



Andreea ȘTEFAN
Curator, National History Museum of Romania, PhD in
Classical Philology University of Bucharest

First Seminar (May 6 – 14, 2019)

*Discussing the Lapidarium Collection (NHMR) within the theoretical frame center-periphery.
The relevance of the concept “Provincial Art”, benefits and limits*

Within the proposed topic of discussion of the seminars, the theoretical reflections on periodization in art history, I would like to look at some concepts currently in use in the literature on Greco-Roman art. The scholarly tradition in the field Greco-Roman Art follows roughly two trends. On the one hand, there is the approach that originated in the Renaissance which sees the intrinsic value of the object, thus focusing only on those artifacts that are characterized by outstanding craftsmanship. On the other, a more interdisciplinary perspective, mostly informed by processual archaeology, considers the artifacts in series stressing their functionality over their aesthetic qualities. This last perspective operates with concepts like “visual culture”, more grounded in art history, and its archeological counterpart, “material culture”. In both cases, chronology plays a central role. While a stylistic analysis generates narrative of linear stylistic development, and, as a by-product, pays attention to the technological development that enables the expression of these aesthetic sensibilities, a synchronic perspective is interested in “artistic” artifacts as a dating criterion, following the general assumption that they closely reflect changing trends and fashions.

The Lapidarium Collection of the National History Museum of Romania (NHMR) is the case study I propose for this series of seminars. The collection consists of a wide range of stone artifacts, of different provenience, which were produced within the Greco-Roman cultural tradition. These artifacts are currently described in terms of “provincial art”. Behind this concept,

a simple center-periphery dichotomy is usually assumed. Consequently, provincial art reflects a generally failed emulation of the ideas of the center, with specialists comparing unfavorably examples of “provincial” art to Roman metropolitan products.

While there is no question that differences between provinces exist, and that these differences are detectable in provincial products when compared to metropolitan Roman art, more recent research has brought to light phenomena such as: resistance to normative metropolitan standards and conventions, decentralization, large-scale dissemination of a variety of material cultures stemming from various other cultural backgrounds than the center. Thus when we analyze the so-called provincial artifacts we should bear in mind that lateral networks for transmitting cultural experiences existed in the Roman Empire alongside top-down propagation, which is generally referred to as Romanization.

Accordingly, the Lapidarium collection would largely benefit from the revision of the term “provincial art”. The art object is a product of the specific social practice; therefore attention should be paid not only to considerations of style, iconography, and chronology, but also to the semantic system encoded in it through these practices. The artifact, as we see it, may result from the interaction of multiple factors as artistic patronage (imperial, elite, and non-elite), workshop practices, context etc. For, evidence, both literary and material, testifies that “center” itself is a dynamic concept. As Emmanuelle Rosso (2010) has recently shown in his examination of Vespasian’s portraits, the canonical representation of the emperor originated in Egypt. Only afterward, when he moved to Rome, metropolitan and western workshops adopted and adapted the Egyptian type.

Bibliography:

Susan E. Alcock, Mariana Egri, James F. D. Frakes (eds), *Beyond Boundaries: Connecting Visual Cultures in the Provinces of Ancient Rome*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016.

A.A. Donohue, Mark D. Fullerton (eds), *Ancient Art and its Historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

James F. D. Frakes, *Framing Public Life: The Portico in Roman Gaul*. Wien: Phoibos Verlag, 2009.

Elise A. Friedland, Melanie Grunow Sobocinski, Elaine K. Gazda (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Sculpture*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Martin Henig, *The Art of Roman Britain*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Emmanuelle Rosso, “Entre Orient et Occident: création et diffusion de l’image impériale flavienne (69-70 ap. J.-C.)”. In I. Savalli-Lestrade, I. Cogitore (eds), *Des rois au Prince*.

Pratiques du pouvoir monarchique dans l'Orient hellénistique et romain, Grenoble, 2010, 165-192.

Sarah Scott, Jane Webster, *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Peter Stewart, *Roman Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Jane Webster, "Creolizing the Roman Provinces," *AJA* 105.2 (2001): 209–25

Jane Webster, "Art as Resistance and Negotiation," in Sarah Scott and Jane Webster, *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 24–51.