

To what extent did cultural differences in the Roman Empire affect the art of Ancient Rome?

(APA style. British English)

A. N. Essayist

Abstract

This essay attempts to show how the expansion of the Roman Empire led to acculturation – the transfer of values and customs from the Romans to the other peoples that became part of the Empire. I argue that, although the Romans copied the art of other civilizations, as the Empire expanded to less developed societies, “Romanisation” – the spreading of Roman culture throughout the Empire – took place, and this was reflected in the art of those peoples living on the fringes of the Empire.

Keywords: Roman art, Romanisation, Roman Empire acculturation

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Art can be defined as visual, cultural manifestations of human activity: paintings, sculptures, mosaics and architecture, but the idea of culture being represented in art begs the question of what we mean by culture. In a broad sense, culture may be taken to mean the repeated activities of geographically located peoples, so that even mundane habits, such as holding a fork in the right hand, are cultural. There is little to tell us of how people lived in ancient times, so we must rely on artistic representations which often combine spiritual beliefs in gods, spirits, etc., with social activity – banquets, sex, etc. Written texts also help but only in those cultures sufficiently advanced to have them, and we do not know how far to believe the Roman monographs as accounts of real life. But while Pliny extolled former Greek artists such as Peiraikos, who depicted the lives of commoners, Roman art chose to depict “busts of important ancestors to mythological and historical scenes, still lifes, and landscapes—all to create the idea of an erudite patron steeped in culture” (Ambler, n.d.).

During the Roman Republic, the Celts had occupied a vast area of Europe before Celtic culture was virtually eliminated by the Romans. In the process of acculturation it was the Romans who emerged strongest and, as far as art is concerned, it was the Celts who “adopted features of classical art and incorporated it into their own art” rather than the other way round (BBC Irish, n.d.).

The Roman Empire refers to the period between 27 BC and the fall of Rome in AD 476. The peoples of the Empire were those who had been conquered by the Romans. These included the Greeks and the Etruscans, who had already clearly defined cultural manifestations, as well as more primitive cultures where art did not play such a central role in social organisation – at least as far as we can glean from the survival of artefacts from this period. This is not to say that in more primitive societies there was no art (cave etchings attest

to art even in prehistoric times) but that the materials used, unlike those used in Ancient Rome, did not stand the test of time.

The conquest of primitive cultures does not find echo in the artistic creations of the ancient Romans. Primitive rural life in the outer reaches of the Empire is not etched into the walls of Roman villas. The Romans did, however, assimilate the artistic creations of other civilised cultures, even to the extent of being accused of copying the art of the conquered. The other, kinder, argument is that the Romans were more eclectic in their art, allowing themselves to be influenced by other cultures. Art does not fall from the sky – it is always a social product, and, in some sense, it is always derivative. The Romans, while engaging in artistic activity, would have been well aware of their surroundings. These surroundings would have influenced the choice of themes to depict while taking into account the wishes of their patrons.



Figure. Kouros.
c. 600 BCE

The Romans were clearly influenced by Greek architecture – the symmetry, marble columns, wide front porch and the cella (the enclosed sanctuary) were all Greek standards. Additionally, the Romans followed the Greeks in depicting realistic human form in their sculptures. But it is worth remembering that not all Greek representations of the human body are natural – the early *kouros* (youth) figure, for example, is very stiff and unnatural (Figure). Reliefs, used to decorate Roman temples, were also copied from the Greeks. Greek mythology also forms the central theme of many Roman reliefs, painting and mosaics. But the assimilation of Greek culture, the fact that many Greeks integrated into Roman society, makes the job of distinguishing between original Greek and Roman art more difficult. We only know of much Greek sculpture because

the Romans made copies of it (Crystalinks, n.d.). Bonanno (1994) explains that our knowledge of Greek painting is extremely limited as most of the Greek originals have not survived, and “is based on Roman versions and Greek vase painting” (p. 66).

The influence of Etruscan culture on the Romans is more difficult to fathom as they did not leave written records and their art is mainly buried in tombs beneath Roman developments. There is a real difficulty in trying to understand culture from reading into paintings, sculptures or other art forms. However, one aspect of Etruscan society which was not reflected in Roman society is believed to be the relative freedom of women. In Etruscan art, well-to-do women are depicted attending banquets such as the one in the Tomb of the Triclinium in Tarquinia, and participating in public events. Sarcophagi of spouses have been found in different locations depicting a man and a woman in a presumably intimate pose.

The Etruscans and the Greeks depicted the lives of the elite social classes, but Laurel Taylor argues that “funerary art is the only category of [Roman] art that documents the lives of those outside of the elite” (Taylor, n.d.). There was some upward social mobility, freed slaves and successful social climbers may have wished their achievements to be recorded, as is the case of the Tomb of the Haterii with its depiction of a treadwheel crane used in the family's construction business.

As the Empire expanded, “Romanisation” implied the spread of Roman culture throughout the Empire rather than the other way around. As an example of this, Elsner (1998) cites the Acropolis of Athens. There the Romans placed a bronze charioteer group of Agrippa by the Propylaea and a circular temple of Rome and Augustus near the Parthenon (p. 120). In addition, much of the iconography of the Antonine altar at Ephesus celebrates Roman victories over the barbarians (p. 124). This is art celebrating Roman domination – not reflecting subjugated cultures. However, Trajan’s victory monument at Adamklissi in Dacia (Romania) shows more sensitivity to the local population. Although Roman victories were

represented in the metopes, local artisans were used and the “enemy, represented with no less humanity than their Roman foe, are shown noble in battle and noble in defeat, noble even in the flight of their families in the face of conquest” (p. 126).

As the Empire grew older, Rome was seen less and less as the capital. This process lead to changes in the way art was made. For example, Elsner explains that, in Egypt, reliefs and steles, dating even from the beginning of the Empire, were “carved in a pristine Egyptian style [...] where the emperor is only identifiable through his hieroglyphic inscription”. This, argues Elsner, is “evidence of non-Roman ways of seeing and the need to accommodate peripheral conceptions and views” (p. 135). Richard Reece (1994) also reinforces this idea when he argues that “[L]ate Roman art first emerges in the provinces, particularly in the South and East, before establishing itself at the centre” (p. 234).

To sum up, it is unlikely that cultural representations from less advanced societies such as that of the Celts would have found themselves into Roman art. But as the Roman Empire tries to establish itself on the fringes, it combines traditional Roman with local iconography. We cannot know to what extent Roman art is an accurate reflection of previously existing cultures as much of our knowledge of other cultures passed through a period of domination by Rome.

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