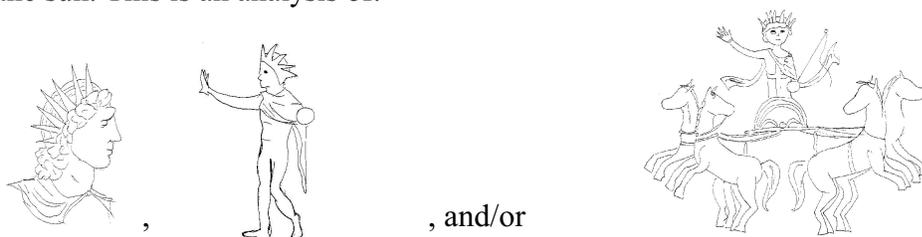
That Roman art can be usefully understood as a semiotic system is hardly a new or controversial proposal, but it has interesting methodological implications. A basic characteristic of any coherent semiotic system is that it is complete in itself, i.e. that it can communicate meaningfully without recourse to other systems, and that it is unique. Each system or genre has its own framework of signs and their organizational principles and each framework typically has its own specific communicative strengths and weaknesses. Hence a corollary of this difference between genres and a fundamental principle of semiotic systems is that they are not "synonymous". We can never convey identical messages in systems based on different units.

For Roman art this means that a given work could be understood through its iconography, attributes, context, parallels, and the like. To return to an earlier example, it is obvious that Romans did not need to refer to the Iliad in order to recognize a particular statue of the

Pasquino-type as, say, Menelaos and Patroklos, because its details of iconography would have sufficed. As we have already seen, the statue is not an illustration of a passage in the Iliad, nor is its iconography dictated by that passage. It is an independent reference to a part of ancient culture - the legends of Troy - to which the epics of Homer and countless other Greek and Roman works of art and literature likewise refer. Consequently the meaning of the statue is not defined by or in any way dependent upon the aforementioned passage of the Iliad, but by the myriad associations it evoked and evokes in its own right.

It is clear, then, why we cannot presume to understand the potentialities of images of sol by turning to the word Sol within Latin literature. As each is part of a distinct semiotic system, the two by definition cannot be synonymous and each must have developed its own codes and variances of meaning. Beyond that basic principle there is obviously interaction between the systems; the two naturally contribute jointly - and together with others - to the concept sun within Roman culture as a whole. However, to appreciate their joint contributions we need a clear understanding of the individual systems. Here lies the problem. For our understanding of Roman art as a semiotic system is still intuitive and patchy, and Classicists have traditionally stepped back and forth between image and text.

The first step we must take, then, in the reading of Roman art entails a small but essential shift in emphasis. We must read Roman art as an agent of meaning rather than a reflection, accepting that it was a medium which could speak for itself. That is why this study is not an attempt to collect, far less analyze, all iconographical and material sources relevant to the cult of the sun. This is an analysis of:



that is to say of the three affiliated, specific image-types commonly found in Roman art and related to Sol.⁷⁵ The difference, though subtle, is fundamental. Rather than study some group of images collected on the basis of non-visual criteria - all images deemed by us to pertain to a specific cult, or period, or region, or material object, for example - the analysis presented here deals with a distinct and visually clearly circumscribed group of three related iconographic signs. The material for this analysis has been collected purely on the basis of the formal criteria that define these signs, meaning that the meaning of an individual image is irrelevant to its inclusion or exclusion. Of course it is obvious from the outset that the Romans more or less arbitrarily linked these image-types to the sun in much the same manner as they did the verbal utterance Sol. Nonetheless, that is not the reason behind the collection of material presented here. I am not looking at depictions of Sol, but rather at three distinct image types with the potential to construct a range of visual meanings yet to be established, which includes establishing how those

⁷⁵ I would like to thank Zoë Hijmans for producing these drawings for me.

meanings are related to the concept Sol (or should I write: sol?).

The point is that image types, by virtue of their repeated use, have the potential to take on conventional meanings. This has significant ramifications, because such meanings can be arbitrary, insofar as they can be far removed from what the images would appear to depict at first glance. Theoretically, any arbitrary meaning was possible, provided it was widely understood. At one level, this is quite clear in Roman art, and undisputed. The sun is a fiery orb, not a nude youth holding a whip, and the Roman tradition of depicting him as the latter is a matter of convention, not an attempt to visually mimic some imagined reality. To see that this is so, one need but think of eternity that, as a concept, could be visualized in art as a woman holding the head of Sol and the head of Luna on her outstretched hands (Cat. L2.3, 6-7, 10-11, 14-15). Surely this cannot be taken to mean that Romans actually thought that there was such a woman or goddess somewhere walking about balancing the heads of Sol and Luna on her upturned palms - any more than they thought that the waning days of the year were a Cautopates holding down his torch, or the wind a small winged boy.⁷⁶

At a deeper level, however, this is an aspect of Roman visual communication that we still poorly grasp. To recognize a reclining, bearded male figure with chubby babies clambering all over him as the Nile is one thing. To understand the significance of the numerous Nilotic scenes in Roman art is quite something else, and yet that is a far more important aspect of ancient viewing, although by no means the only one requiring closer attention.⁷⁷

In Saussurean semiotic terms, we can identify the image types as signs consisting of the form of the image-type as the signifier and the associated concepts as signified(s).⁷⁸ Varying degrees of social convention determine the relationship between signifier and signified. We normally divide signs into three types, depending on the degree of convention involved in making sense of the signs, namely iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. Iconic signs are those in which the signifier closely resembles the signified. We recognize a pipe in a painting as a pipe because the painting closely resembles that which it represents. Social convention is limited to the agreement that it is possible to use paint, brush, and canvas to two-dimensionally depict something that is actually three-dimensional, made of wood or clay, and has aromatic and tactile

⁷⁶ I am deliberately ignoring the issue of anthropomorphism here. It is relevant, of course, for explaining how the iconography of Sol emerged, but it is itself a socially agreed convention, Cicero argues this explicitly (*ND* 1.80-84, cf. *supra* n. 55), pointing out that other cultures chose not anthropomorphism but zoomorphism for their representations of divinity, and that in different cities or shrines nominally identical deities could be depicted in quite different ways. That deities could appear to people in their conventional guise in dreams and visions - as Sol reportedly appeared to Aurelian at his decisive battle with Zenobia (*SHA Aurel.* 25, 3-6) - is a different issue. The ability of images to mediate between the human and the divine (and that includes displaying magical or miraculous properties) does not require a mimetic relationship between the deity and its manifestation. On modes of viewing religious and ritual images in the Roman Empire, cf. Elsner 1996.

⁷⁷ For an interesting analysis of Nilotic scenes as representations of “otherness”, see Versluys 2002.

⁷⁸ One signifier can have multiple signifieds - *can* may be either a noun or a verb - and one signified may have multiple signifiers - *grain* and *corn* are both correct English for the same product, though the former is more common in the US and the latter, in that meaning, is British English.

characteristics that - for a smoker - are as essential as the visual ones.⁷⁹ Indexical signs are those in which the signifier points indirectly to the signified, such as an owl referring to Minerva or tracks to the animal that made them. Symbolic signs are those in which the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary. In Roman art, personifications such as Concordia or Aeternitas are examples of symbolic signs.

This is basic semiotics and it makes quite clear why we cannot simply place ourselves in the shoes of the ancient viewer and assume to see what they saw. The social conventions that determine the connection between signifier and signified are not self-evident, but arbitrary and hence incomprehensible to the outsider. To comprehend visual signs such as [sol],⁸⁰ we need to know the relevant social conventions, and I do not think we do, at least, not as well as we often imagine. My principal disagreement with Berrens' (2004) analysis of Roman coins depicting Sol, for instance, is that he does not question what it was that a Roman actually saw when she recognized the image-type [sol] on a given coin. Instead, he automatically assumes that the sign is an iconic one in which the signifier (the image on the coin) has Sol/sun god as signified. I see no reason, however, why the image type [sol] cannot have been an indexical or even symbolic sign on coins, in particular because we are dealing not only with a highly conventionalized image - [sol] - but also with coinage, arguably one of the most socially symbolic and conventionalized mediums for the dissemination of messages that the imperial court had at its disposal. In fact, various indexical meanings have already been proposed in the past, and Berrens actually rejects one, namely that on certain coins he represents the East, and refers to Roman military campaigns in that region.⁸¹ That Berrens is correct in this particular case does not diminish the likelihood of other indexical or symbolic signifieds, yet to be rediscovered.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that the terms Berrens usually uses for the signified of the image type [sol], Sonnenkult and Sonnengott, are themselves quite problematic categories. The Roman concept of divinity does not coincide with the German one, and Romans almost certainly associated deus Sol with characteristics that we do not associate with divinity. One can think in particular of Sol's perfect form and cyclical motion, to the Romans quite literally quintessential aspects of Sol as deus, but not ones that are considered divine today for the simple reason that they are easily observed and calculated. Hence we cannot equate deus Sol with Sonnengott because the Latin incorporates aspects of the sun that the German certainly does

⁷⁹ One may feel that the agreement on the meaning of iconic signs is not a social convention, but self-evident. But as Magritte pointed out of the pipe(s) he painted: "ceci n'est pas une pipe". The nature of an image, in ontological terms, is not self-evident but the subject of fundamental debate, perhaps even more so in antiquity than in modern times (until recently) - a debate in which Plato of course played a central role, but which ranged from the myth of Pygmalion to the *Imagines* of Philostratus.

⁸⁰ For the remainder of this book, [sol] will refer to the image types that are the topic of this study, as they cannot be equated with the Latin word S/sol. Wherever I use "image type/types [sol]" one should really read one of the three (or all three) images sketched on p. xx.

⁸¹ Berrens 2004, 176-178.

not.⁸² Add to this the fact that in written usage Latin authors often use *sol* in a manner that leads modern editors to write it with a lower case *s* rather than an upper case - i.e. sun rather than Sun God - and the problem of interpreting the image type [sol] even as a purely iconic sign come into clear focus: is the signified of that iconic sign then Berrens' Sonnengott, the Roman deus Sol, or simply sol? The answer is actually none of the three, because the image type [sol] is visual and therefore by definition not identical to any given word - i.e., the concept(s) evoked by the signifier *sol* (the word) cannot be wholly identical to the concepts evoked by the signifier [sol] (the image type).⁸³ In short, the answer to the question what the Roman viewer saw when she looked at an image [sol] on a coin, or anywhere else for that matter, is not self-evident.

I have highlighted two points so far concerning fixed image types such as [sol] in Roman art: the remarkable, long-term stability of their basic iconographic conventions, that could remain essentially unchanged for half a millennium or more, and the arbitrary conventionality of numerous depictions to the extent that there is no formal or mimetic connection between the depiction and the depicted. To paraphrase Panofsky: an Australian bushman would have no difficulty recognizing a tree in a Roman painting as a tree, but would not realize that an eagle could be Jupiter, a she-wolf Rome, a woman with turreted headdress a city, a reclining bearded figure with a jar a river, etc. I have stressed these points because stability and conventionality are two fundamental prerequisites for the assumption upon which this study is predicated, namely that Roman art incorporated a carefully maintained semiotic system, actively and consciously deployed by the Romans as a communicative tool. It is on this basis that I argue that an analysis of the basic image types [sol] can be the first step towards a better and more comprehensive reading of the visual evidence for Sol.

A “bungee jump into the land of phantasy”?

Roman art conveyed visual meanings, and these may have differed more from verbal ones than we care to admit. But the mere fact that Roman art was meaningfully constituted does not necessarily mean that images can be used as a meaningful source of information for topics as complex and subtle as religious beliefs and practices. Art communicates not just in a different

⁸² Rothaus (2000, 1-7) opens his book with a warning against treating Roman cults as “christianities” with a different deity, pointing out that the differences were far more fundamental. Berrens' use and (implicit) concept of *Sonnenkult* and *-gott* is a good example of the problem to which Rothaus refers. On the problem of Christianizing assumptions in our approach to Roman religion, cf. Price (1984, 11-15) or Clauss (1999, 17-22).

⁸³ This is why Saussurean semiotics, which prioritizes the verbal, is actually less suitable for discussion of the visual than Peircean semiotics. In Peirce's semiotic triangle the sign has three relations. In one corner is the signifier, which Peirce calls the representamen. In the other two corners are the *object* and the *interpretant*, which together fulfill the role of signified. The object is that to which the signifier/representamen refers, and the interpretant that which it evokes in the mind of the interpreter. Thus the image type [sol] can refer to an associated visual concept as object and yet evoke the word *sol* in the mind of the viewer as interpretant. That interpretant, whether a word or image, is itself a sign, though restricted by the associated representamen and object. This dialectic between object and interpretant allows for some of the issues that arise when we think about the object to which an image refers, because the object itself, as concept, is beyond the image or words the representamen evokes as interpretant. Lele (2006, 48-54) gives a good summary of Peirce's semeiotic, followed by an analysis of its value for archaeological research.

manner, but also at a different level or area of cognition, suggesting that the types of concepts that art can disseminate differ essentially from the types of concepts, ideas, and beliefs that we explore when studying religion. A significant part of the visual meanings may have been concerned with affect, with the creation of a particular atmosphere or feeling, for instance. One could then argue that where religion is concerned, art may reinforce key concepts, but only words can define them. Ergo, without the right texts we cannot begin to understand the religious concepts reinforced by the images.

I disagree, and believe that we should actually exclude written sources in our first analysis of visual meanings. However, it is important to recognize that such scepticism with regards to the practical informational value of material remains of any type for the study of religious thought and related, cognitive, areas of social practice is shared by many - historians and archaeologists alike - and is not limited to historical religions (such as Christianity), but extends to prehistory. Most scholars are reluctant to suggest that we can study past thought through material remains. Certainly there is no serious or longstanding tradition for the study of religious thought (as opposed to religious expression) through material remains. On the contrary: archaeology has a long tradition of relegating everything it does not understand to the realm of ritual, a label that is then used as an essentially non-explanatory one for otherwise inexplicable remains, the tacit assumption being that religion is one of those fields of past activity that are intrinsically incomprehensible to us (unless we have written sources).⁸⁴

The closest one comes to discussions of the possibility to study past ways of thought from material remains is in that still nebulous field sometimes termed cognitive archaeology or neuroarchaeology.⁸⁵ But as soon as one immerses oneself in these discussions, dominated by prehistorians, it immediately becomes apparent that the proposition that one can discern past

⁸⁴ Fogelin 2007, 59.

⁸⁵ For a succinct definition of cognitive archaeology see Renfrew & Bahn 1991, 339. A more extensive definition is given by Flannery & Marcus 1998, 36-7: "Cognitive archaeology is the study of all those aspects of ancient culture that are the product of the human mind: the perception, description, and classification of the universe (cosmology); the nature of the supernatural (religion); the principles, philosophies, ethics, and values by which human societies are governed (ideology); the ways in which aspects of the world, the supernatural, or human values are conveyed in art (iconography); and all other forms of human intellectual and symbolic behaviour that survive in the archaeological record." This is a sweeping definition and a problematic one. As Robb (1998, 331) points out, "the question is not whether we can find the symbolic archaeologically, but whether we can find anything cultural that is not symbolic. (...) Powerful symbols are not irrational or etherreal but are often highly rationalized and concrete (...). Nor can the symbolic aspect of ... things be magically separated from a logically prior economic or material use." If everything cultural is symbolic it is not quite clear how any archaeology can avoid being cognitive (at least in the definition of Flannery and Marcus). Fogelin (2007, 64) gives a more restrained definition: "Cognitive archaeologists focus on the physiological processes of the brain, and the influence of these processes on human cognition." Interestingly, the example he gives is not of a "normal" physiological process, but an exceptional one - shamanic trance - and its postulated influence on rock art. Beck (2006) takes an explicitly cognitivist approach to Mithraism based on so-called neurotheology, carefully divested of its transcendental tendencies and thus reduced to the study of the physiological processes of the brain associated, according to a specific school of thought, with religion. Cf. in particular Beck 2006, 88-98, 136-152. On the implications of recent advances in neurological and cognitive research of the brain on cognitive archaeology, cf. Malafouris & Renfrew 2008, which introduces a special section in the Cambridge Archaeological Journal on "neuroarchaeology of the mind" (*CAJ* 18.3, 381-422, and 19.1, 73-110).

ideas from mute, material remains, is highly controversial. This is not the place to survey all the differing theories, methodologies and caveats presented, as most have little or no bearing on the type of art under consideration in this book. I will, however, briefly discuss the concerns of Flannery & Marcus (1996, 1998), not just because they are so lucidly expressed, but also because they would appear to most forcefully contradict the approach I take in this book.⁸⁶

Flannery & Marcus bluntly warn that cognitive archaeology can easily degenerate into “some of the worst archaeology on record”. In fact, if pursued without the constraints of independent, documentary (i.e. verbal, literary) evidence, they feel that it is little more than a “bungee jump into the Land of Fantasy”.⁸⁷ As for iconography, which they explicitly incorporate under cognitive archaeology, they argue that it can be a “truly scientific analysis” only when history or ethnohistory offer a solid foundation of knowledge, ensuring that we are well-informed about the ideological and religious background that inspired the art under consideration. Where such external information is lacking, they feel that iconography too will quickly degenerate into “science fiction”.⁸⁸

It would appear, then, that the very sources that I largely exclude from this study - the literary sources - Flannery & Marcus deem indispensable for any serious iconographical research. They would probably point out that we are reasonably well informed about the social and religious background against which the images of Sol were produced and argue that I will not really exclude literary sources as I will hardly be approaching the Roman period *tabula rasa*. Certainly I do not question whether literary sources have a role to play in the study of Sol and the material record pertaining to him - it goes without saying that all available sources should be deployed. The problem is rather when and how they should be introduced into the equation. Here, it is not just the traditions of our respective disciplines that lead me to differ with Flannery & Marcus, but also a basic theoretical principle that, I feel, they overlook.

Flannery & Marcus insist that for any attempt at cognitive archaeology we first construct a model based on ethnohistoric documents (i.e. literary evidence) and only then turn to the archaeological record.⁸⁹ They offer no theoretical justification for the necessity of such a model, and in fact it is clear that their insistence is inspired primarily by pragmatic considerations. They

⁸⁶ A summary of recent cognitive archaeological studies can be found in Malafouris & Renfrew 2008. For earlier work cf. Renfrew & Zubrow 1994; Mithen 1996. For a survey of broader trends in this direction, with a focus on agency theory, see Dornan 2002.

⁸⁷ Flannery & Marcus 1996, 352, 361-2. Cf. Flannery & Marcus 1998, 36, warning that in cognitive archaeology without ethno-historical constraints “Any fanciful mentalist speculation is allowed, so long as it’s called “cognitive archaeology””. In contrast cf. the emphasis Wynn *et al.* (2009, 81) place on the ways to potentially test and falsify their conclusions concerning levels and types of cognition and the stage of cognitive evolution represented by the lion-man statuette of Hohlenstein-Stadel produced around 30,000 to 32,000 years ago.

⁸⁸ Flannery & Marcus 1998, 43; they quote with approval a study by Olga Linares of Panamanian burial vessels from sites ranging from AD 500-1500, in which she makes use of eyewitness accounts of early Spanish conquistadores to support her interpretations (O. Linares, *Ecology and the Arts in Ancient Panama: On the Development of Social Rank and Symbolism in the Central Provinces*, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks, 1977).

⁸⁹ Flannery & Marcus 1996, 355.

are worried by the increasingly rampant cases of pseudo-archaeological “research” - in Meso-America and elsewhere - carried out by self-styled “inspired” or “gifted” dilettantes and charlatans who abuse the term “cognitive” as an alibi for their fantastic theories.⁹⁰ I fully sympathize with these concerns and to some extent accept that the approach they advocate can remedy them. There is, however, to my mind a fundamental flaw in the assumption that (ethno-)historical sources take priority in any cognitively oriented analysis of material remains. In fact, one could argue quite the opposite.⁹¹ For historical sources give rise to a host of problematic issues of their own. Written treatises are not “objective texts”. They can be misleading, biased, simply mistaken, and inevitably one-sided in that they represent one individual’s take on things. For example, Cicero’s dismissive comments concerning the sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia and its oracle, suggesting that no thinking person took it seriously, hardly prepare us for the sumptuous nature of what would appear to have been one of the largest and most popular sanctuaries in central Italy in his time.⁹²

Leaving ancient biases aside, we must also address the issues of academic rhetoric and the construction of history/ies. In the case of Classics in particular we must be especially wary of texts and existing frameworks of reference offered by Classical historiography, based primarily on written sources, illustrated and expanded, but rarely amended by the material record. This hierarchy of sources is no longer uncontroversial.⁹³ To begin with there are the well-known problems with ancient literary sources: that literature in antiquity was written by and for a minute elite only; that no more than perhaps five percent of what circulated in antiquity has survived to our day; that the preserved corpus is by no means a random sample of what was written in antiquity; etc. These problems alone make it a complex task to estimate the informative value of our sources, which is not only determined by their veracity but also, importantly, by their relevance to the problem at hand. Of course, Classical scholarship has a long, strong tradition in dealing with these problems. In fact, many of the greatest achievements of our field are directly or indirectly related to the ordering and accessing of ancient sources.⁹⁴ But there is a strong

⁹⁰ Flannery & Marcus 1996, 351, 352, 361-2.

⁹¹ It is well known that there can be striking discrepancies between what people report they do and what they actually do (Hodder 1999, 73-4). Various studies have shown that interview data, for example, can paint a quite misleading picture of people's actions, and that for a full analysis of the activities under consideration the material record can provide essential corrective information.

⁹² Cic. *Div.* 2. 85-7. On the sanctuary: cf. Lauter 1979; Ley & Struss 1982; Coarelli 1989; Gullini 1989.

⁹³ There is a tradition of almost two and a half millennia in Western culture in ascribing a preeminence in information value to the spoken word over the written, and the written word over the non-verbal; cf. Chandler 2001, 51-2, referring to Derrida (1976, cf. Derrida 1978, 1981) who would subvert this hierarchy in favor of the (material) written word; others have extended this to include material culture; Cf. Hodder 1999, 73-4. On the general nature of this problem within classics, with an excellent example as *caveat* against overreliance on the written record, cf. Sancisi-Weerdenburg 2000, 87-93.

⁹⁴ Cf. our vast corpus of erudite text-editions and commentaries; the impressive range of comprehensive supplementary corpora (CIL, TLL); the encyclopaedic collections offering preliminary analysis of the sources (Pauly-Wissowa, HAW, Daremberg-Saglio, ANRW, LIMC, Neue Pauly); etc.

positivistic element - typical of its age - in the scholarship which produced these tours de force, aimed as it was at facilitating the extraction of all possible information from every conceivable written source. In this tradition, generations of ancient historians have fine-tuned their methods for the creation of as convincing a description of the past as possible notwithstanding the fundamental difficulties posed by our sources. The results generally consist in almost equal parts of painstakingly achieved analysis of data and the insidiously persuasive rhetoric of continuous historical narrative. That there is an element of rhetoric involved in the texts of historians is natural; scholars feel an urge to persuade. That the narrative, for the sake of coherence and continuity, shows little tolerance for gaps in our knowledge is also understandable. While some scholars have, on occasion, voiced a preference for disjointed staccato-like discussions focussing solely on what we "know",⁹⁵ it remains common practice, if only for the sake of legibility, to push back the boundaries and fill in the gaps as much as our sources and common sense will allow. Nonetheless, both aspects of historical writing - rhetoric and seamless narrative - put great pressure on our sources and the danger of over-interpretation is ever present.

The extent to which this is a problem within our field depends on one's point of view, but examples abound, with the biggest danger lying in the fact that Classical historians, in their search for information with which to fill in the blanks, have developed an approach to our sources which can all but ignore their communicative intent in favour of mining them for isolated snippets of information.⁹⁶ We routinely attempt to glean answers to our questions from the haphazard and gap-toothed collection of sources available, irrespective of their actual relevance to the question at hand. To the extent that the intent of the author is studied it is done primarily to establish the parameters of the source's informative value, that is to say, its reliability. From this perspective it is obvious why literary sources are considered to be far more useful than material ones. Material sources do not contain chance remarks or stray snippets of information. Indeed, material sources are not terribly informative at all if one cannot decode the language in which they are composed and is unaware of the context within which they functioned. Written sources, on the other hand, are a veritable mine of unexpected, tangential information alongside what they actually intended to impart. Thus Classicists are quite unfazed when a passage in Quintilian concerning the use of *g* as a terminal letter in certain archaic Latin words is transformed into a source for the cult of Sol in Rome.⁹⁷ Of course the information (that there was some sort of shrine - pulvinar - of Sol on the Quirinal) is perfectly valid and relevant, but this does not turn

⁹⁵ Ernst (1996, 34), drawing his inspiration from archaeology, suggests that such a discussion would be like a "serial registration", an enumeration of "(...) the fragments as fragments (...)", referring *inter alia* to the German translation of H. White's *Tropics of Discourse (Auch Klio dichtet, oder, Die Fiktion des Faktischen: Studien zur Topologie des historischen Diskurses*, Stuttgart 1991); Shanks & Tilley 1987, 137. Cf. Hodder (1999, 182), with further references.

⁹⁶ An amusing, albeit extreme example of overinterpretation of a decontextualized snippet of text is referred to by Wes (1980, 11), namely Jacob Burckhardt's enthusiastic conclusion, based on two lines in Homer, that all Greeks were immune to draft and could not catch colds: "Freilich muss ... eine staunenswerte Kraft in der hellenischen Rasse vorhanden gewesen sein".

⁹⁷ Quint. *Inst.* 1,7,12, referring to an inscription containing the word *vesperug* at the *pulvinar Solis* next to the *aedes Quirini*.

Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* itself into a source on the cult of Sol. It is difficult if not impossible for us to evaluate the significance of this information, because neither Quintilian nor any other ancient author gives us comprehensive information and analysis of the role and nature of pulvinaria in Roman religion in general, and this shrine in particular. We do not even know how rare or common such shrines were, far less how significant or insignificant it is that there was one for Sol on the Quirinal.

In calling attention to the problem of over-interpretation, I am of course belabouring the obvious. Classical historians are fully aware of this danger. Nonetheless, the full extent of the effects of this problem are only gradually gaining acceptance. Elsner (1995, 6) has aptly described our field as "strewn like a minefield with the intellectual wreckage (the views, positions and prejudices) of centuries of scholarship". With every step we take we risk exploding some long-cherished tenet and bringing down with it some pillar of our understanding of the ancient world.

With this in mind, let us return to Flannery and Marcus. It will be clear now why the current state of our discipline makes me wary of the type of reliance on texts that they advocate. But that is not the only reason. More important is that fundamental issue to which I have already referred a number of times: the difference between visual meanings and verbal ones. The more we rely on written sources, the more difficult we make it to recognize the quintessentially visual and ineffable components of meaning in the visual ones. If the semantic nature of Roman art was as strong as I have argued, then we must trust it to convey its messages successfully, and trust ourselves to understand them without resorting to an interpretative framework pre-imposed by literary sources (as interpreted by us).

Reading Roman Image Types: Theory and Practise

That sounds grand, but not very practical. In fact, some may feel that I have argued myself into a corner. Let us recapitulate the points that I have made so far. I opened this chapter with "the" Roman viewer, whom we have lost and need to find again if we hope to view Roman art on its terms rather than ours. Until the last few decades, I argued, Roman art history has been more concerned with form than meaning, while Roman art itself was more concerned with meaning than form. The realisation that even the style of a Roman image could be dictated by the message is still fairly new. At the same time we have come to see that many so-called Roman copies can be more fruitfully understood as Roman image types, and that the widespread use of image types attests to the importance of recognizability and hence of communication to Roman art. Many of these image types are governed by a remarkably strict set of iconographic rules that remain constant over very long periods of time. In semiotic terms it is therefore justified to view such stock images as, for example, the image types [sol] as signs in a Roman visual semiotic system. This has implications for the meaning(s) of such images, for it is a characteristic of signs that they do not have pre-determined or self-evident concepts associated with them, but rather socially agreed ones. Unfortunately, as far as the language of Roman images is concerned we are not as well versed in those social agreements as the Roman viewer would have been. This means that we must take care not to assume too easily that we know how to read a given image, the more so because semiotics also stresses that signs in different systems cannot convey identical concepts. This means that verbal language and visual communication cannot convey identical

meanings; a visual sign in the shape of the image type [sol] cannot be deemed to convey the same as a verbal sign in the shape of the Latin word Sol. Hence to understand what a Roman viewer saw in an image type [sol] we must seek visual meanings, not rely on verbal ones. To summarize, these are the assumptions from which this study proceeds:

- that form was usually subordinate to message in Roman art, because art was primarily a communicative system;
- that basic semiotic theory gives us the best tools for the initial analysis of that communicative system;
- that we have inadequate knowledge of the social agreements governing which specific concepts were associated with which signs in Rome's visual communicative system;
- that we cannot turn to written sources to expand that knowledge because visual concepts associated with visual signs differ by definition from verbal concepts associated with verbal signs.

A number of major questions and problems arise from these assumptions, the first of which is how we are to establish the basic or potential visual concepts and meanings associated with a given image type if we accept that Rome's visual signs were associated with particular meanings by social agreement. We must bear in mind that often knowledge of those agreements has been lost in part or in whole. Additional questions present themselves when we focus on the further analysis of actual images incorporating, say, the image type [sol], but we cannot begin to analyse a particular Roman work of art or visual composition in communicative terms if we do not know what the component image types and visual conventions contribute collectively to its meanings. Conversely, the component parts, i.e. the signs, that make up the whole are not very meaningful in isolation, but imbued rather with potential meanings (the range of possible associated concepts) which can be actualized depending on how the sign is deployed. To give a linguistic example, social convention among speakers of English associates a number of quite unrelated concepts with the verbal sign can, so that standing alone the sign has no intrinsic or core meaning, but only a number of potential ones. Actualization begins when the sign is deployed as either noun or verb, and, if the latter, used either transitively ("my boss will can me") or as an auxiliary verb ("I can see the can"). In principle, the same is possible with a visual sign. It is true that can is a symbolic sign, and that whereas words tend to be symbolic signs, images are more likely to be iconic ones. But visual symbolic signs are quite common as well. Each typed letter in this book is an example, as are such common visual signs such as a red cross, a national flag, traffic lights, and the like. In any system as formulaic and constant as Roman art in particular the potential for symbolic visual signs is significant, as we have seen.

It is not easy to gain a firmer grasp of the potential meanings of all visual components or signs contributing to overall visual messages in Roman art. We have to deduce these through contextual analysis of a wide range of occurrences of the convention or image type under consideration, such as [sol]. Unfortunately, context is a sore spot in the study of Roman art, which makes this problematic. Almost invariably the overall visual program or message has been fragmented, with many elements destroyed and the rest dispersed. Even if we had found Cicero's Tusculan villa, for example, with most of the sculpture that he had acquired through Atticus still more or less in situ, we would likely not have the wall-paintings, the tapestries, the woodwork, nor anything in (precious) metal that may have adorned his lecture hall. Furthermore, if the villa

had been discovered before the early 20th century, the statuary would likely have been dispersed over various collections with scant documentation, if any, concerning precise findspot and context in the villa. Much work is being done to remedy this situation where that is still possible, but a great deal of information has been lost through the passage of time, the different priorities of earlier excavators, and the ravages of illegal digging.⁹⁸ It is as if one were dealing with ancient papyri, fragmentary to begin with but now also cut up, with museums displaying individual words or isolated sentences for their calligraphy or intrinsic interest, but with little regard for their original function in the text from which they were taken. Establishing the potential meanings of a word such as *can* would be impossible if all we have were that word itself on one such papyrus fragments.

Fortunately, the analogy with papyri alerts us to an important difference between verbal and visual signs, as a result of which the situation is not quite so dire as it may seem. Visual signs are not words in another form. The differences are substantial. Visual signs, for example, are always multidimensional and often mobile. They inevitably stand in three-dimensional relationship with the viewer (from viewpoint to image) and with other images, whether they are only two dimensional themselves (paintings, mosaics) or three-dimensional (sculpture). This means that images are easily re-placed, either literally because they are moved to a different spot and/or a different image is set in their place, or indirectly because the viewer moves to a different vantage point, allowing different visual interactions and connections.⁹⁹ Therefore the cohesion between images is generally loose to avoid there being only one “correct” vantage point or reading. One did not need to stand in one particular spot of Cicero’s lecture hall to ascertain that its adornment was suitably *γυμνασιώδη*, nor did one need to view the sculptures adorning it in a specific, prescribed order. Of course size, position, lighting, backdrop and similar structuring elements could help direct the gaze and syntactically impose a degree of order and hierarchy, but not to the same degree as morphology and syntax organize a verbal text. The powerful verbal syntax also gives verbal text significant chronological control. Basically, the visual has an important spatial element but not a chronological one, while the verbal is chronologically sequential but generally lacks a spatial component.

This explains why even the most elaborate visual “texts” are composed of far fewer signs than longish verbal ones. Visual communication tends to be laconic, because it cannot have the same chronological dimension that a verbal text has with its tight control over the order in which information is imparted. Visual texts cannot gradually build up and fine tune meaning through the carefully controlled sequencing of a large number of “words” or signs. Consequently a greater proportion of the visual communication is entrusted to individual signs than is the case with words in verbal texts. In that sense the comparison above with cut-up papyri is not a fair one. One could say that Roman art consists of numerous short and fairly self-contained texts that can be viewed alone or in loose connection with associated visual texts. Even in its current state of survival, then, Roman art potentially has much to impart.

⁹⁸ A good example of all the issues involved are the recent attempts to reconstruct the sculptural program of the house of Octavius Quartio in Pompeii (II, 2,1), excavated between 1916 and 1921 by V. Spinazzola, which proved to be far more difficult than one might expect (Tronchin, *in press*).

⁹⁹ Boymel Kampen 2003, 381-2; Wallace-Hadrill 1988; Bergmann & I 1994; Cooper 2007.

This is particularly the case when one considers the ineffable components of visual meanings which are increasingly the object of study. Here new problems arise. We must avoid the somewhat Cartesian distinction between meaning (the signified; mind) and form (the signifier; body) that one often encounters, as it tends to reduce visual meanings to what can be verbalized and does not well equip us to examine the ineffable.¹⁰⁰ We often forget to focus (sufficiently) on the process of creating a link between signifier and signified, and tend to proceed from the sign as a given entity, with the relationship between signifier and signified preordained. As a result we have difficulty dealing with contested meanings, ambiguity, misinterpretations, changes in meaning over time or regionally, and the like, and in particular with the experiential aspects of a sign. There is a tendency to treat the sign as a tool that exists independently of both the persons deploying it and those to whom it is deployed. The very notion of the sign as semiotic entity contributes to that sense of independent existence.¹⁰¹ But just as a signifier cannot exist without a signified and vice versa, it can be argued that a sign cannot exist without people. We are just as integral and essential a part of a sign as signifier and signified, which would mean that meaning does not reside in signs independently of people interacting with them, just as meaning also does not reside in people independently of signs. Hence the poststructural view that meaning is constantly emergent, arising at the moment of interaction between people and signs or symbols.¹⁰²

We already know that of course. We are fully aware of the importance of the rhetoric, the music, the poetry, in short the many ineffable but essential elements of verbal text, for instance. But just as we have long tended to place greater worth in words than in images, we have tended to give priority to intellectual meanings over experiential ones. In the case of Latin literature, for example, we tend to privilege the silent, written text and its meanings over the spoken text as spectacle and experience. While that reflects the priorities of probably most verbal texts, I would contend that we underestimate the physical impact of performed words (through intonation, tempo, volume, gestures, etc.), in particular in such societies as the Roman in which silent reading was exceptional rather than the norm.

The visual likewise conveys intellectual meanings as well as experiential ones (insofar as the two can be clearly distinguished) but here I would argue that the hierarchy is inverted and the physical impact predominates (without losing sight of the integral role of the intellectual meanings as well). This is a factor of the spatial dimension of the visual, its area of strength. For we experience space primarily through our bodies. No wonder, then, that Tanner, for example, argues that art's capacity for social agency depends on human embodiment.¹⁰³ Discussing art in terms of human embodiment firmly entrenches it in human experience as a whole (rather than specifically in human cognition or awareness) and thus opens the way to a far more concerted analysis of the full range of meanings relevant to issues of, for instance, identity and power.

¹⁰⁰ Lesure 2005, 238-243.

¹⁰¹ Hodder 1996; cf. Robb 1998, 332-4 on structuralist approaches to symbols.

¹⁰² Thomas 1996, 97.

¹⁰³ Tanner 2001, 260; cf. Fisher & DiPaolo Loren 2003; Hamilakis *et al.* 2001b.

Discussions of style, for example, would not only revolve around questions of competence or intent of the artists (Johns 2003) or meaning of the image (Hölscher 1987), but could also focus on such issues as "correctness" or "naturalness" of the art in the experience of the viewers (Lesure 2005). This allows for a fuller analysis of the agency of the image in its ability to imbue viewers with, for example, senses of self and otherness.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, approaching art in terms of embodiment subverts the absolute primacy of vision itself and legitimizes the role of other senses (touch, smell) in the experience of the art, breaking down the artificial division between art and material culture in the process.¹⁰⁵

Experiential meanings are obviously momentary and emergent in nature, and characterize the fluidity of the sign and its human component. Recognition of this fluidity is essential, but at the same time we must not underestimate the strength of the social conventions governing the sign. Meanings may not be fixed, but they are not absolutely fluid either.¹⁰⁶ Keeping that in mind, we can see how the rapidly growing interest in non-discursive meanings, the body and embodiment, and in general the experiential aspects of material culture is yielding new lines of enquiry that hold significant promise for the study of Roman art - and Roman material culture in general. Beck well illustrates this with his analysis of Mithraic experience and the role of the physical environment therein.¹⁰⁷ This is research that places the (Roman) viewer centre-stage and attempts to deal with material culture on its own terms, as experienced by the person interacting with it.

These approaches have moved well beyond mainstream semiotics, but for the time being, at least, semiotic analysis still has a role to play, certainly where Roman art is concerned. Returning to the image type [sol], what emerges from the previous is that current poststructural theory of material culture meanings provides significant further support for our contention on semiotic grounds that we must draw a sharp distinction between visual and verbal meanings. With its focus on non-discursive, experiential meanings it is also opening the way to studying material culture events or texts as agents of social meaning. In other words, where semiotics teaches us that "what it was" is not self evident and may well differ substantially from what we think it was, current theory has moved beyond that to the analysis of "how it was". How far we can take such analyses remains to be seen, but our material culture database for the Roman world is extraordinarily rich and thus holds significant promise. More importantly, these new approaches treat material culture as intrinsically meaningful per se, something that is obviously true of art, but has not always been accepted as the case with all material culture.¹⁰⁸ This is an important shift away from traditional analyses of material culture, which viewed it as a mirror or

¹⁰⁴ Tanner 2001; cf. Gell 1998. This does not mean that competence and meaning are irrelevant but simply that they are not necessarily the prime determining factors.

¹⁰⁵ Boymel Kampen 2003, 377-8. Cf. Morris & Peatfield 2005; Pauketat & Alt 2005; Joyce 2005; Fisher & DiPaolo Loren 2003.

¹⁰⁶ Robb 1998, 339-40.

¹⁰⁷ Beck 2006, 102-152.

¹⁰⁸ Robb 1998, 332-4.

the outcome of social discourse.¹⁰⁹

Irrespective of whether we ask semiotically “what” or postprocessually “how” it was, however, there still remains the “it”. And in order to ask how “it” was, it needs a working definition. To give an example, the manifold meanings, in postprocessual terms, of the Forum of Augustus do not reside in an enumeration of the ornaments, reliefs, statues, structures, spatial organization and the like, nor in the interpretation of their individual symbolic meanings. But without those statues and structures and their symbolisms there was nothing to experience. We do not apprehend the whole without apprehending the parts. It is tempting to postulate a hierarchy of meanings. One could argue that we must first analyse the iconic or representational meanings, then turn to structural or semiotic aspects, and only then focus on the phenomenological or experiential.¹¹⁰ Certainly we cannot hope to arrive at a fruitful analysis of an image [sol] in terms of self and otherness, for instance, if we mistakenly believe Sol to be an imported Syrian god. Likewise how one understands images of [sol] in terms of power may change depending on whether Sol the sun god, sol the planetary symbol for a day of the week, or sol the indexical sign (with luna) for eternity or some other abstract concept is depicted. But can we impose a hierarchy on iconic, structural and experiential material culture meanings? Is it not rather the case that each of these “types” of meaning is empty without the other two? In other words, we cannot really analyse the parts separately from the whole.

So how, then, do we set about analysing these different types of meaning? To ask the question is to ask how we can find the Roman viewer, a question to which we do not yet and may never have an answer. How, then, do we cope with not being able to find the Roman viewer? That too is still very much an issue. The growing interest in experiential and non discursive meanings is a project in process with no consensus on either goals, methodologies or theoretical framework.¹¹¹ The importance of this aspect of meanings is hard to deny, but we do not have the methodological tools yet that allow us to explore the experiential in academically sound fashion. Flannery and Marcus are right that the moment we enter the realm of visual meanings we come perilously close to that bungee jump into the land of phantasy that they exhort us to avoid.¹¹²

Nonetheless, this is as much an opportunity as a problem, for Roman art may have much to offer here and Roman archaeologists much to discover. With its numerous strictly maintained conventions, Roman art is explicitly communicative, which means that it seeks to exert considerable control over the specific meanings it evokes in its dialogues with its viewers. Those meanings are no less visual insofar as they remain to a significant degree experiential, non discursive, or ineffable. But artists in the Roman empire appear to have made it their first priority that their art was intellectually intelligible and thus a clearly defined conduit for its ineffable

¹⁰⁹ We can think of these types of meaning as standing in triangular relationship to each other in an almost Peircean sense, with experiential meanings in the position of Peirce's object, iconic meanings as representamen, and structural meanings as interpretant.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Robb 1998, 341.

¹¹¹ Robb 1998; Fogelin 2007; cf. Lele 2006; Thomas 2004, 202-222; Bauer 2002.

¹¹² Cf. Tarlow 2000; Hamilakis *et al.* 2001a.

meanings. That should provide us with the type of grounding of potential meanings that we lack in many other art traditions or, for that matter, in other forms of material culture.

It is not unreasonable, then, to assume that a degree of insight in the experiential and non discursive meanings of Rome's visual culture is attainable, but the challenges remain daunting. In the first place there is the sheer scale of the task. Robb lists fourteen possible points of study in the archaeology of symbols:

“(a) iconic or representational meaning of symbols; (b) structural or relational meaning of symbols; (c) phenomenological or experiential meaning of symbols; (d) grammars and variations of form, technique, and decoration; (e) perceptual aspects of symbolic artifacts (visual, auditory, tactile features); (f) cross-artifact styles and semantic associations; (g) social connotations and associations of artifacts, representations, and styles; (h) technical analysis of techniques of manufacture and use wear; (i) economic aspects of artifact manufacture and circulation; (j) knowledge and execution of artifact manufacture as cultural process; (k) artifact life histories from manufacture through deposition; (l) context of usage and interpretation; (m) knowledge differentials and layers of interpretation among users of artifacts; and (n) ambiguity, multiplicity of interpretations, misunderstanding, and irony.”¹¹³

All these points of study are relevant in the analysis of a given Roman image. But the analysis also has to contend with the complexity and subtlety of the semantic system that was Roman art. It is through that system that the artist and viewer exert control over the potential meanings, but as the misinterpretations of Sol and the relative lack of research into the image type [sol] show, we must assume that we do not have a good grasp of it. Our task, then, is to analyse both the individual image as well as the semantic system to which it belonged. Because we know neither well, and need the one to study the other, we find ourselves in the classic “paradox” of the hermeneutic spiral: we do not fully understand the individual images because our knowledge of the system is lacking, and we can expand our knowledge of that system only through those individual images we do not fully understand.

Images, Image Types, and Semiotic System

The best way out of this paradox, I believe, is to focus our attention initially on the image types, such as the three standard image types [sol] mentioned above. Image types, selected by the artist for deployment in a given image, constitute the intermediaries between the visual semiotic system underlying Roman art and the actual images that constitute it. That is why I have chosen to focus on the image types [sol] in this first foray into the analysis of the visual meanings of images of Sol. These image types are not actual symbolic expressions, but signs, for image types are virtual and like signs have no author, no temporal existence, and no physical form. One could consider this analysis of the image types a component of the hermeneutic contextual analysis, i.e. the placing of a specific image of Sol (actual symbolic expression) within its broader context of similar depictions (the “image type”). The pre-understanding with which I come to this contextual analysis is that the “context” I wish to study is itself a component of a visual semantic system with a specific, consciously maintained and imposed structure. I choose to understand

¹¹³ Robb 1998, 342.

that system in (loosely) semiotic terms as consisting of culturally agreed signs (which besides image types, can be styles, techniques, formats, material, positioning and the like). By looking systematically at the actual deployment of the three basic image types [sol] that are the object of this study, I can expect to discern patterns of occurrence which provide insight into the culturally agreed potential meanings of these image types within that system. I can also expect, through those patterns of occurrence, to gain further insight into the nature and functioning of the semantic system itself that I understand Roman art to be. Thus the intended outcome of this study are new pre-understandings concerning the image type [sol] and the visual system of signification to which the image types belonged, which can then form the basis for new or further research in all three areas (images, signs, system). The outcomes of this study are thus not conclusions but beginnings of further study, hypotheses subject to affirmation, amendment, or rejection.

Towards a conclusion

The reader who has accompanied me through this chapter will be as relieved as I am that most of the actual “systematic analysis” is quite straightforward and down-to-earth. In part two of this study I begin with a chapter on the iconographic characteristics of the image types [sol]. This is essentially an extensive affirmation of a major pre-understanding in the analysis, namely how to recognize the image types in the first place. This chapter is followed by the core section of this study in which I present the visual evidence in the form of an extensive catalogue of images which consist of or incorporate one (or more) of the basic image types [sol]. Each major section of the catalogue is followed by a commentary in which I discuss salient features of the images gathered in that section. These discussions range widely, from critical analyses of previous interpretations of specific images or groups of images to suggestions for certain potential meanings for the image type [sol] in specific contexts. The aim of this section is to lay the foundation for subsequent analyses. The discussions are primarily meant to identify significant patterns as they emerge. They do not constitute analyses of the images themselves, and at best offer tentative proposals for potential meanings with which image types of [sol] may have imbued specific images. Part two ends with a brief summary of the main conclusions. In the third and final part of this study I present a number of case studies devoted to a more detailed analysis of specific images or closely related topics. In most cases this is a reworked and sometimes expanded version of articles that I have published previously, now revisited in the light of the outcomes of the present study. The aim of these case studies is to provide some initial tests of the hypotheses generated by section two, but here too the reader should not seek firm conclusions. On the contrary, the case studies illustrate that we still have a long way to go before we can engage in more thorough analyses of the visual meanings involved.

The aforementioned, weary reader may now grumpily wonder what the point is of this abstract chapter if the bulk of this study is so practical, preliminary, and down-to-earth. The present chapter is necessary, however, because it does not deal with what follows in this book but with why it is there. The present chapter is in many respects a quite personal attempt to put into words the broader perspectives to which this study hopes to contribute. Personal, because those well versed in archaeological and visual theory will have recognized its deficiencies and have realized that I am by no means a theorist of material culture meanings. This chapter is not meant to be programmatic or an authoritative summary of relevant current theory, and those less

conversant with the issues discussed should turn to the literature cited rather than to this chapter if they wish to gain an understanding of current trends and debates. This chapter should be read as a personal statement of my own understanding of the theoretical framework and horizon of this study. We all work within such a framework and with such an horizon, but we often fail to make it explicit, even to ourselves. Boymel Kampen laments the lack of theoretical and philosophical engagement among current students and a wariness of theory among Roman art historians in general.¹¹⁴ I suppose this chapter is an attempt to pick up that gauntlet. Certainly I agree with her that as scholars we need to engage with the basic theoretical and philosophical issues associated with our field and the knowledge we pursue. All too often we seem to take the what and why of our research for granted.

Because this is my personal understanding of the framework of my research, I have decided not to define certain key terms, such as Roman, art, religion and the like. The reason is simple: I am not very certain what I mean with those terms, particularly in the Roman (!) context. My hope is that further research building on this study will enhance and expand my understandings of what it means for something to be Roman or Roman art or Roman religious art, but in the meantime I have decided to avoid even a working definition because it simply sets up arbitrary boundaries around concepts that I am not convinced are definable at all. Approaching such concepts with unarticulated and partially subconscious pre-understandings carries risks, but makes it easier for me to adapt my understandings in the course of this study (as I have certainly done and am still doing). For similar reasons I have not attempted to define “the Roman viewer”. I am well aware that however we may seek, we will never find “the” Roman viewer because she does not exist and never has. There was no unified Roman view, but as many views as there were Romans, and the individual experiences of past people are beyond the reach of the historian. The role of the Roman viewer in this study is to keep us firmly aware of the integral role of the viewer in the construction of emergent visual meanings through their art. We may not be able to relive the experience of individual Romans, but that does not mean that we need not incorporate it in our attempts at approximate understanding. Ultimately what we seek is the otherness of collective experiences of (groups of) Romans and the light that otherness sheds on us. For the study of history is an essential component of the study of ourselves, or so we say.

My wife draws my attention to something Friedrich Blume wrote in 1942 as he sought to define the essence of “Great Art”, and Great Art’s ability to project meaning on all cultures and peoples, “selbst in unfaßbare Erhabenheit verharrend...”:

Kein Mensch und kein Zeitalter vermag im Kunstwerk als Erfüllung zu erkennen, was nicht in ihm selbst als Sehnsucht, Ziel oder Wunschbild lebendig ist. Das Werk wird dem Beschauer zum Spiegel seiner selbst. (...) So wird ihm die Aussage über das, was er im Kunstwerk erlebt, halb zur Auslegung des Gegenstandes, halb zum Bekenntnis des eigenen Wesens.¹¹⁵

Our initial reaction to this beautiful rhetoric is that it is “all wrong” with its normative approach

¹¹⁴ Boymel Kampen 2003.

¹¹⁵ Blume 1950 [1942], 5.

to the reified Great Work of Art. But one word hits home: *Sehnsucht*, a powerful word with connotations of addiction and pining that extend its meanings well beyond those of the English *desire*. Why does it strike a chord? Something in this study's long genesis? When I first began to study Sol, my main interest was the transition from paganism to Christianity in Roman art, and in particular the depiction of Christ as Sol. I soon felt that we knew too little about Sol in general, so I turned my attention to depictions of Sol. The problem I now confronted was what these depictions meant. Too easily, I felt, scholars linked them to sun god and solar cult, and that dissatisfaction gave rise to this study. One intellectual step thus led logically to next, resulting in this book of which this chapter lays out the *raison d'être*. Then Friedrich Blume tells us that we cannot find fulfilled in art what is not already present in ourselves as *Sehnsucht* and the lopsidedness of this chapter is revealed. The chapter is about this book, about Roman art, and about the integral role of (other) people in establishing that art's meanings. It is not about me. But I am an integral part of this book, an integral part of why it was written. Why did I write it? What drove me? What *Sehnsucht* shaped this study? I discover that I don't really know...; that this will require thought; and that I wonder whether it matters. But if people are integral to visual meanings...?

There is, inevitably, a long way to go.