A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a classical marble bust, likely of a female figure, showing the head and shoulders. The hair is styled in thick, wavy curls. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the marble and the contours of the face and hair.

Oxford
History of
Art

Classical Art

From Greece to Rome

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Classical Art

From Greece to Rome



Oxford History of Art

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Contents

	Introduction	I
Chapter 1	Painting Antiquity: Rediscovering Art	II
Chapter 2	Moving Statues: Art in the Age of Imitation	65
Chapter 3	Sensuality, Sexuality, and the Love of Art	107
Chapter 4	Sizing up Power: Masters of Art	147
Chapter 5	Facing up to Antiquity: Art to the Life	205
	Notes	238
	Maps and Plans	241
	Timeline	260
	Further Reading	268
	Museums and Websites	280
	List of Illustrations	282
	Index	295

Introduction

By 65 CE the Roman court had had enough of its increasingly psychotic post-adolescent emperor Nero. The conspiracy to do away with him was hopelessly bungled, and in the reprisals Nero roped in a number of high-profile suspects. Among these was his former tutor Seneca, now in retirement and busy turning himself into a full-blown philosopher, the Roman Socrates. When he received the customary 'invitation' to take his own life, Seneca grabbed the chance for glamorous martyrdom. Opening his veins (arms, wrists, and legs), he stepped into a warm bath to hasten the flow of blood—and died (as he himself made sure to proclaim) in the cause of Liberty.¹

Fifteen hundred years later, an ancient marble statue surfaced in Rome, capturing the very moment of Seneca's suicide: the philosopher straining to surmount agonizing pain, his face scored with lines of wear and renunciation, veins graphically playing across the emaciated body, pulsating through the shrunken skin; and an eery glow all around, from the gleaming black stone [1]. This sensational pagan image of Stoic fortitude struck an immediate chord with Rubens, who made it an icon of 'passion', as the centrepiece of his *Death of Seneca* [2], and it prompted extravagant eulogies from all and sundry: 'If our sculptors knew how to make a comparably expressive CHRIST it could be depended on to bring tears to all Christian eyes', heaved one stricken admirer in 1700.² Another admirer, Napoleon Bonaparte, bought up Seneca in 1807 for his grand new museum, the Louvre, where the visitor can still see him standing in his bath. Facing up to death, and challenging us to do the same.

But take this story more slowly and you will find it much richer than it looks. For a start, when it was discovered, the statue was evidently missing its eyes and parts of the face, both legs from the crotch to below the knees (only a small wedge of calf seems to be ancient), and probably both arms below the armpits; and it was certainly not standing in a basin. All these are Renaissance restorations, designed to give us a whole work of classical art and to recreate a famous figure from antiquity in his moment of glory. The statue also acquired a garish modern 'belt', whose ends bunch together behind him to form a supporting stone pillar that props the alarmingly hunched figure

1

Statue commonly known as the *Dying Seneca* or the *Louvre Fisherman*.



2 Peter Paul Rubens

The Death of Seneca, c.1608.

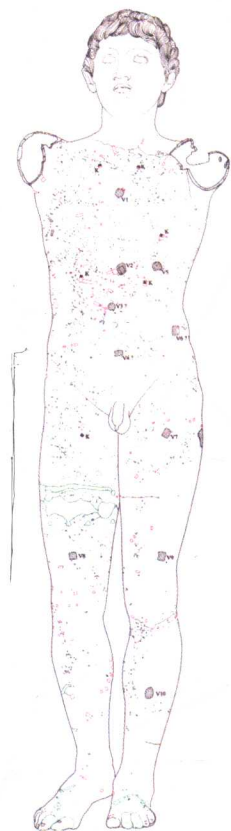
upright. Almost at once, the identification, and the restoration, were doubted. In the 1760s, J. J. Winckelmann (the 'father' of art history, who will be a key player in this book, pp. 68–72) was scornful, sure that this was no Seneca, but rather a comic slave from the Roman stage. Today's art historians see the statue as an 'Old Fisherman' (very

likely depicted wading in water, hence nothing below the top of the calves). And they count it a Roman copy of a lost Greek original; in fact over a dozen more or less well-preserved versions of the type have turned up in different places across the Graeco-Roman world—wearing similar ‘belts’, or loin-cloths, but none of them with knees bent and torso jack-knifing back at such an angle.

These disputes have taken their toll on the Louvre’s *Seneca*. Around 1900, in a fit of half-hearted purism, the museum removed the gorgeous Renaissance basin and perched the statue on a concrete block; only to put the basin back in the late 1990s, as if to recognize the significance of the astonishingly drastic restoration itself. Changing aesthetics have made their impact too. If his discovery was greeted with eulogies, the tide had already begun to turn when Napoleon took *Seneca* to Paris, and the emaciated body and haggard face were found disgusting rather than uplifting. It is certainly no longer highly prized among the masterpieces of classical sculpture.

This story heralds many of the themes of this book: identification and restoration, controversy and copying, international scholarship and imperial spectacle. Our period starts with the meteoric career of Alexander the Great of Macedon. Putting paid once and for all to the independence of the free city-states of classical Greece (Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and the rest), his armies blazed their way to the borders of India—before their charismatic leader perished in 323 BCE on the return leg of the journey. It ends in 138 CE with the death of the Roman emperor Hadrian, who had ruled territory that stretched from Britain and Spain to the Sahara and Syria (Maps and Plans 1). The four hundred and fifty years in between were first marked by the rivalry of the kingdoms founded when Alexander’s generals carved up his conquests; and then dominated by the irresistible rise of Rome from a middle-ranking tribal stronghold to the greatest imperial superpower the world had ever known. In the process, Rome itself was transformed from a quasi-democratic republic to an arbitrary despotism under the Caesars (even if their regime did masquerade as a benign adaptation of the Republic). Much of the art we shall be exploring in this book was produced for autocrats, whether Greek kings or Roman emperors. Inevitably, their dominance has pushed other traditions—whether Etruscan, native Italic, or Near Eastern art—to the periphery.

Our period has made itself the crucial episode in the story of ancient art: it saw the first attempts to produce a critical analysis of painting and sculpture, and the invention of the ‘artist’ as a figure of fame. Particular Graeco-Roman objects produced during this half-millennium have not only enjoyed lasting prestige (think first of the Venus de Milo [84], pp. 120–3, or Laocoon [49], pp. 65–8), but for



most of the history of the West have defined the very idea of classical art. Before the early nineteenth century almost nothing was known of the Parthenon marbles or any of the other treasures of fifth-century Greece (which specialists tend to label, in a narrower sense, 'Classical'). What came out of the ground in Renaissance Rome and later in the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum (in south Italy)—the art treasures which became the inspiration for the Renaissance itself and provided models for generations of European painters and sculptors—almost all belonged to the period between Alexander and Hadrian. And it was in the attempt to understand this material that the modern discipline of art history was born.

We shall treat classical art by topic, theme, and genre, with chapters on painting, sculpture, desire, power and scale, and portraiture. To organize the book chronologically, along a linear thread of artistic development, would have been impossible (see Timeline). On the one hand, the kaleidoscopic complexities of the political history of the Greek world after Alexander (conventionally known as the

3 a, b, c

Bronze statue, the *Praying Boy of Berlin*: (a) without arms; (b) computer simulation of the construction of the inner framework; (c) with restored arms.

Like many ancient statues, the *Praying Boy* has lost its original arms, presenting us with both a challenge and a dilemma. Restoration must decide (create) what the figure is to convey: is he 'praying'? Is he the very statue, entitled *In Prayer*, listed in a Roman review of famous masterpieces in bronze (c)? Or is the task of restoring his 'true' pose a minor issue? Should we rather enjoy his fragmentary condition as such (a)? Can we grasp the technological processes and artisanal achievement of the craftsmanship involved (b)?

Hellenistic period) cannot be resolved into an intelligible narrative against which we could plot a succession of artistic styles or regional idioms. On the other hand, as we shall see, the diverse visual culture of the Roman empire and the dominant ethos of creative imitation (as works of art were copied and multiplied, adapted and parodied, across the centuries) inevitably preclude any single model of change. The world incorporated by Rome was a seething global multi-culture: 'Hellenism' was everywhere, not least in Rome itself; 'Romanization' proceeded apace, not least in Greece and the whole sweep of the east Mediterranean. As we shall see, there is only one general formula that holds: in classical art Greece is always mediated through Rome.

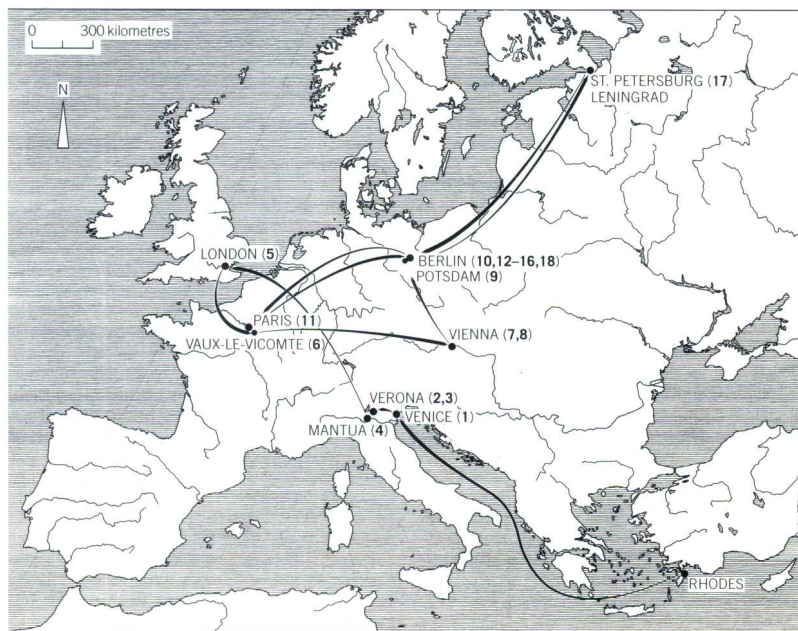
We shall be concerned not to sever the objects we study from their origins in classical antiquity, but just as fundamental to our approach is the determination to keep in clear view their history since antiquity. We shall give full attention to the collection and restoration of art works, and to their roles in inspiring artists to fashion faithful copies and fresh creations; to changes of ownership and movement between museums, and to their fluctuating fortunes in the wrangling of critical disputes and the game of fame [3, 4].

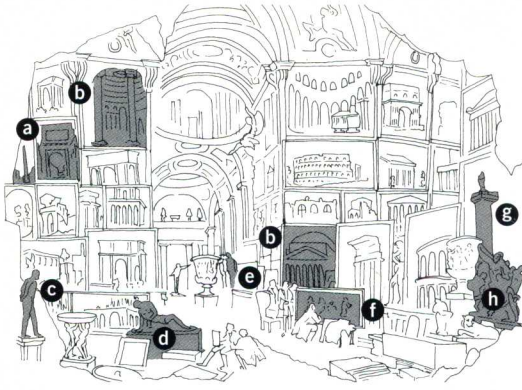
These works have influenced the history of western culture massively. Ever since their rediscovery, they have provided artists with direct inspiration: *Seneca* handed Rubens his vision of fortitude; Raphael decorated papal palaces patterned on the extravagant 'Golden House' of the Emperor Nero himself [46]. And on a yet grander scale, great collectors put together displays of classical art

4

The travels of the *Praying Boy*.

On the road to Berlin, most of Europe was graced by this statue. Said to have been found near the city walls of Rhodes, it was brought to Venice c.1503; bought by Kaiser Friedrich 'the Great' of Prussia in 1747, it was long admired on his terrace at Sanssouci (Potsdam), and variously identified as a *Young Apollo*, *Ganymede Antinous*, *Ball-Player*, or *Boy-Victor*. The *Boy* went to the Musée Napoléon, Paris, in 1806, to be the centrepiece of the *Salle de Diane*. In 1936, he starred at the Berlin Olympics; in 1958, he returned from Leningrad to East Berlin.



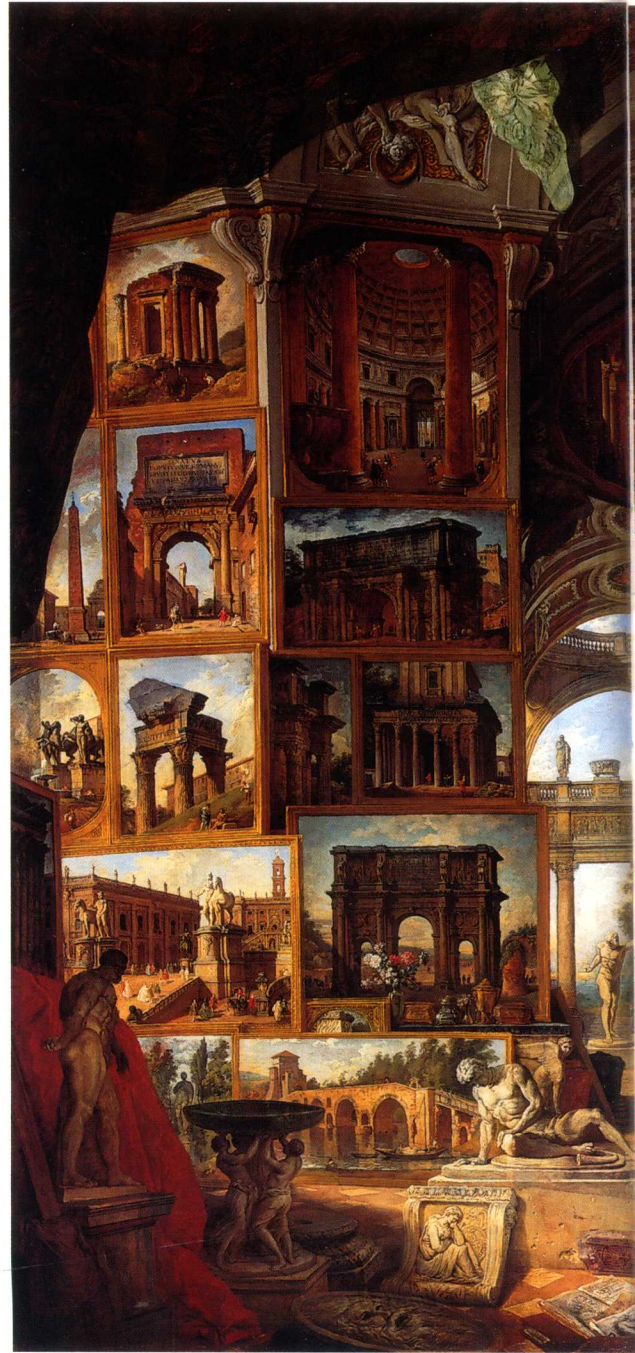


5 G. P. Panini

Roma Antica, from *Gallery of Views of Ancient Rome*, c.1755.

This imaginary ensemble of canonical works of classical art does more than show off treasures – among them, many we shall highlight in this book: (a) *Arch of Titus* (131–2), (b) *Pantheon* (123), (c) *Farnese Hercules* (144–6), (d) *Dying Gaul* (110), (e) *Apollo Belvedere* (77–8), (f) *Aldobrandini Wedding* (44), (g) *Column of Marcus Aurelius* (p. 181), (h) *Laocoon* (49).

Panini also catalogues the different ways that modern art lovers interact with ancient paintings, sculpture, and architecture: absorption, discussion, reproduction of the masterpieces, and modern representations of them (including, of course, Panini's own panorama). At the heart of the painting, the artist who finishes a copy of the 'Aldobrandini Wedding' (= 44) conveys the classic insight of all classicism: to copy is to *recreate* the original; but it is also to *create* an original.





which defined and redefined civilization itself in terms of these very objects [5]. It was as the agent of Cardinal Albani, the star collector in Renaissance Rome, that Winckelmann came to theorize the canon of classical art; and Napoleon's investments and seizures of masterpieces made his museum (the Louvre) not only the greatest gathering of art since classical Rome but a model of civilization at its zenith. Each will therefore be a major focus for this book ([63], [76], [110], [111], pp. 68–72, 107–9; and [77 (b)], [92–3], [129], [150].

But, still more vitally, the works we shall be featuring *cannot* be seen outside their history since their modern rediscovery. At the most basic level, *Seneca* was essentially created by Renaissance restoration; and (as we shall see, pp. 214–5) the eighteenth century manufactured its own favourite portrait of the first Roman emperor, Augustus. More generally, the history of museology and strategies for display, of

6 L. Alma-Tadema

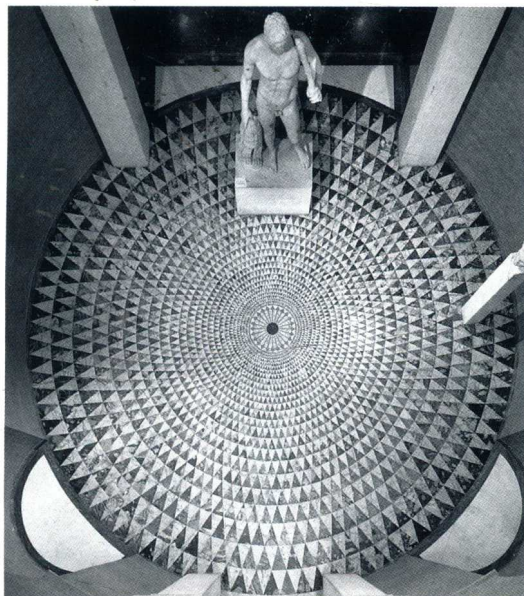
The Picture Gallery, 1874.

This picture imaginatively recreates an ancient Roman gallery, displaying on its walls lost masterpieces of Greek painting – known only through copies from Pompeii or references in Roman authors. The artist is partly making a telling point about the imperfect preservation and the severe limitations of our knowledge of these artworks (for the portrait of Medea at the centre, and the half-glimpsed image at the far left, in fact a famous image of a victory of Alexander the Great, see 22, 12). But he is also dramatizing for us the dilemma we face in imagining the circumstances in which ancient painting was produced, circulated, and viewed. As such it constitutes an allegory of classical viewing, no less.



J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California, 'Temple of Herakles' (1974), with replica of mosaic from the Villa of the Papyri, Herculaneum, and statue of Hercules (the *Lansdowne Hercules*—66).

The billionaire collector's dream come true. This mosaic is a replica of the first find (1751) at the Villa of the Papyri, Herculaneum (on which Getty's Museum was modelled). Made from Italian marbles in coloured triangles, it was shipped to Malibu as flooring for the 'Temple of Herakles' built to house Getty's favourite statue.



aesthetics and art theory, of archaeological discovery and academic scholarship, have helped to determine how we see and understand the art of the ancient world [6]. It is for these reasons that the drive behind our display of the splendour of classical art must be a stereoscopic vision of art in ancient *and* modern cultural history (see Timeline).

These processes of recovery, restoration, recreation, and reinterpretation are, necessarily, far from over. As we shall find in the chapters that follow, major works of art continue to be uncovered (pp. 189–92, 197–9) and indeed to be ‘manufactured’ under the technological regime of modern restoration (one of the most notable sculptural groups to be discovered in the twentieth century was ‘reassembled’ from hundreds of tiny fragments [52], pp. 74–82). We have never stopped trying to see how Greek and Roman art was seen, how it looked and was meant to look, what it meant and can mean. Museums and collectors too continue to reshape our vision of the classical world. Appropriately enough, the collection of J. Paul Getty in California (the largest and most costly collection of classical and other works of art to be assembled in the twentieth century) tells this story loudest of all. Modelling his first museum beside the Pacific Ocean on the plan of one of the largest and richest villas of the Roman town of Herculaneum, itself a treasure trove of ancient sculpture, Getty offered a parable of engagement with the art of the classical past—telling how we must all keep making our own copies in order to recreate theirs [7] (cf. 65, pp. 93–6; 72, pp. 104–5).

