

# Forwards and backwards in the historiography of Roman art

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In the 19th and early 20th c. the British Empire comprised a vast array of territories circling the globe, each with its own indigenous and evolving cultures, tied to the English center by strings of authority, tradition, law, and force. The expansive aspect of Britishness, evident in the structures of empire, manifested itself in language, in the courts and rule of law, in the architecture of public administration, and in visible forms of colonial culture, themselves varied through adaptation to climate, religion, and local artistic traditions. Although what constituted the core of "Britishness" might have been at issue (and still remains so, given the instability of such concepts and the difficulty in establishing their consistency over time and space), some constellation of characteristics emerged, patterned after political and cultural values long endemic in the British homeland of England.

Yet no one would consider British 19th- and 20th-c. art to be co-terminous with the varied arts of the empire, despite the historical connections and colonial filiation between Britain and its imperial, later commonwealth associates. That is not to say that British art and architecture were isolated in their development from either the long colonial experience or from contemporary European movements. British art, at least historiographically, was conceived as a distinct entity with its own history, its own artists and architects of distinction. However, in the eyes of many, British art did not exhibit the greatest originality or leadership among its world-wide competitors and was, therefore, deemed unworthy of the highest degree of aesthetic approbation, when weighed against contemporary art on the European continent.

If British artistic culture remained tied to its insularity for so long even while aspects of that culture, in attenuated forms, manifested themselves in various colonial versions, especially in India and Australia, American art, the artistic culture of the United States, once a British colony, remains both continentally diverse (New York *versus* California) and socially inclusive. The particularizing expression of diverse immigrant populations, bringing their own cultural traditions to America, has undergone progressive amalgamation to conform to an inchoate perception of "American ways". Those American ways have diffused throughout the world since the mid-20th c., constituting the spectrum of linguistic, economic, political, and consumerist features, combined with the antithetical pursuits of leisure and work, typical of so-called "American cultural imperialism". Nevertheless, the coherent definition of American art and architecture has been exceedingly difficult to maintain despite the common acknowledgement of its innovative leadership and influence in the development of non-representational art and complex architectural designs over decades. One must also take into account the vast expansion of the American art market, of patronage, and of the opportunity made possible for public and private consumption by abundant American resources and by the exercise of American exceptionalism, that adherence to the principle of independent individualism in the face of conformist social pressures.

What does this preamble have to do with the art of the Roman world? Historical parallels, however useful they might be in imposing a semblance of order on the diverse forms of cultural expression, are imperfect at best, given the absence of true coincidence. Even more artificial and less similar are those allegedly analogous historical situations promulgated by historians of artistic culture in their attempts to model a stratagem for defining comprehensively the distinctive character of a complex polity, such as the Roman empire, that generated enormous quantities of artworks for centuries. The task of defining the common character of those artistic endeavors has not been made any easier by the loss of the great majority of the ancient works of art presumed once to have existed, nor by the changing circumstances of patronage, reception, and consumption, much of which remains unknown. The prevalence of statue bases without statues, of statues without bases, of crumbling buildings whose decorative schemes once depended on a close relationship among architectural elements, painting, and mosaic of dismembered ensembles or programs of once-correlated artworks, all these mark