

AESTHETICS AND ART HISTORY WRITING IN COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Classical art historians in the contemporary world are faced by an uneasy balancing act. On the one hand, we wish to recognise the difference of the Greek and Roman past. On the other hand, one of our common claims as classicists for our discipline's educational value is the fact that contemporary Western concepts of art, as also of philosophy or democracy, have their roots in the Greek and Roman world. Both these intellectual positions can potentially entail severe epistemological problems. Emphasizing the continuity between the classical world and our own, we run the danger of flattening the differences, and simply projecting modern and inappropriate concepts – such as (arguably) art and aesthetics – on to the ancient world. An insistence on the radical alterity of the classical past might reasonably suggest that there was no concept of “art as such” in the classical world, and that the referent of the terms “aesthetics” was very different in antiquity than in the modern West. Yet such a stance entails its own set of problems: if concepts of “art” and “aesthetics” are anachronistic in relation to the classical past, how exactly as classical art historians are we to identify what remains (material or textual) from the past are proper objects of “art historical inquiry”, and what aspects of them (if not their “aesthetic” features) are proper objects of art historical discourse?

This paper explores these issues by looking more explicitly at the similarities and differences between ancient and modern practices of art appreciation and art history writing in their institutional and cultural contexts. In particular it seeks to trace how classical antique practices and concepts of art history and criticism were transformed from the Italian Renaissance to the 18th century. On the basis of this comparison two arguments are developed. First, that while the specific cultural meanings attributed to practices of art collecting and art criticism are significantly different, as are their certain features of their institutional setting, nevertheless, these are simply variant specifications of parallel practices marked by a range of family resemblances. These family resemblances render the ancient and modern practices mutually intelligible. Second, that, notwithstanding their distinctive cultural background, such apparently specifically modern and western concepts as “art” and “aesthetics” can be analytically defined in such a way as to be applicable to the expressive visual culture (in short, the “art”) of other cultural traditions without serious danger of distorting their specific character.