

BOOK REVIEWS

Elizabeth Marlowe, *Shaky Ground: Context, Connoisseurship and the History of Roman Art*. London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney 2013: Bloomsbury Academic, “Debates in Archaeology” Series, pp. 184

Reviewed by Paul Barford

Classical Archaeology is a discipline that in the Anglophone world has long been institutionally and, one might say, intellectually often relatively separate from other archaeologies. One area where this seems especially true, according to this thought-provoking book by Elizabeth Marlowe (Associate Professor of Art and Art History at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York USA), is the study of the history of classical art. This object-focussed discipline is still to some extent embedded in the text-driven traditions and connoisseurship/art appreciation approach that underlie the ethos of collecting and derive from the aesthetic and elitist attitudes of the epoch of the Grand Tour, de Caylus, Piranesi, Winckelmann and Stanisław Kostka Potocki.

Marlowe takes a closer look at the implications of these cognitive characteristics for scholarship on the history and meaning of Roman art. The thinking behind it emerged from conflicts developing from her simultaneously teaching two courses, the first was on “looting, faking, collecting and understanding antiquities in the post-colonial world”, the second being an introductory survey of the history of Roman art using the standard textbooks. The juxtaposition induced her to look at the discipline and to think critically about underlying methodologies and assumptions. Marlowe’s book (published in the Bloomsbury “Debates in Archaeology” series), urges a greater epistemological and methodological consciousness in the practice of the writing and teaching of Roman art history. In particular, she takes a close look at the current mode of the study of Roman sculptures, and their attribution to a particular time and place primarily through formal and stylistic analysis (“connoisseurship”).

The fundamental tenets of the discipline set out in the standard reference and textbooks of Roman art history involve the repeated use of “canonical works of Roman art that serve as the bedrock” and baseline of the entire discipline. Marlowe emphasizes

that the quality of the evidence for the dates, places of manufacture and finding, use or reuse, and social significances of these individual works of Roman art varies widely. Rather than the quality of information about where they were found, these artworks owe their prominent position in the historiography on Roman art largely due to historical, aesthetic, institutional, and practical factors. So great is their celebrity that the fact of their unknown archaeological origins is scarcely mentioned in scholarly publications or the textbooks. Indeed, since many of them appear in older collections, having previously “surfaced” on the antiquities market, relatively few have come down to us with even a known findspot. Marlowe points out that: “somewhere between one-third and one-half of all the freestanding sculpture in the Roman art surveys has no reliable data about its ancient setting”.

The author argues that the lack of information about the original context of these works frustrates the goal of understanding the functions and meanings of art in the Roman world and hinders the development of interpretations of the social context of creation and situational meaning (context of use), and thus their fuller interpretation in terms of the place of these items in social life of the people that commissioned, made and viewed them. Marlowe presents the view that interpretations of the “meanings” of individual works and their place in the historiography of ancient art based only on formal and stylistic analysis are not the product of any real knowledge about those particular objects’ ancient patrons or users. They are extrapolated from extra-source information, such as the literary record, which has been used to fill in the historical gaps left by these artworks’ missing ancient contexts.

Yet, regardless of when they surfaced and were added to prestigious collections, their fame, or the renown of the scholars who have previously studied them, we can never be certain that they are what they seem to be. Using a number of case studies, Marlowe highlights some of the limitations (and underlying assumptions) of the traditional techniques and shows the risk inherent in such assumptions which she stresses are “shaky ground upon which to build complex, specific narratives about ancient practices, beliefs or values”. No amount of formal analysis, no matter how skilled or erudite, of a loose object that first surfaced on the art market can be considered as a firm foundation for subsequent historical interpretation.

In her text, Marlowe argues for the importance of giving priority to the notion of context of deposition and context of discovery. A documented findspot at least tethers the work to some piece of objective fact external to the work itself. The book usefully promotes the use of the terms “grounded” and “ungrounded” to describe Roman artworks with and without (respectively) a known findspot. Marlowe points out that previously used terms are inadequate and involve their own conceptual baggage. The labels “licit” and “illicit” utilized to characterize the differing origins of various ancient artworks involves issues related to the market, not to epistemology. The word “context” is often used in art history in an ambiguous manner, while the dichotomy

“provenanced” and “unprovenanced” also blurs a critical distinction, with little critical attention paid to epistemology; in use, it refers to a number of unrelated issues. She illustrates this (p. 45) by reference to eight different accepted answers to the question “Where from?” that can be found in many publications on ancient art: good findspot data (“from Acquarossa, monumental building F, where the slabs apparently adorned the internal portico”), vague findspot data (“from Cologne”), hypotheses seemingly based upon connoisseurship (“from Asia Minor”), hypotheses whose basis cannot be determined (“from Rome”), rumor (“said to have been found in Alexandria”), ownership history (“from the Farnese collection”), acknowledgment of no provenance (“findspot unknown”), and silence.

Marlowe argues that the criterion of degree of knowledge of the context of deposition and finding should play a greater role than it currently does in decisions about which objects are included in the scholarship on and teaching of Roman art.

A major hurdle is the way that it is almost automatic to perceive works of art of any period mainly in terms of their aesthetic qualities. It is natural that more attention is paid to extraordinary, visually spectacular works wherever they may have been found. These objects may have qualities that are sometimes capable of evoking certain types of reaction in the viewer (pp. 7–10), the object is considered to speak for itself. In the view of connoisseurship, art constitutes art through its ability to transcend its original function and speak through pure form to viewers across time and place. In the reception of this message, it is as if intensity of regard for the object itself excludes all extraneous information. The more arresting or emotive the object is, the less its original context is felt to matter. This attitude is what makes an object desirable as a collectable. It is also what supports one side of the current debate between the art world and heritage protection circles on looting and the antiquities trade. Museums, collectors and their allies in the antiquities trade all argue that visually interesting artworks belong on display rather than hidden in the ground, even if their original context is unknown.

It has long been apparent that the original messages communicated by works of Roman art were strongly shaped by multiple elements in their ancient environment. It is clear that sculptures were rarely created to exist in isolation from their setting. For the artist, patron and viewer, the meaning of ancient artworks was created not only by their form, but the interaction of those forms within a larger setting. These might include their specific placing in and associations with the enframing architecture or monument, inscriptions, other works belonging to the same complex. These would shape a particular work’s meaning as strongly as its own forms did. By taking account of the wide array of physical and historical evidence that accompanies “grounded” works, one can construct a far more complex story of how Roman art developed and functioned, and what it meant in the society of its time.

Marlowe indicates that a broad commitment to prioritization of archaeological context and rejection of discussions based on ungrounded artworks would benefit the

field through a more robust, conscious commitment to interpretation of the original social context through an art history based only on securely grounded material. This would require paying more attention to epistemological data such as the full articulation of information on what is and is not known about the findspot and collecting history of the object, as well as the explicit discussion of the evidence and comparanda behind attributions for all objects used in discourse on ancient art. This will produce an increase in methodological transparency and epistemological clarity that will “encourage students and scholars alike to think consciously about how we know what we think we know, and how we go from evidence to interpretation”.

In the book’s first chapter (*Histories Modern and Ancient*), Marlowe sets the scene by briefly presenting the beginnings of Classical Archaeology and the associated eighteenth century traditions represented in the contents, installation and décor of the Palazzo Nuovo galleries of the Capitoline Museum. In doing so, she introduces (pp. 15–20) the Fonseca Bust (the “Flavian woman”) found in the early 18th century and donated to the Museum by the Portuguese Franciscan José Ribeiro da Fonseca (1690–1752). This object is one of the most frequently reproduced works in Roman art history, and forms part of the “canon” of objects conventionally used in its presentation. It is also one of a group of works to which Marlowe refers throughout the book as case studies illustrating the arguments she advances. She posits that, examined objectively, this well-known piece “offers unreliable testimony to ancient practices”. Discussing the piece and its comparanda in detail, she points out the uncertainties about the object itself and the circularity of the arguments based on connoisseurship about even its date (which she suggests is early second century and not Flavian at all) and origins. The lack of any information about the context in which it had been made to be displayed renders a fuller understanding of its unusual iconography difficult (pp. 24–25). Her point is that although the Fonseca bust is deeply enmeshed in the historiography of Roman art, “our heavy reliance upon it is [...] inversely proportional to how much we actually know about its ancient history far less than we know about its eighteenth-century history”.

The second part of the chapter outlines the “clearer prospects for interpretation of social context” offered by grounded items. The examples taken as case studies are a group of statues from excavations at Aphrodisias in Turkey (pp. 29–34) or the mausoleum of Claudia Semne on the Via Appia in Rome (pp. 34–35). Here she makes the cogent point that had these figures “surfaced” loose on the art market, none of the nuances about their “rich, shifting ancient meanings would have been perceptible”.

The second chapter (*Indifference to Context*), examines some of the ways in which older models of art historical analysis, with their privileging of ungrounded works and/or other signs of indifference to context, continue to prevail. This manifests itself in a variety of ways in Roman art history, such as the inconsistencies with which information is presented in object identifications and exhibition captions. Context is often

obscured behind vague or ambiguous labels that elide findspot, ownership history, and hypotheses based upon style. The same attitudes are perpetuated in museum displays (pp. 49–52), where objects are decontextualised, or even given entirely new, alien contexts. The ultimate origin of this is in the collector mentality. It is because of the nature of the world of ancient art dealing and that the specific historical or physical context of discovery played almost no role in its appreciation, and was thus rarely thought worth preserving. It is not surprising that many objects now above the ground have lost their associated contextual data. Another factor that has also contributed to the erasure of findspot information is the often clandestine nature of the ancient art trade (p. 38).

“To identify the exact site where a valuable ancient artwork was discovered is to create a host of potential claimants (landowners, developers, government, papal, or museum authorities, etc.) who might block the sale, demand a cut of the proceeds or make arrests [...] Furthermore, the sooner the findspot is forgotten, the fewer the accomplices to theft or illegal exportation, and the more legitimate the claims that all parties have acted in ‘good faith’”.

In chapter three (Lessons Learned and Not Learned), Marlowe considers the intellectual consequences of the field’s privileging of ungrounded antiquities and the connoisseurship that comprises the traditional methodology of Classical Archaeology. In Roman art history, this is sometimes practiced with less self-awareness than connoisseurship in other art historical fields, and has remained largely outside the debate that has been going on for many decades about the epistemology and methodology of the analysis of the art in general.

It is still common for Roman scholars and curators to identify items without naming the stylistic comparanda upon which the hypothesis is based, or even identifying which traits of the object in question have been taken as diagnostic or citing the line of reasoning on which they are based. Attributions are most often simply asserted without supporting evidence as if they were an obvious, irrefutable fact. A greater insistence and consistence about the importance of external data in historicizing an artwork would make the shaky foundations of connoisseurship more visible.

Here Marlowe returns to the issue of circular logic inevitable in dealing with ungrounded objects, in which hypotheses merely confirm other hypotheses and this self-affirmatory circularity of interpretation, untethered to any secure facts derived from reliable, external data, merely strengthens the existing patterns of thinking (pp. 84–89). “Surfacing without secure information beyond what is immanent in themselves, the objects are unable to broaden our basis of knowledge”.

The fact that a sculpture has been on continuous display in a major collection and had long-standing prominence in the historiography is no guarantee of the correctness

of its connoisseurial attributions. A good example of how much faith Roman art historians often put in the opinions of their disciplinary forebears is the discussion of the recent findings about the medieval date of the Lupa Capitolina which was once thought to be ancient Etruscan (pp. 99–100). Marlowe uses this to illustrate how complacently the conventional wisdom on some sculptures has been passed down for generations, and how little attention had been paid to its epistemological foundations and led to stylistic anomalies being ignored.

The final section of this chapter (pp. 76–79) raises the largely overlooked issue of scholarly practices involving connoisseurship of ancient art, and the complicity of academia in the market in such objects. This issue becomes very blurred in the museum world. Currently, the use of connoisseurship by Roman art historians in the academy to incorporate ungrounded objects into historical narratives is precisely the same as (and legitimizes) the intellectual premises of those involved in the antiquities market. It is on the basis of connoisseurship and “reputation”, that dealers market ungrounded (thus possibly looted or forged) antiquities to buyers, representing them not just as rare, valuable, interesting, desirable or beautiful objects, but also as relics whose place in history “reputable” dealers ensure through their knowledge. As long as both scholars and dealers “offer an uncritical, uncomplicated version of history-through-connoisseurship, the method will retain its legitimacy, and ungrounded antiquities their value”.

The book’s fourth chapter (Connoisseurship and Class) examines the gap that has developed between the narrow, taxonomic focus and traditional artist-focussed style of historiography of Roman art and newer trends in the analysis of visual imagery that analyse works of art in terms of the forms of representation used by artists and patrons to engage in the competition between various social entities and focus on the relations between images and consumers evaluated for their cultural significance.

Marlowe shows in Chapter 4 that the prevalence of ungrounded artefacts in the source base of Roman art history undermines their ability to be effective in this area. Currently, the leading textbooks present the history of Roman art as a sequence of styles, with the occasional observation about social significance grafted on here and there. Even works organized around contexts (the domestic sphere, the funerary realm, cults, etc.) continue to feature ungrounded objects, whose original context can only be guessed at and discussed in the most general way. In interpreting such objects, these studies necessarily fall back on generic or conventional wisdom about types and styles, rather than analysing specific data about the works’ commissioners, architectural frame, grouping with other works, use, or reuse. They can generalize broadly about the style of such objects, but cannot shift the focus from artists to patrons and users if there are no data external to the object itself by which to assess its forms. Forms alone are a record of what a particular artist did; to understand why he did it, whose needs those forms served, requires information about where an object was displayed, who commissioned it, what ensemble it belonged to, or how it was subsequently deployed.

The next chapter discusses two issues that the author considers under the heading of “Red Herrings”. The first is the problem of “knowing what we have” in regard to forgeries (pp. 99–105). When studying ungrounded artefacts of a type “for which modern demand has long exceeded supply”, scattered by an unregulatable antiquities market and gathered by eager collectors, there will inevitably arise the problem of forgeries and whether items are ancient at all. Karl E. Meyer, author of “The Plundered Past”, once compared forged antiquities to venereal disease, “the punishment for excessive desire and bad judgment”. The problem affects all branches of the study of the past that allows items from the antiquities trade into its source base (“bazaar archaeology”). Marlowe argues that these concerns about forgery obscure the deeper epistemological problems inherent in the use of ungrounded antiquities in scholarship. She asserts that due to our faith in connoisseurship to supply the fundamental historical data, and to the conservative nature of scholarly traditions, it has become easy to ignore the many uncertainties that encumber the ungrounded, canonical works of Roman art, like the Capitoline Wolf mentioned above. While the bad forgeries are relatively easy to spot in terms of their anachronistic style and workmanship, it is obvious that the good ones are still on display in museums and maybe figured in publications on Roman art. In reality, although this is rarely acknowledged, ungrounded works may only be situated somewhere along a long grey scale of greater or lesser consensus about their antiquity. The study of Roman art on such a basis involves a number of “unknown unknowns”, and the profusion in the corpus of ungrounded works is the real source of this instability.

The other issue discussed in this chapter that the author considers distracts attention from the deeper epistemological problems involved in academic use of ungrounded antiquities is the matter of the distinction between “licit antiquities” and “illicit ones” (pp. 105–118). This distinction relates only to local laws and international documents, such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the “Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property”, and legal and ethical concerns surrounding artefacts exported from their source country after 1970. Marlowe however stresses that “for those in the business of studying the past rather than buying and selling it, however, all ungrounded antiquities are problematic, whether they surfaced in 1974 or 1749”. The lack of information on the collecting history of long-famous pieces as well as freshly-surfaced ones is equally problematic for scholarship.

In the US, discussions of illicit antiquities rather unfortunately focus on the issue of “repatriation” of loose illicitly – obtained artefacts identified on the international antiquities market, seized and sent back to the source countries with the appropriate fanfare and diplomatic emphasis on political goodwill between nations. The fanfare tends to obscure the knowledge that was lost when the artefacts concerned were removed from their original archaeological context.

The final chapter of the book (pp. 119–129) therefore attempts to build on the previous discussion and lay down some principles for best practice in the academic study of Roman art history. From the currently ongoing discussion of looting and the market in illicit antiquities and concomitant shifting attitudes in its wake, Marlowe identifies an opportunity emerging for the study of ancient art in its many social contexts. She suggests that publication policies requiring a full, explicit account of the origins and ownership history of every piece discussed, regardless of when it surfaced and whether or not it is “licit”, would help more fully address the problems posed by ungrounded antiquities. This will aid an increased understanding of the past development of ancient art history, and how collections were formed, and for what larger ends. The increased use of digital technologies, new internet databases of collections and collecting histories of individual objects have the potential to change the landscape of ancient art history. In particular it will aid the further study of the eighteenth century and later reception of Classical art which will have much to tell us about the construction of an ideal classical past, the formation of taste, and the history of collecting, topics of growing scholarly interest.

Elizabeth Marlowe’s “Shaky Ground” is a clear, concise, timely and elegant presentation of an important argument about the nature of the evidence we use to learn about the classical past. This book has relevance not only to the classical scholar and student of Roman art but also makes many points of wider interest, including the general reader.

In that regard, one small quibble might be that the “canon” of works named as examples in developing the argument may be familiar by those names to only part of the book’s readership. Several are named earlier in the book and only later on does one discover the actual item concerned, which turns out in many cases to be extremely familiar as an image frequently seen in general books on the ancient world (thus proving the point Marlowe is making). A one page concordance of works in this canon with where the item now is and what we know of its origins in the book’s introduction would have been helpful.

As she acknowledges, this book and its call for action come at a time when the issue of connoisseurship is being critically examined by professionals and scholars from many disciplines. In this wider debate, the tensions between the tacit appreciation and judgment that expertise and connoisseurship entail and the explicit justification required by research are under scrutiny. How can the creative practice and outputs of connoisseurship be assessed in an academic context and how may the requirements of the practice of research with its requirement for explicit knowledge be accommodated? Marlowe’s suggestions may be seen as part of this general intellectual trend.

She raises the question of the implications of the wider dissemination of information about Roman art online, and one of these might be a democratization of research, far from being restricted to a narrow group of scholars with the learnt ability to

discriminate and judge the aesthetic qualities of something, the public no longer have to accept a curator's view of what they should be looking at and how.

It is in this latter context that her suggestions are even more timely. She is right to note that to a large extent the focus of the ongoing debate to which she refers on the collection of illicitly-obtained artefacts tends to have concentrated on the loose objects and antiquities market and its actors, rather than the fundamental one of the effects of the activities of artefact hunters on the archaeological record, and the careless destruction of contexts of deposition and obscuring the context of discovery. Stressing the notions of the intellectual consequences of insufficient discrimination of grounded and ungrounded artefacts in research and presentation of the results, Marlowe draws attention back to this issue. One thinks here of archaeological attempts to collaborate with collectors in order to gain access to "archaeological" information such as the Portable Antiquities Scheme of England and Wales and related schemes of collaborating with artefact hunters, or academic initiatives to publish cuneiform tablets, papyri, coins, hoards and other materials that have "surfaced" on the antiquities market. Ungrounded artefacts, acquired unmethodically and according to certain biases, cannot be considered archaeological data at all.

Through augmenting the traditional tools of Classical art history by addressing the basic data according to archaeologically-grounded criteria, and subjecting it to more rigorous source criticism, the manner of treating Roman art outlined by Marlowe opens the way to the development of new approaches to part of the material legacy of the classical world and its relevance to modern society, and with this historical context thus producing a more multi-faceted view of our own cultural history. It also has deeper relevance to discussion of the methodological issue of the relationship of archaeology and archaeologists to "dug up old things" and the current increasing role played in some countries by private collecting and museums in determining public opinions about the discipline.