

For many students of ancient art, Cicero has come to represent the Roman collector *par excellence*, a reputation based on the evidence of a handful of frequently cited passages excerpted from Cicero's letters to his friends. I suggest that this assessment is flawed, the result of the problematic practice, common among art historians and archaeologists, of reading selected ancient passages in isolation, removed from their original context.

Excerpts from ten letters written to Atticus between 68 and 65 BCE have led to Cicero's characterization as an avid art collector. In them, Atticus, who was at that time living in Greece, is asked to locate, purchase, and ship statues appropriate for the decoration of Cicero's Tusculan villa. The apparent enthusiasm with which these requests are expressed has been interpreted by scholars as proof of Cicero's eagerness to own works of art, and his example is often cited as the paradigm for Roman collecting practices. In the 1966 publication, *The Art of Rome*, J.J. Pollitt writes, "our best insight into the attitudes and interests of art collectors in the first century BC comes from the private correspondence of Cicero, who was a moderately intense collector himself." More recently, the fifth edition of Nancy and Andrew Ramage's widely used survey, *Roman Art*, published in 2008, describes Cicero as "an illustrious citizen who collected with zeal."

A comprehensive analysis of Cicero's letters shows, however, that his passion for art has been greatly over-estimated. The misinterpretation stems largely from the way in which the ancient texts are used by modern scholars. Traditionally, the passages concerning art have been excised from their original letters and presented together, one after the other, in a sort of rapid-fire testimony to Cicero's ardor for collecting. When these passages are re-contextualized within the framework of the letters of which they were a part, the complete corpus of Ciceronian correspondence, and Late Republican epistolary conventions, Cicero's enthusiasm appears in a different light. Much of his perceived ardor reveals itself as the product of standard epistolary convention rather than an expression of sincere emotion. A similar sense of urgency and zeal characterizes many of the written requests made among Cicero and his friends. At least twelve other letters can be shown to express the same enthusiasm found in those pertaining to works of art. This quality of eagerness pervades appeals both large and small, be it a plea to Cicero for panthers to be shipped from Asia Minor for the games his friend Caelius Rufus finds himself obliged to host or an admonition to "write back soon." Thus, when the passages on art are understood in their original, wider context, the perception of Cicero's passion for collecting fades.

The emphasis placed on Cicero's supposed zeal for sculpture is part of a larger, equally problematic, scholarly tradition which views the ancient collector as a connoisseur with certain aesthetic sensibilities and a considerable level of art historical expertise. Reassessment of Cicero's attitudes toward art challenges this notion and helps to provide a more accurate view of Roman collecting practices.