

History of Western Art

Part Two – The Classical and Medieval Worlds

Assignment Two – Exercise 1

Notes – Chapter 5 - Hellenistic and Roman Art

Sarcophagi – not according with Greek beliefs but done by Greeks.
'Home for dead' – Egyptian, Etruscan, Oriental.
Predominant form of funerary art.
Continued into Christian era.
Sarcophagi depict battles/events. Some personal depiction. Leaders begin to be deified from 4th c onwards.
Cultural intermixing as lands conquered by Alexander Great.
(p167)
Alexander dies 323bc. Start of Hellenistic period. Around 140bc Roman republic grows.
Cities individually ruled after Alexander dies.
Hellenistic period lasts 3 centuries. Birth of scientific discovery (Aristotle, Euclid, Archimedes) and philosophies of stoicism (virtue is its own reward) and epicureanism (virtue is prerequisite of happiness).
(p168)
Late 4th/early 3rd c bc beginning of art history (not criticism) tho' survives only in later quotations. Concept of the 'standard' to which art should aspire (Plato) arises. Art as reflection/imitation of the 'ideal' object Vs Aristotle's more pragmatic view that purpose, intention of artist and background will influence outcome.
Shapes artistic aesthetic debate in W art and expands Hellenistic art.
Aristotle paves way for art as 'work of art' not just representation. Art becomes more realistic, representing real subjects in natural poses; natural colours, softer and more delicate. Move away from idealism. Idea of artists as individuals, patronage and political art begins. 'Beauty' from within means not all art idealistic.
(p169)
Last decades of 4th c and first of 3rd – lifelike sculpture truly emerges.
(p172)

Allegory

Sleeping figures appear for 1st time. Gods are depicted as allegory or abstraction – courage, faith, luck etc. Pose also reflects situation, altering subject to suit occasion (nike at Olympia 'general' vs nike of Samothrace specific to a naval victory). (p174)

Scale: Pieces both v small and v large produced. Lysippus accredited with developing proportion ratio based on Polyclitan model. No examples survive of Lysippus' work but other artists used similar proportions.

Rulers were depicted with real heads but bodies that exemplified the desired characteristics. (p174)

Hellenistic architecture

Temple of Zeus – over-large sculptures of mythical gods vs giants battle. Painterly treatment, strong use of light and shade; figures escape from the frieze/band bringing it into spectator's realm. Much energy and movement.

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2nd c bc, buildings arranged in careful groups. Little survives of Hellenistic architecture but suggests move away from looser, organic growth to structured planning for dramatic effect. Possible adoption of grid-planning as used in Aegean in 7th c bc and earlier in Egypt. Buildings inc. houses, more opulent and richly decorated. (p177)

Hellenistic and Roman paintings and mosaics

2c bc to 1st c ad Roman empire expanding but Romans adopted more genteel art of Greeks. Style of paintings and mosaics is Hellenistic rather than Roman (Italian). Colours are traditional – black, white, red, yellow and intermediates. First reference to pro women artists is from Hellenistic period. (p178)

Battle of Issus mosaic; made of tesserae not pebbles. Depiction of ‘realistic’ battle scene. Skilful use of artistic techniques to give perspective, movement and individualisation. (p180)

Italian homes decorated with trompe l’oeil paintings and still lifes. Examples at Pompeii poss not typical as Pompeii provincial but some high quality work, probably rich merchant houses. Elegant décor significant of status in and increasingly complex social structure. Decoration also extended to stucco. Full-wall paintings (murals) of landscapes/seascapes/forests etc. depict scenes, sometimes with named characters. Shows intersection of Hellenistic and Roman art period. (p182-3)

Some exquisite art but also more candid subjects in lower class homes. By 79ad all art forms being explored; still life, portraiture, landscape, historical. (p184)

Art collectors first appear in 1st c bc. Bought older Greek/Hellenistic works at vast prices. Works later copied for the less wealthy. Created concept of difference between ‘original’ and ‘copy’. Copies were disdained. Artists and sculptors v much devalued despite value of their works. Treated as commoners, labourers, workmen. Architects, however, held elevated status as both ‘educated’ and ‘artistic’. (per Cicero/Vitruvius). (p185)

Roman architecture

Romans excelled in architecture, building design, urban planning. Pax Romana saw unique period of peace, Roman law. Skilled practical project managers; roads, drainage, aqueducts, public works. (p185)

Domestic architecture

Pompeii gives unique insight into Roman town layout. Houses carefully planned to take advantage of sun, shade and nature. Little division of commercial and domestic or rich/poor. By 4th c ad, most Romans lived in ‘insulae’ (5-storey tenements) with shared facilities due to over-population. Rich moved to country and farmed with slaves. Poor moved to towns. By 79ad some Pompeii properties converted to ‘insulae’.

Temples and public works

Temples not as high profile. 1st c bc public works for propaganda purposes produced roads, public works. First public baths commissioned by Augustus and could be enjoyed by all. Marble highly valued and used to decorate some buildings. Development of arch and concrete facilitated impressive public building work, eg Pont du Gard aqueduct. Use of prefabricated pieces, numbered and installed on site. (p191)

The Colosseum and the Invention of Concrete

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Development of slow-drying concrete allowed Romans to build much more ambitious structures eg: Colosseum. Rulers built large public works to enhance reputation and popularity. Exploited unique structures (eg. Nero's golden house) with domes, atria, etc. for light and shade. Trajan's market carefully designed to maximise space but still light, and airy. Romans 'moulded space'.

Pantheon

Made possible by Roman construction techniques. Combination of domed, oculus roof within rectangular outer remarkable. V clever use of geometry to create illusion of space, heavens. Initially celebration of 'religion', later (609) converted to Christian church. (p195)

Roman sculpture

2nd c bc sculpture in high demand for domestic settings. Much either bought/stolen from Greece or poor quality copies. Scale, materials, décor dictated by needs of buyer. Represents much of our understanding of Greek sculpture making determining quality of such sculpture difficult.

Laocoön may be original Roman piece.

Sculpture became 'click-and-build composites' – portraits heads joined to standard selection of bodies, stylised to make more 'Roman' (clothing, pose etc. to suit purchaser). (p196)

Towards a definition of Roman art

Is there 'Roman' art? How to define; geography – what was made in Roman territories; ethnicity; style; chronology. Roman empire v widespread with many diverse cultures/traditions remaining. Artists v mobile. Architectural 'definition' clearer due to specifically Roman inventions/techniques. Much otherwise influenced/borrowed from Hellenistic/Greeks. Literature definable by language; interpretations of Greek literature 'Romanised'. Some sculptural identifiers; figures embody virtue, modesty, moral probity; age is valued (pater familias as head of family, father figure); figures realistic. Reliefs and sculptures mix real events, allegory and religious imagery to enhance prestige of owner. Reflect Roman ideals of stoicism and 'stiff upper lip'. Artistic skills not as highly valued as technical expertise.

Portrait bust uniquely Roman. Wax or marble, depicted lifelike representation of high status individuals and prominent figures. Wealthy would have busts that were brought out at ceremonies. Emperor busts had to be propitiated daily (Christians persecuted for refusing). Likeness preserves spirit. (p203)

Triumphal arch a unique Roman concept. Origin uncertain; locations make purpose obscure. Celebratory but often freestanding so not necessarily processional or as an 'entrance'. Carved with real and mythological events, also inscriptions. Romans developed the proportions for the power of compelling text (basis of modern typography and still seen in type fonts). Greek text more haphazard in comparison. (p204)

Commemorative columns also peculiar to Romans. Friezes around column tell stories of wars, celebrate victories. Read in bands only by walking around column. Play with perspective and scale to accommodate imagery. (Trajan's column) (p206)

Late antique art

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Although Rome in decline, architecture and grandeur continued with magnificent buildings, elaborate constructions and decorations; attention both to building and to ‘spaces’. Concrete rarely used in Eastern provinces of Empire, columns (v many) predominated. In Rome, vast new buildings, baths in particular. AD 3 c emperors elected by armies; lacked decorum and class; significant unrest; challenges from within and without the Empire; little interest in art. 270-275 last major Roman construction, a wall around Rome. (p211)

Decline of Empire saw sculptural subjects reflecting move from the physical to the spiritual, the soul. Sarcophagi depict introspection not self-assuredness; emphasis on the esoteric in line with increasing interest in philosophical, contemplative religions (Neoplatonism/Christianity). (p212)

Move away from valuing physical beauty in art to spiritual, ‘internal’ beauty. Art is denigrated as mere imitation of an imitation (Plotinus). Harks back to more Platonic ideas. Does however, recognise artist as producing images from within, not mere depictions of real objects/people. (eg. Zeus painted as artist envisages he would want to be seen). Arch of Constantine is melting pot ‘summary’ of the period, incorporating skilled and less skilled carvings, old and new ideas, images of emperors admired by Constantine, all wrapped up in the traditional Roman arch format. (p213)