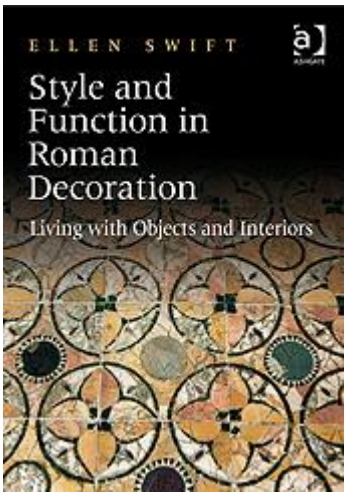

Style and Function in Roman Decoration

Living with Objects and Interiors

Ellen Swift, University of Kent, UK

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This important book puts forward a new interpretation of Roman decorative art, focusing on the function of decoration in the social context. It examines the three principal areas of social display and conspicuous consumption in the Roman world: social space, entertainment, and dress, and discusses the significance of the decoration of objects and interiors within these contexts, drawing examples from both Rome and its environs, and the Western provinces, from the early Imperial period to Late Antiquity.

Focusing on specific examples, including mosaics and other interior décor, silver plate, glass and pottery vessels, and jewellery and other dress accessories, Swift demonstrates the importance of decoration in creating and maintaining social networks and identities and fostering appropriate social behaviour, and its role in perpetuating social convention and social norms. It is argued that our understanding of stylistic change and the relationship between this and the wider social context in the art of the Roman period is greatly enhanced by an initial focus on the particular social relationships fostered by decorated objects and spaces.

The book demonstrates that an examination of so-called 'minor art' is fundamental in any understanding of the relationship between art and its social context, and aims to reinvigorate debate on the value of decoration and ornament in the Roman period and beyond.

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Introduction

This book offers a new interpretation of decoration in Roman art. Its origins lie in my reading of two very different books written almost a hundred years apart: A. Riegl's *Late Roman Art Industry* (1985 [1901]) and A. Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998). Riegl inspired me to investigate the colossal subject of Roman decoration. His book also exemplified the rich potential of an approach which was, firstly, grounded in close observation and analysis of individual art works, and secondly, considered material not merely of one category (relief sculpture, for example) but across diverse media. I have followed his example in these respects, cutting across material categories, and focusing my interpretations on the in-depth analysis of particular instances of decoration. Gell, meanwhile, with his central proposition that art does not merely represent or symbolize elements of social experience but has an active part to play in maintaining and/or transforming society,[1] provided the key to interpretation: that decoration does not merely 'decorate', but has a significant impact on people within the social world. An exploration of decoration within its social context, which is primarily interested in the function of Roman art in everyday living, is the result.

What is decoration? In this book, a very broad definition is taken, of applied art in the widest sense. This includes both figurative and non-figurative art, in a spectrum from illusionistic to wholly geometric. Inevitably the so-called 'decorative arts' media (for example, metalwork, textiles, ceramic and glassware) are foregrounded in any book on decoration, but this is not to exclude discussion of media such as painting, figurative mosaic and sculpture where appropriate – for example, their use in an overall scheme of interior decor.[2] 'Ornament' as a term is generally avoided in this book, as it is often used in a more limited sense than 'decoration': to imply a pattern made up of individual motifs. 'Decoration' is a more usefully broad term, and also has

[1] Gell (1998) 6. Other scholars such as Grabar (1992), writing on Islamic art, also share this view.

[2] As historians of decoration have shown, definitions that try to distinguish between 'art' and 'decoration', or between 'art' and 'craft', are cultural constructs, situated within a particular historical context: the debate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about aesthetics in Western culture (Trilling 2003, Brett 2005).

wider connotations of 'interior decor', again of relevance to the approach put forward here.[3] 'Decorative style' also needs defining, though it is difficult to define satisfactorily; to some scholars, style is different from content, and to others, it includes content.[4] In this book, 'style' can be taken to imply the sum of all the features of decoration that allow it to be placed into a distinctive and repeatable category – that is, including its characteristic subject matter (the content of a particular style) and the way in which motifs, patterns and so on are represented (the structure of style). Decorative style is, of course, more recognizable visually than definitions frequently imply, and in part it is difficult to define *because* it is visual rather than textual.

How can we interpret decoration? Following the seminal work of Gombrich in the 1970s – in its time, and probably still, the most significant book on decoration since the nineteenth-century investigations of the subject by Riegl, Semper and Owen Jones – there has been a proliferation of studies which investigate different aspects of decoration, though in general it seems there has been little exchange of ideas between anthropologists and art-historians, despite their similar preoccupations (albeit exemplified in very different material). I do not wish to reprise here either the authoritative historiographies of the decorative arts that have been produced by art-historians or the entirety of existing anthropological and archaeological dissections of style.[5] Both would give a misleading impression of what this book is about. Interpretation from the perspective of art-history, archaeology and anthropology[6] does, however, have much to bring to an investigation of Roman decoration, and in what follows I discuss briefly some lines of thought that have been influential on the interpretations of Roman decoration put forward here.

Approaches to Decoration

Decoration can be examined from many angles: for example, in relation to theories of symbolism, style, fashion, perception and affect. In seeking to

[3] See also Trilling (2003), who discusses definitions of decoration and ornament in great depth.

[4] See Roe (1995) 31 for a rather long-winded definition of style as 'an intentional, structured, system of selecting certain dimensions of form, process or principle, function, significance and affect, from among known, alternate, possibilities to create pleasing variability within a behavioural – artefact corpus'. Washburn (1995) 101 defines it as 'the more basic properties of form, such as line, colour, texture, symmetry, and organisation'. See also Smith (2002) 99–100 on 'style as history' in Classical art.

[5] For extended discussion of nineteenth-century scholars Ruskin, Owen Jones, Semper and Riegl, see Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 38–59 and 195–7, Schafter (2003) 15–59, Brett (2005) 106–36; on Ruskin, see also Trilling (2003) 183–99. For anthropological and archaeological studies of style, and of the relationship between style and the construction of social identities, see, for example, Hodder (1982), Conkey and Hastorf (1990), Carr and Neitzel (1995).

[6] Gombrich (1992 [1979]) and Gell (1998) are particularly important to the approach taken in this book; see below.

explore the functional role of decoration, the way in which decoration 'works' in a particular context can sometimes be suggested by a more specific focus on one of these areas.

The symbolic use of decoration has been much explored by anthropologists and archaeologists working from an anthropological perspective.[7] Symbols are widely understood as possessing many levels of meaning: for example, they may simultaneously express more than one idea, or may show different levels of interpretation. The interpretation of symbols is always context-dependent,[8] and context may even negate symbolic meaning.[9] Symbols are conventionally defined as arbitrary to what they represent, which is less obviously the case with material culture, as opposed to, say, language. Archaeologists have argued for Peirce's definition of symbols, more useful to the scholar of material culture, which states that in addition to sometimes having an arbitrary relationship with the signified, symbols can also be non-arbitrary, based on perceived similarities between a symbol and what it is understood to represent, or stemming from a process and thus being the index of a specific action or circumstance.[10] Both decoration and material culture used as a symbol often fall into one of the latter two categories. Most simply, a symbol of something can be a visual representation of it. There are also, of course, more oblique ways of creating an association based on imitation – for example, it may be a particular interior *quality* of the signified that is represented by a symbol, rather than its appearance. The choice of a material culture symbol is rarely a purely arbitrary one, as it will normally already have some perceived context or connotation.[11]

Symbolic decoration that is simultaneously a representation is something of a particular category, as there may actually be a conflation of signifier and signified to some extent. Castriota, for example, suggests that the plant and animal motifs to be found in Roman decoration,[12] which on one level were simply emblems or attributes – symbols – of the gods and genii, were understood by the viewer on another level as actual evocations or manifestations of divine power.[13] Gell discusses at length the way in which decoration which is interpreted as a representation is often understood, in traditional or in ancient societies, to be not merely a copy, but actually part of the original

[7] Womack (2005) provides an introduction to the anthropological literature; Hodder and Hutson (2003) provide an overview of symbolism in relation to archaeological theory.

[8] Womack (2005) 3. The transformation of symbols both chronologically and geographically is noted by Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 223–4, Boas (1955).

[9] For example, the repetition of a motif within a pattern, that, alone, would have symbolic value (Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 151–2).

[10] Hodder and Hutson (2003) 63–4, Peirce (1955) 98–104.

[11] Hodder and Hutson (2003) 60.

[12] Some examples: ivy and vine are suggested to symbolize Bacchus, while laurel represents Victory (Wilson 1999, 11). Toynbee (1973) 289 observes that the dove is the sacred bird of Venus; and the peacock and eagle signify female and male apotheosis respectively (ibid., 242, 252).

[13] Castriota (1995) 62.

(the prototype); in this way, a copy can take on the power of the original, and act upon another entity, as the original can.[14] Concomitant upon this idea follows the inference that by acting upon a representation, one may affect the original, represented person or thing; or that the power of the original may be manifested through its representation, since it is in some sense part of the prototype. Relationships may thus exist in which a representation is itself considered to exert agency over the prototype: for example, volt sorcery, in which injuring a representation is considered to effect an injury to the prototype, the person who is represented.[15] In this conception of the image, it is clearly regarded as, in some sense, inseparable from the prototype – it is a dispersed part of the prototype. Cultural understandings of decorative motifs as protective devices rely on the conflation of image and prototype documented by Gell. A particular motif, such as a gargoyle, protects because it is understood to be not just a motif, but in some sense the entity which it represents. Gombrich also agrees that representations of monsters and masks in decoration can be understood in this way – as animated devices that 'guard' the objects so decorated.[16]

Scholars of decoration all confront at some point the most obvious way in which decoration is used as a symbol – its presence can often be argued to index status and power.[17] In many different periods and societies, decoration is an expensive luxury, and thus a signifier of a particular social status. Decoration adds value, and consequently represents wealth and power. Decoration is thus often used to denote a luxury item, and by implication the affluence of the owner who is able to afford something beyond a basic, practical item. The existence in some societies, including Roman society, of sumptuary laws which restrict the amount and nature of decoration (as well as other things, such as particular colours or materials), for example, is an obvious illustration of its importance as a status signifier.[18] The reverse situation can also be found, in which minimalism is the preferred, high-status aesthetic; yet even in this case, decoration is used to differentiate between those with 'taste' and those ostensibly without.[19]

Semper, one of the formative thinkers on decoration in the nineteenth century, also prioritized the symbolic function of decoration, but rather than focusing on the content of overtly figurative motifs, he examined the connection between decorative patterns and the representation of materials and techniques. He observed, for example, that motifs used in ancient wall decoration seemed to be derived from the woven appearance of textiles or wickerwork. He suggested that, in the most ancient societies, the function of a wall was to divide space, using non-load-bearing materials like these. Even

14 Gell (1998) 96–106.

15 Ibid. 102–4.

16 Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 257–62.

17 See, for example, ibid. 17–18, Gell (1998) 24, 33.

18 On sumptuary laws, see Hurlock (1965). In the Roman period, only the emperor was entitled to wear the decorated *toga picta*; see Delbrueck (1929) 53.

19 On the rejection of decoration, see Brett (2005) 184–214.

though load-bearing walls often subsequently replaced these materials, for example in masonry construction, a reference to the original function could be seen in the use of wall-claddings with decoration that evoked fabrics and basketry.[20] Although Semper's overarching theory about structure, function and decoration fell out of favour subsequently, he made an interesting observation when he noted the relationship of decorative patterns to particular materials or methods of construction. Decorative motifs do sometimes appear to be derived from functional features such as stitching or weaving, and thus to be related to the way in which, for example, visible stitches might index the act of sewing. Yet, as subsequent studies have shown, an imitation might originally be intended to evoke its prototype, but would also be likely to become transformed over time, with the consequent disappearance of the semiotic link to its origins, and the development of new symbolism to suit its changing context.[21] This is just one example of the way in which all kinds of symbols are likely, through time, to become devoid of their previous symbolic content, and may continue to exist instead as an index of tradition, ancestry and culture in a broader sense.[22]

Decorative *style* can be taken to include both structure (for example, the organizing features of a particular style such as symmetry[23]) and content (the typical 'subject matter', as it were, of a particular style), as combined in distinctive, recognizable and repeatable ways across particular instances of applied decoration. The most influential strand in anthropological studies of style has been the emphasis on the symbolic use of style – as 'information exchange' – that is, a medium for the communication of identity.[24] It is used within societies to represent social categories and to communicate them to others. These (constructed) categories may include gender, ethnicity, age, liminal status and so on. A style is argued to have an important role as a marker of identity, whether between or within cultures. Different aspects of style may simultaneously represent different social categories: for example, it has been argued that the structure of style is more important in representing group affiliation, while the content of style more often relates to other aspects of social living.[25] The potential of a style of decoration to create difference, whether in status or in other kinds of identity, is suggested to be one of its most important functions.

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[20] Semper (1860–63). See Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 46–50, Schafter (2003) 32–44 for a general discussion of Semper.

[21] Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 227–8 gives a summary in English of Koenig's work on uniforms, which demonstrates this trajectory perfectly.

[22] Roe (1995) 30.

[23] Washburn (1995) 101, 115, 118–19.

[24] See Shennan (1989), Conkey and Hastorf (1990), Carr and Neitzel (1995) 3–17. Carr and Neitzel provide a brief summary of anthropological approaches (ibid., 6–8), and also a critique of, and some alternatives to, the influential 'information exchange' model of style: ibid. 3–17, Carr (1995) 151–6.

[25] Hodder and Hutson (2003) 47–8.

The symbolic use of decoration or decorative style should also be viewed as *creating* identity, rather than merely reflecting it: as current anthropological and archaeological approaches have stressed, material culture can be understood as an active constituent of social identities, rather than a passive reflection of them.[26] This opens up the possibility of its more or less deliberate manipulation to achieve particular goals within social relations.[27] In this view, a style of decoration has the potential to mislead, and to assist in a transformation or disguise of status, as well as to actively perpetuate established social categories and behaviour. Sometimes decorative style more or less deliberately references previous tradition. The historicity of a style may be deliberately related to a collective cultural past,[28] and may be important in producing cultural continuity – or its illusion.[29] The role of decoration here may be to evoke a particular tradition and heritage, to form a link not just between individuals within a society, but to their past and to other societies and cultures with which they have been historically associated. Onians illustrates this effectively in an examination of two mosaic floors from Nero's palace on the Palatine Hill in Rome which interpret the same basic motifs in two very differing styles. He suggests that the striking difference in the way in which the motifs are represented is an attempt to deliberately contrast the naturalism of one stylistic approach with the schematized, diagrammatic approach to representation of the other, in a conscious evocation of the past heritage of Greece and its pairing with the new culture of Rome.[30]

The way in which decoration can vary through time has, historically, received much attention, especially from art-historians. How can a change in decorative style be interpreted? This question was the subject of the most extensive enquiry into Roman decoration to date, Riegl's *Late Roman Art Industry* (1985 [1901]). Through close observation and analysis of numerous particular examples in a wide range of media, Riegl documented a shift in modes of representation through the Roman period from sensuous plasticity to stark visual contrasts of light and shade. He sought in particular to demonstrate the existence of these trends across disparate media, with the implication that stylistic change therefore must be embedded in the wider culture of a particular historical era. His interpretation of art focused on a particular mode of viewing in the age in which it was created.[31] He suggested that an emphasis in Classical art on the tactile, or bodily sensation, the modelling of a three-dimensional sculpture, for example ('haptic' to use his

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[26] The multiple ways in which material culture can be used to display and assert identity are well illustrated by Hodder in his ethnographic studies of African societies; Hodder (1982).

[27] Hodder and Hutson (2003) 10.

[28] Roe (1995) 30.

[29] Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 173–80 discusses the use of traditional form and decoration to disguise technological innovation. See also Snodin and Howard (1996) 116–21 on ornament and tradition.

[30] Onians (1999) 253–4.

[31] Riegl (1985) 231–4.

term), was gradually replaced by a wholly visual, or 'optic', sense in the art of late antiquity, best exemplified in two-dimensional works of art.[32] The driving force behind this change was termed by him *Kunstwollen*. *Kunstwollen* implies both the individual artistic will, responding to and fighting for mastery over the technical and material constraints on artistic production, and also the shaping of the individual artist by the collective socio-cultural imperative – that is, the manner in which the artist exemplifies the wider artistic intent of a particular period.[33] Although subject to subsequent critiques,[34] the association between style in art and a particular *Zeitgeist* remains an influential aspect of Riegl's work.[35] Other art-historical considerations of style change – often focusing on only one aspect of style, the mode of representation – interpret style as an expression of ideology or ethnicity, as a reaction or response to previous styles, as the product of an evolutionary process, or resulting from the use of particular media and the development of new techniques, though none is without problems.[36]

Anthropologists, too, have turned their attention to stylistic change. Braun discusses, for example, how the choice to change some elements of a decorative style and to retain others may be affected by a wide variety of factors, for example the mutability of cultural practices and norms within a group, exposure to competition from outside it, and so on.[37] In this view, stylistic change cannot be explained by any one overarching theory, but is contingent on a series of choices in the selection of stylistic attributes which themselves can be ascribed to widely divergent and unpredictable causes. Arriving at similar conclusions to art-historians of style such as Gombrich, explanations of changes in style through time will have more validity, Braun argues, if they are grounded in specific cultural and historical circumstances.[38]

Changes in decoration that occur in the culture of complex societies such as states or empires are sometimes labelled 'fashion', and studied mainly by sociologists, especially in relation to particular categories of material culture

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[32] See Brett (2005) 36–75 for an extended discussion of touch, sight and other senses in relation to decoration.

[33] Riegl (1985) 221–34; see Elsner (2006) 748–54 on Riegl's definition of *Kunstwollen*, and 758–64 on subsequent interpretations of it.

[34] Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 216, for example, maintained that it is only with the benefit of hindsight that a particular style comes to be inextricably linked with the 'spirit of the age' of a specific historical period. He was particularly critical of Riegl. The wider context of his writings on Riegl, and critiques of Riegl's theory of *Kunstwollen* by other scholars (Panofsky, Wind, Mannheim, Sedlmayr, Kaschnitz-Weinberg), are summarized in Elsner (2006) 758–64.

[35] Onians (1999) 253–4. See Entwistle (2000) 63–4 for a consideration of zeitgeist in relation to fashion.

[36] See Fernie (1995) for an introduction to the principal literature, and Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 195–216 for an extended discussion and critique of the various theories. Brendel (1979 [1953]) considers theories of style change in relation to Roman art. See also Chapter 5 in this volume for a further discussion of this.

[37] Braun (1995) 130–33.

[38] Ibid. 137, Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 209–13.

such as dress. Especially in more recent historical contexts, some stylistic change has been argued to relate to the maintenance of elite culture, not only reflecting its norms and values and the way that these mutate through time, but also responding to social competition. This mechanism of stylistic change is termed *emulation*; those at lower levels of society copy elite culture, thus prompting the elite to change their style in order to minimize the damaging effect of imitation, and thus devaluation.[39] Again decoration is being used to create and maintain difference, in this case in social status and its associated identities. Emulation has been criticized, principally because it is too reductive: although it is undoubtedly a factor in some contexts, there cannot be a mono-causal explanation for such a complicated phenomenon as fashion change.[40] Considerations of Roman copies of Greek art and of provincial copies of Roman art have also emphasized that emulation is a considered response, rather than an inevitable process, and have focused on the original contribution of the emulators – that is, how material culture is transformed during the process of emulation, and given new meanings.[41]

Returning to the use of decoration in the particular social context, decoration can also be shown to have an ontological function. The use of decoration to create official regalia and other status-confirming equipment and dress, for example, is common in many historical cultures and periods. In a different way, the formal qualities of decoration and its relationship to what it decorates can assist in constituting an object's essential nature by emphasizing its form (and thus function), for example marking out the different shape and orientation of different surfaces,[42] or structural elements such as lids or fastenings.[43] As a decorative border, decoration can function as a framing device for the elements within, constituting its contents as a picture. In particular ethnographic contexts, too, the decoration applied to an object endows that object with a particular status or power; to the recipient, the pattern applied to it may be essential to the object's function.[44] Gell describes this as a 'technology of enchantment' which may play an essential role in the efficacy of an object, or even in the definition of the object itself.[45] These conceptions in particular stress the integration of decoration with decorated surface and with decorated object, considering the decorated object as a whole which is rather more than the sum of its constituent parts.

The structure or content of decoration can also be viewed as the product of individuals, and driven by individual needs and desires, therefore representing,

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39 See Veblen (1925 [1899]), Simmel (1957 [1904]).

40 Entwistle (2000) 62–3.

41 On Roman copies of Greek art, see Gazda (2002) and Perry (2005). On provincial Roman art, see Webster (2003), especially 26–42.

42 Boas (1955) 57.

43 Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 165.

44 Gell (1998) 74.

45 Ibid. 76. Roe (1995) 35 also cites several ethnographic examples in which an artefact is only described as 'complete' or 'real' by its makers when decoration has been applied to it. See also Jones (2001) 472.

or assisting in the creation of, the self, as well as having a wider role in society at large.[46] Studies of decoration often focus on the way in which recognizable similarities of design and content make up a particular style, which can be related to a wider culture. However, there is also room for variability and thus individual expression within these styles,[47] and sometimes the opportunity to create unique decorated objects that have a particular relationship to an individual. Decoration can be used very overtly in mediating an image of oneself to others, for example through commissioned work. In many different societies, including Roman society, luxury objects are often specific commissions. They display a self-constructed identity, though inevitably there would be a reflexive relationship between the choices of a particular person and the wider cultural milieu, and the artist would also retain some scope for innovation within the framework of the patron's chosen theme. Even items bought ready-made might be used for overt self-expression, though this would be more limited; the buyer would be choosing from a selection of possible ways to represent themselves through objects that already exist. The objects themselves, in this case, shape the self-perception of their owners to a certain extent; the owners must fit into the mould suggested by the objects (the overall cultural framework within which they were produced).

Decorated material culture can also foster particular actions and modes of being.[48] Gombrich, for example, explores decoration, exemplified by uniforms and dress codes, in relation to its potential to create formality and ritualized behaviour. Here decoration is an essential part of ritual display, especially in its transformative aspects – in enabling participants to take on new roles and identities, whether for the duration of a ritual or in the enactment of a permanent change. Particular styles of decoration worn by groups of people can also be used to erase the individual and thus create collective behaviour, perhaps disciplined behaviour with an emphasis on formality and correctness, or sometimes class-based norms of behaviour. Numerous instances of this use of decoration can be cited from very varied historical contexts**.** The idea of the 'right' decoration – for a particular social group or perhaps a specific social occasion – is most familiar in relation to dress and its accessories, but can also apply to other media: for example, the formality of the table ware used at a ceremonial dinner which helps to create an atmosphere, and thus behaviour, appropriate to the event.[49]

It could be argued that much decoration relies on the visual impact on the viewer, which elicits particular kinds of responses. Visual effects in decoration are at the heart of the analyses of decoration by Gombrich and Gell that are so important to the approach taken in this book. Both acknowledge the

[46] See Voss and Young (1995) 88–90 for a discussion of style and the self from an anthropological point of view.

[47] Ibid. 95.

[48] See Hodder and Hutson (2003) 90–94 for a summary of the theory of Bourdieu in relation to the structuring of human behaviour through the material world; Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) is one of his more accessible works.

[49] Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 226–32.

importance of visual effects to the social function of decoration because of their ability to create an affective response in the viewer. To understand this, it is useful to examine them in some detail, using some illustrative examples.

Visual Effects

Both Arnheim and Gombrich were particularly interested in the relationship between the eye and the brain in the perception of visual images, and how this related to the psychological effects of visual art.[50] Even the simplest of images, as Arnheim shows, can be an optical illusion, and, as illustrated by Gombrich, the perceptual tendencies of viewers to see things in a particular way have been extensively exploited by practitioners of decoration. Why people tend to see things in a particular way is suggested by Gombrich to stem from the 'sense of order' that arises from a physical sense of direction and spatial awareness of the world.[51] He argues for an innate 'sense of order'[52] which leads to an anticipation, or expectation, of an order in visual images. It follows from this that artists can make use of these 'expectations' – by conforming to, or deviating from, the expected order, particular sensations can be created in the viewer.

Visual effects described by Arnheim and Gombrich include motion, tension, balance, undulation, rotation and radiation, perspective, figure–ground reversal and other optical illusions.[53] All can be illustrated using examples drawn from Roman art and are particularly well represented in Roman mosaic decoration. Motion effects may be as simple as an arrow motif which 'points' in a particular direction. Using similar organizational principles of symmetry, motifs may also be positioned deliberately to create an effect of balance or tension, or can be interpreted as having a thrusting or piercing motion, for example when the pointed end of one motif overlaps the next, which adds to the sense of direction. Movement is not always in one direction only: linear patterns may turn first in one direction, then in another, with an undulating or zigzagging effect, perhaps created by the viewer's attempt to comprehend the way in which each section of the pattern mirrors the previous section, turned through 180 degrees on a horizontal axis.[54] (See Figure 2.5 for some Roman examples.) Patterns that are organized centrally exhibit movement effects such as rotation and radiation. In this case, the visual effect is produced by the structure around an axial point of symmetry, combined with visual cues that direct the eye.[55] Movement effects, especially those of centrally organized patterns, may also be enhanced by, or dependent on, perspective effects. Effects that combine motion and perspective include a sense of advancing or receding into and out of the picture plane, often created by similarity translations, which

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[50] Arnheim (1974), Gombrich (1992 [1979]).

[51] Ibid. 216.

[52] Ibid. 3.

[53] See Arnheim (1974), especially ch. 1 and 8; Gombrich (1992 [1979]), ch. 4 and 5. See also Gell (1998) 76–81.

[54] Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 137.

[55] Ibid. 138.

enlarge the size of a motif moving outwards from a central axis. Vortices, which simultaneously appear to turn and recede, are created in a similar way but using rotational symmetry as the organizational principle (see Figure 2.20). Patterns can be created which flip between two different perspective views. Some designs will not even let the eye rest momentarily on sections, but appear to flicker and shimmer as they are viewed – according to Gombrich,[56] discussing the pronounced effects in twentieth-century op-art patterns, as a result of overloading of the perceptual system. To use an example from the Roman period, the arrangements of the lines of the labyrinth design create an optical illusion that there are shimmering diagonal lines pointing outwards from the centre towards the edge of the motif, and that alternating quadrants marked off by these wholly imaginary lines are slightly different shades of grey (created by the blurring of alternate black and white) giving an illusion of depth to the image (Figure 1.1 shows a Roman example from Pompeii).[57]

The visual effect called figure–ground reversal is created by a juxtaposition of two tessellating motifs in contrasting shades of light and dark, which repeat symmetrically in a grid or radial system. The effect is that the image can be perceived either as a light motif on a dark ground or a dark motif on a light ground.[58] The motifs will also be the opposite of one another in shape, for example juxtaposed concave and convex shapes.[59] The image appears to oscillate between the two possible readings, creating visual uncertainty for the viewer, and uncertainty as to which is the 'correct' version. A particularly illuminating example of figure–ground reversal can be seen in the mosaic pavements fronting one of the shops in the *Piazza delle Corporazioni* at Ostia (see Figures 1.2–1.4).

Perspective effects create an illusion of volume, either in objects or in spaces that appear to be three-dimensional. The simplest perspective effects are created by means of gradients, either simple oblique lines which extend at an angle to the picture plane and create the illusion of depth and therefore space,[60] gradients of size, which create distance, or gradients of tone and colour[61] which confer volume and three-dimensionality on shapes and spaces. Perspective effects in Roman art, principally seen in mosaic floors, are usually created isometrically, using a grid of oblique parallel lines,[62] with other devices such as shading and overlapping also used to enhance or create a three-dimensional effect. The classic example is the pattern that is built up from three-dimensional cubes, which are constructed on an isometric grid and extend backwards in infinite space (Figure 1.5 shows some Roman examples). The sides of the cubes are shaded, as though lit directionally, to add to the

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56 Ibid. 136.

57 See also Balmelle et al. (2002) 133, *planche* 325.

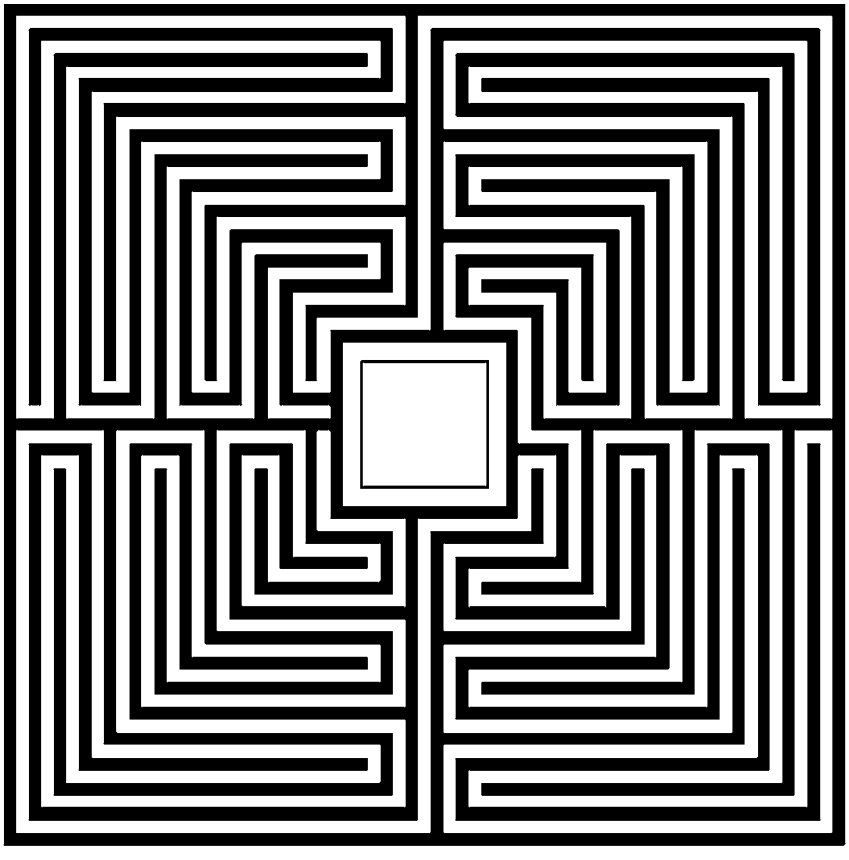
58 Riegl (1985 [1901]) examined figure–ground reversal in terms of the light–dark contrasts that they utilize in a purely optical effect.

59 Arnheim (1974) 225.

60 Ibid. 264.

61 Ibid. 276.

62 Ibid. 280.



1.1 Labyrinth mosaic from Pompeii.

effect of three-dimensionality.[63] The illusion of depth that is thereby created in a flat plane is often very striking.

Since they are based on the physiological properties of all organisms, Gombrich suggested that these visual effects are universal. It has also been argued, however, that not only meaning, but also perception itself, is culturally dependent; that the way in which the brain recognizes what the eye sees is culturally constituted and thus that what one person 'sees' may not correspond exactly to what another person 'sees', particularly if they are from different cultural backgrounds.[64] This is an area that will be returned to below, when we consider Roman ways of seeing; it will be argued that visual effects in Roman art were and are visible to ancient and modern viewer alike, though there will inevitably be differences in what they actually 'see'.

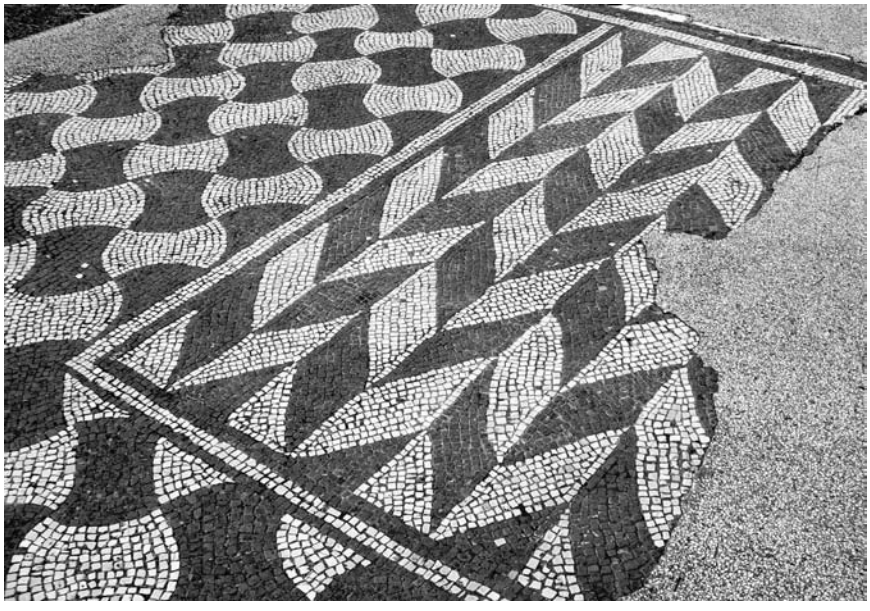
The visual effects explored by Gombrich and Arnheim described above can be suggested to be particularly important to the function of decoration in the social context – because of the reaction that they provoke in the viewer.

[63] See Wilson (1999) 34.

[64] Ninio (2001) gives a summary of the debate.

1.2 Mosaic floor in the *Piazza delle Corporazioni*, Ostia (front view).

1.3 View of the same shop from the right-hand side: the mosaic appears to show black reels on a white ground.



1.4 View of the same shop from the left hand side: the mosaic appears to show white reels on a black ground.

A visual effect may cause a response that is mostly subconscious, or one of pleasure, admiration or fascination. Grabar takes this view in his book in Islamic ornament, arguing that decoration is a source of aesthetic pleasure or sensation that evokes an emotional response.[65] Drawing upon psychoanalytic theory, Brett also considers pleasure to be an essential feature of decoration, related to its wider social function.[66] The relationship between sensations of pleasure and their wider effect is effectively amplified by Gell. For example, he notes that, historically, the pleasure created by decoration has always been used to make objects attractive in an active sense; to actively *attract* the viewer. Gell emphasizes that decoration that brings pleasure to its owner may have a different effect on the viewer who does not own the decorated object – that of envy or desire.[67]

Representational decoration may be used to deliberately evoke specific emotions. Gell proposes, for example, that when viewers look at a representational image, they also participate, in some sense, in the atmosphere, or emotion, that it evokes. Gell uses the example of a warrior's shield, with a representation of a terrified face upon it, which in turn terrifies the viewer. He terms this a 'false mirror' – a representation that persuades us that it is a reflection of reality, and thereby helps to bring that reality about.[68]

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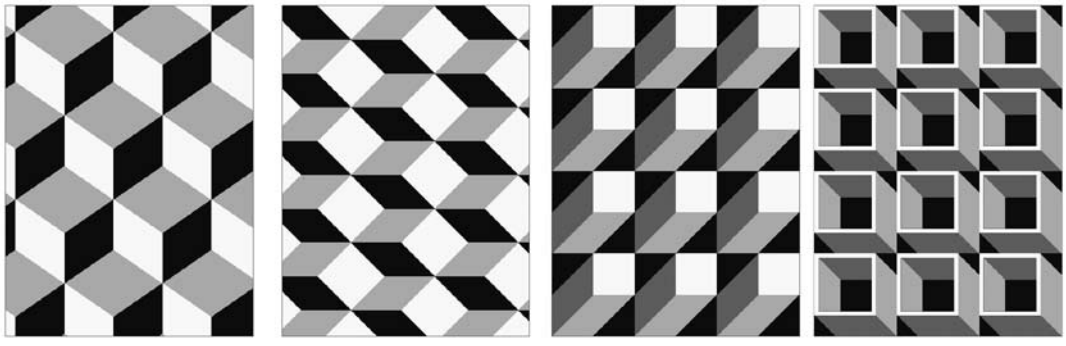
65 Grabar (1992) 226.

66 Brett (2005) 18–28.

67 Gell (1998) 81–3.

68 See also Mack (2002) 576–95 on the image of Medusa in ancient Greek culture as a mirror that, he argues, reflects the image of Perseus, transforming the viewer into the mythical hero.



1.5 Some examples of three-dimensional effects in patterns of cubes in Roman mosaics.

Gell also documents the many negative sensations that decoration, especially the more striking visual effects, may produce – for example, surprise, a feeling of having been deceived, visual exhaustion, dizziness and nausea. In particular, large surfaces covered with repeating decorative motifs may not be comprehensible in their entirety; while viewers digest one section, the others will be only in their peripheral vision. Viewers can never comprehend the entirety of the image,[69] and may feel lost, disorientated or even dizzy. Gell suggests that this type of relationship creates an 'unfinished exchange' between art object and viewer; the object is never completely owned, there is always something missing. A continuing imbalance is created between the pattern and the viewer, perhaps resulting in feelings of deprivation or subordination.[70]

These kinds of reactions caused by an art work, whether positive or negative, will then, Gell argues, tend to be transferred to the particular social situation in which the art is encountered, and in particular, to the entities responsible for the production of the art, whether the artist (as in the modern world) or, in Roman society, the patron or owner of the art work. After looking at a dizzying pattern, for example, a viewer will tend to feel overwhelmed by the entity perceived to be responsible for its existence – perhaps the person or organization which paid for it, or the artist who created it. The sensations caused by visual art thus, Gell argues, feed directly into social encounters and the development of social interactions and relationships.

The Roman Context

Scholars of decoration, then, have suggested many ways in which it functions in both ancient and modern societies. In order to explore further the uses of, specifically, Roman decoration in the social context, it is necessary to think

[69] Gell (1998) 80.
[70] Ibid. 80–81.

about what decoration was understood to be in the Roman period, and how art was perceived. These subjects will be considered next.

Roman Definitions of Decoration

Roman concepts of decoration revolve around two terms in particular, *decor* and *ornamentum*. *Ornamentum* signifies adornment, embellishment and decoration, and *decor*, originally a Greek idea,[71] has connotations of appropriateness, including formal cultural prescriptions or conventions, what is ordained by nature, and the weight of accepted tradition.[72] These principles are drawn principally from Vitruvius, writing *c.* 30–20 BC. *Ornamentum* is similar to the present-day meaning, in that it is thought to enhance something, though *decor* and *ornamentum* are related to one another, in that something will only be enhanced if its decoration is appropriate. Other important principles are those of symmetry and proportion, especially the ratios between different components that together make up the whole, and *eurhythmia*, relating to visual harmony and a balanced or graceful, well-shaped composition.[73] These aspects of decoration are inseparable from wider design principles in Roman architecture and interior decoration; great attention is paid to the overall effect and the relationships between different elements of an interior. Decoration, to Vitruvius, is the completing element in an overall design.[74]

How does the Roman definition relate to the discussion of decoration and its functions as explored by modern scholars? The ontological function of decoration discussed above is clearly implied by Vitruvius' stressing of its necessary function of completion, and by the emphasis on appropriateness in Roman definitions of decoration. If decor must be chosen to be 'appropriate', it could be argued that the decor itself helps to create a perception that the thing which it decorates is what it claims to be. Similarly, the 'wrong' decoration might help to undermine the identity of the entity that it decorates. In addition, Vitruvian definitions of decor emphasize the importance of aspects such as proportion and symmetry in the creation of beauty and pleasure,[75] corresponding to the affective functions of decoration described above. The Roman definition that focuses on the 'appropriateness' of decor also makes clear the usefulness of decoration to create formality in the Roman social context. Decoration was intimately related to convention and tradition in Roman culture.[76] Concepts of appropriateness tend to perpetuate the lifespan

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71 Onians (1988) 37.

72 Rowland and Howe (1999) 151. The conservatism of Roman decorative motifs, both in themselves and in their placement, is strikingly evident from any consideration of architectural ornament.

73 Wilson Jones (2000) 40–43.

74 Ibid. 59.

75 McEwen (2003) 210.

76 Perry (2005) 28–50.

of styles and motifs of decoration, and we indeed see strong continuities in Classical decoration.[77]

How representative are Vitruvian ideas of decoration in the Roman period? It has been noted that his theory does not appear to influence Classical architecture in the slightest.[78] Conversely, Wilson Jones observes that Roman design is flexible, because it depends on the application of principles rather than rigid prescriptions. It seems that the principles which Vitruvius outlines, and which are not original to him but based on earlier Classical culture, do have some relationship to practice.[79] In addition, he was certainly influential on later Roman writers, who show that his works were acknowledged and read.[80] Other, perhaps non-Classical, ideas are likely have existed alongside the cultural conventions documented by Vitruvius. It cannot be supposed that everyone who designed or commissioned a piece of art in the Roman world would have been aware of the Classical principles and conventions of which he is the main expositor. In so far as art works were usually copies of established schemata, such principles of design might be unwittingly perpetuated; but there would also be room for innovation or the operation of other design principles, especially among provincial artists or in non-elite media.

Anthropological studies of decoration, discussed above, provide a possible insight here into how decoration may have been understood in the diverse societies and cultures that made up the Roman empire. Notwithstanding the inevitable disjunction between the theory and practice of decoration in the Roman period, it will be clear from what follows that many of the broad principles to which Vitruvius alludes are indeed important in an understanding of Roman decoration, particularly the relationship of decoration to an overall scheme of design and its importance in contributing to a total effect.

Roman Ways of Seeing

The viewing conditions and the context in which an image is viewed, not to mention the cultural outlook of viewers and their understanding of what art is, will inevitably vary radically from the ancient world to the present day. It is widely acknowledged that the Roman makers of the kinds of objects explored in this book generally had no renown in their own right, and were not of high rank in Roman society, though they could enhance their status through success in their profession.[81] Artistic products were mostly associated with

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[77] See Riegl (1893). Gombrich (1992 [1979]) 180–90 gives a useful summary of Riegl's work from quite a sceptical viewpoint. Ovadiah (1980) and Wilson (1999) examine the Classical origins of many Roman-period motifs. See Perry (2005) 44 on the way that conventions of decoration foster conservatism in Roman art.

[78] Onians (1988) 40. See also Rowland and Howe (1999) for an extended discussion of Vitruvius.

[79] Wilson Jones (2000) 9.

[80] Ibid. 35.

[81] Ling (1991) 212–13.

their owners, rather than their makers.[82] (In the case of religious objects, they might be associated primarily with neither owner or maker, but with the god to whom they were dedicated or whom they represented.) The artist would perhaps have had a substantial input into the design and/or realization of many artistic products, though occasionally evidence survives of very close supervision of the content of artistic work.[83] Many luxury objects, such as mosaics, silver plate or jewellery, would have been specific commissions, and would have needed approval from their commissioner as the final stage of the production process. The commissioner, or patron, of art would have judged works of art produced for them by Roman cultural conventions such as the appropriateness of style to subject matter and subject matter to context.[84]

Similarly, the experience of viewing in the Roman period will have been different to the present day. One way to access the ancient viewer is through the study of contemporary sources, from philosophical texts to Christian apologia. These are illuminating, and, it is argued, are especially valuable because, although very varied in nature and written with different purposes and from different points of view, they provide an idea of the underlying conceptual framework within which ancient debate about art was situated.[85]

One Roman literary device, the *ekphrasis*, is particularly important here. An ekphrasis is defined in the ancient sources as a description of a scene which brings it before the mind's eye in a particularly vivid manner. The subject matter appropriate to an ekphrasis was wide, and included, for example, descriptions of landscapes, battle scenes and so on.[86] Ekphrasis was sometimes used to describe sculpture, painting and the like, and has come to mean 'a vivid description of a work of art' in modern scholarship.[87] Ekphrases which describe art works are naturally one of the principal sources for understanding ancient perception.[88]

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[82] Berczelly (2001) 182. In some exceptional cases, artists gained a certain renown: for example, Greek artists of the Classical period were highly valued among the Roman elite. See Elsner (1998) 241–4.

[83] For a further discussion of this in relation to the Roman context, see Dunbabin (1978) 24, Winsor Leach (1982) 156–7, Thébert (1987) 349–51, Ling (1991) 212–20, Berczelly (2001) 183.

[84] Ling (1991) 217, Perry (2005) 35–54. On artistic patronage relating to mosaic production, see Dunbabin (1978); for a discussion of the role of the artistic patron in the production of wall-paintings, see Winsor Leach (1982); Perry (2001) argues for the significant input of the patron in choosing the themes of sarcophagi, especially where these are unusual.

[85] Freedberg (1989) 37–8. See ibid., Barasch (1992) and Belting (1994) for a more general discussion of these topics.

[86] On definitions of *ekphrasis*, see Webb (1999) 7–15. For a further general introduction to *ekphrasis* as the description of art, see Elsner (2002a), the preamble to a special issue of the journal *Ramus* devoted to the topic (Elsner 2002b).

[87] Webb (1999) 7–8.

[88] Elsner (2007) is an extended discussion of ekphrasis and the nature of viewing in the Roman period. See also Elsner (2005) 23–39.

Philostratus and other writers of the Second Sophistic are particularly associated with the ekphrasis of a work of art. A common motif in Philostratus' *Imagines* is the pretence that the writer has been deceived into thinking that a depiction of a scene is actually that scene really taking place before his eyes.[89] In one sense, the height of artistic achievement is thus implied to be illusionism.[90] However, these descriptions cannot be taken at face value. They both depend on previous conventions (they are a kind of topos) and are also part of a wider discourse on naturalism and representation, in which they are an elaborate showcase for literary skills, implicitly contrasted with the artistic skills that they are ostensibly describing.[91] It is what they reveal of the way that art should be viewed, rather than how or why art was valued, that is significant.[92]

In most ekphrastic picture descriptions, the subject matter transmutes as one looks at the picture, and there are also often descriptions of narrative action in sequence – that is, the ekphrases extend well beyond what could actually be seen in any one painting. The writer is not so much commenting on the 'realism' of either the actual work described (which can often be suspected to be imaginary) or of the art style of the period, but on the effectiveness of the work of art (and the writer himself) in conjuring up a vivid scene of the subject in the viewer's mind – irrespective of its actual contents.[93] In late Roman and Byzantine ekphrases, which follow their Classical prototypes closely,[94] it is even more evident that the ekphrasis does not actually describe accurately the art style of the subject. In these contexts, the art style of the period is one of abstraction and stylization, far removed from Greek or Hellenistic naturalism. Yet there is evidence in some cases that Byzantine viewers were describing real, contemporary, works of art, which could not possibly have been as 'real' in appearance as the descriptions imply.[95] Of course, these descriptions of art works with an emphasis on illusionism might be dismissed as a rather tired literary topos.[96] Yet it has been argued that they reveal more than mere erudition on the part of the writer, and instead show us how the viewer was expected to respond to art – by being drawn into a heightened spiritual and emotional state in which the subject depicted took on the realism of a dream or a vision.[97]

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[89] There are many scholarly studies of the *Imagines*. See, for example, Conan (1987), Beall (1993), Bryson (1994), Elsner (1995) 23–39.

[90] Freedberg (1989) 291.

[91] On this, see in particular discussions of Lucian's *The Hall* by Newby (2002) and Goldhill (2001) 162–4.

[92] On ekphrasis as an education in viewing, see Goldhill (2007) 2–18.

[93] James and Webb (1991) 9; see also Beall (1993) 352–63, Goldhill (2007) 3–6.

[94] The continuum is nicely demonstrated by Kässer (2002) 160–67, in his comparison of Prudentius' *Peristephanon* 9 with the earlier *Tablet of Cebes*. Although one is pagan and the other Christian, the structure of the two narratives is very similar.

[95] James and Webb (1991) 12.

[96] Mango (1963) 65 gives some late antique examples.

[97] James and Webb (1991) 10–12. The confusion between prototype and representation evidenced in ekphrases of art works is also a familiar motif in fiction

As Freedberg notes, 'sophisticated' discourse about art in literature of the Roman period is quite closely related to popular beliefs that existed alongside: the belief that the image actually was real, that it was related to, and could not always be entirely distinguished from, the prototype that it represented, seen most obviously in attitudes to religious cult statues.[98] Although some intellectuals of the Roman period rejected animation,[99] there are countless examples that show clearly how pervasive it was, across the empire, and throughout the Roman period and beyond. Many examples relate to the animation of cult statues.[100] Pausanias' second-century description of Greece, discussed by Elsner, is a rich source concerning the treatment of images; Pausanias describes, for example, in Roman Greece, practices such as the chaining or punishment of statues, which clearly index a belief in the presence of the god inside the statue.[101] Statues were subjected to a variety of other treatment with similar implications: for example, in some parts of the Roman empire they were commonly dressed or bathed by worshippers.[102] Within the Imperial cult, in the provinces, a portrait of the emperor was treated as if it was the emperor, being subjected to particular rites, such as acclamation or procession, and having the same status in law as the emperor himself.[103] The practice of *damnatio memoriae* also attests to the power of the emperor's image and its ability to personate or stand in for the actual emperor.[104] In similar vein, in the earlier Roman period, ancestor masks would be brought out to witness festival and ritual occasions, and were carried in processions;[105] they were seen by their viewers as powerful and fearful objects.[106] Representations of others were also used in magical practices akin to volt sorcery. A clay statuette from Egypt, for example, dating to the third or fourth century AD, is pierced in strategic places with many

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of the Roman period: see, for example, the discussion of *Leucippe and Clitophon* (by Achilles Tatius) in Bartsch (1989) 65–9; Elsner (1996) considers the importance of this novel in revealing aspects of viewing in antiquity. See also Elsner (1995) on the changing responses to art in the later Roman period.

98 Freedberg (1989) 292–3. See also Mango (1963) 59.

99 Barasch (1992) 59–62. See Elsner (2007) 1–48 on the tension between religious and secular modes of viewing often co-existent in writings of this period.

100 See Stewart (2003) and Stewart (2006) for an extended discussion of cult statues and attitudes to them; Petsalis-Diomidis (2006) discusses particular examples of cult statues and other religious representations from Classical Greece. See also Faraone (1992) 5–7 on animism in ancient Greece.

101 Elsner (1996), especially 518ff. See also Freedberg (1989) 74–6. For specific examples in Pausanias, see *Description of Greece* 6.11.6; 8.41.6; 3.15.7.

102 Barasch (1992) 34–5. Pausanias describes an image dressed by worshippers in *Description of Greece* 2.30.1.

103 Kitzinger (1954) 122–3, Belting (1994) 103–106; on the Imperial cult image, see Pekáry (1985), Stewart (2003).

104 See Stewart (2003) 267–78. A statue might be dragged through the streets in the same way as the corpse it resembled. Varner (2004) 2–20 gives a comprehensive overview of *damniato memoriae*; the remainder of this book provides a wealth of specific examples from the Imperial period.

105 Flower (1996) 185–202.

106 Doonan (1999) 11–15.

metal pins, and an accompanying inscription confirms the magical intent to affect the prototype of the representation.[107] Although some Christian writers tried to undermine these kinds of beliefs, it is obvious that they continued into the Christian era.[108] Sometimes the Christian apologists even accepted the supernatural power of pagan images, for example by denouncing them because they contained demons, or because they manifested the agency of the devil himself.[109] Despite the unease of the early Christian fathers, beliefs in the unity of image and prototype were transferred to the images of Christ and the saints, with the earliest references stemming from the fourth and fifth centuries AD,[110] and by the Byzantine era, phenomena such as the divine auto-generation of images (thus denying the involvement of human agency in their creation) were becoming increasingly important.[111]

In addition to conflating the image and prototype in the manner suggested by Gell above, there is also clear evidence that ancient viewers sometimes understood images in relation to themselves in precisely the manner suggested by Gell in his description of the image as 'false mirror'. The examples cited by Gell, a holy subject which induces feelings of piety, or an erotic image which arouses the viewer, were recognized in antiquity by the early church fathers, some of whom were clearly concerned about the dangerous power of the image to incite sinful behaviour by example.[112] Evidence of the way in which ancient viewers might relate themselves to mythological images has also been considered recently at some length by Zanker.[113] Zanker has argued that a mythical subject was sometimes used by viewers to compare themselves to a particular, mythic ideal. By viewing appropriate mythical scenes, which could be related to their own real-life situation, viewers would embody aspects of the myth in their own life.[114]

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[107] Freedberg (1989) 265. Faraone (1991) 175 describes rituals of burning, smashing and binding/burying representations of enemies, and gives an appendix (ibid., 200–205) of archaeological examples of 'voodoo dolls' from the Classical world. On a Roman literary account of the practice of volt sorcery, and for references to further literature, see Klauck (2000) 218–21. Anatomical votives deposited at shrines, which represent injured body parts that need to be cured, are clearly related; see Potter (1985).

[108] See Mango (1963) 55–9.

[109] Barasch (1992) 100–101 and 113–15. See also Baynes (1955).

[110] See Kitzinger (1954). He sees this as a transference to holy images of the practices and beliefs associated with the Imperial cult. Mathews (2001) argues that behaviour relating to Christian icons is instead a continuity from pagan religious practice.

[111] Kitzinger (1954) 112–15. The divine generation of images appears also in the pagan literature: see, for example, Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.26.6. The debate in antiquity concerning the means through which an image could be animated is summarized in Barasch (1992) 36–9.

[112] Clement of Alexandria and Origen explicitly reject figurative art in their writings (see Baynes 1955, 120), as does Tertullian (Barasch 1992, 114–16). See Clement of Alexandria especially on the dangers of figurative jewellery with sinful themes, for example scenes of adultery, or jewellery in the form of the snake that tempted Eve (Clement *Paedagogus* XII, 123).

[113] Zanker (1999), Zanker and Ewald (2004).

[114] Zanker (1998) 40–42; see also Zanker and Ewald (2004).

Cultural understandings of, and responses to, art, then, clearly diverge to some extent between the ancient and modern Western worlds. Close attention to the cultural context within which Roman art was understood will help us in the interpretation of Roman decoration. However, as discussed above, decoration often relies on visual effects, and in order to consider the impact of visual effects in the Roman social context it is also necessary to examine the topic of ancient perception. Is there any evidence to show us that the visual effects we see in Roman decoration were also visible to the ancient viewer?[115]

Deregowski observes that there is a dialectical relationship between the way in which objects are represented in a particular artistic style and the way in which they are perceived in the real world, and that both are grounded in the same perceptual skills.[116] That similar perceptual skills are common to both modern and ancient viewer is evident from any investigation of Roman art. Many of the visual effects created by Roman patterns are formed by the interpretation of lines or shading in two dimensions as representing three-dimensional space. For example, a radial pattern in which the individual motifs increase in size towards the edges of the pattern will, to the modern Western viewer, have the effect of receding into the distance towards the centre, because, optically, a real object will appear to reduce in size as it becomes more distant. More simply, any oblique line may have the effect of projection into a three-dimensional space, since it is at an angle to the frontal picture plane, and this can be enhanced by the use of other devices such as shading or overlapping.[117] For visual effects like these which are dependent on such three-dimensional 'prompts', it is without question that the effects that are created were deliberate and perceptible to an elite Roman audience. There is written evidence of 'real-world' viewing in perspective for the ancient viewer, and the clear existence of deliberate use of perspective in representational Roman art. The material evidence also shows that careful attention was paid to the angle of view and the effects of perspective.[118] Viewing in perspective, and its representation, are brought together in a particularly illuminating passage from Vitruvius:

> The fact is that the eye does not always give a true impression, but very often leads the mind to form a false judgement. In painted scenery, for example, columns may appear to jut out, mutules to project, and statues to be standing in the foreground, although the picture itself is of course perfectly flat.[119]

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[115] For the debate on the possibility of the universal perception of visual effects, see Robinson (1980), Deregowski (1989), Ninio (2001). A case can be made both ways.

[116] Deregowski (1989) 70. Brett (2005) 53 also emphasizes the dependence of perspective view on one's particular understanding of, and embodiment within, space.

[117] Arnheim (1974) 258.

[118] Bek (for example, Bek 1980, 192) documents how a painted Venus figure in the House of Venus (II, 2, 3) at Pompeii can only be seen in 'correct' perspective from a specified position of view.

[119] Vitruvius 6.2.2f; see also Elsner (1995) 82 for a discussion.

The similar prompts in non-representational art would therefore be deliberate, and be understood by the viewer to imply three-dimensional space and interpreted accordingly. The similarity with which the culture of the ancient and modern viewer is grounded in a perspective view is also evidenced in many other ancient sources, usefully brought together by Wade.[120] Roman writers depended on sources such as Euclid writing *c.* 300 BC, who described the way that an object nearer to the viewer appeared to be larger.[121] Lucretius (*c.* 56 BC) described the perspective effect created in viewing a colonnade from one end, in which the pillars of the colonnade, though of equal size, appear to contract with distance.[122] Isometric perspective was used by Roman artists, and structures the theoretical three-dimensional space by means of a grid of parallel diagonal lines, extending in infinite space.[123] (This contrasts with convergent perspective, invented in the Renaissance, in which the lines converge towards a vanishing point.) Some of the clearest examples come from wall paintings recovered at Pompeii, in which the illusion of three-dimensional architectural features such as arcades, pillars and doorways is created through the use of isometric perspective and shading to create a *trompe-l'oeil* effect of infinite space.[124] Some of these Pompeiian paintings even begin to experiment with a centralized grid system, which is the first step towards convergent perspective.[125] Structuring of a scene using an isometric grid is also evident, though less immediately visible, in figurative mosaic scenes. (Arnheim notes that isometric perspective survived to a degree even in the medieval period, though objects tended to be organized isometrically, yet independent of one another, destroying any unity of perspective view.[126] This can also be observed in images from late antiquity which are the precursors of early medieval art.)

The evidence relating to perspective awareness for the Roman period does not, of course, apply universally to all social and cultural groups within the diversity of the Roman world. Written sources, by definition, can be taken to refer only to a particular elite. Some of the art styles of the conquered peoples of the Roman world were non-representational. If 'Celtic' artists, for example, did not produce perspective drawings, perhaps they could not 'see' them either, as the visual prompts would not be understood. It might be suggested, then, that the analysis of visual effects in the Roman world may be considered to be valid only for the ancient viewer who comes from within the same cultural and social group as that for which the image was produced. Any visual effect experienced by the present-day viewer in any case remains only an approximation to the total effect of the visual image on a particular viewing in antiquity.

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120 Wade (1996).
121 Ibid. 1165.
122 Ibid. 1168.
123 Arnheim (1974) 280–83.
124 For example, a Fourth style wall-painting at Pompeii: Onians (1999) 251 no. 208.
125 Arnheim (1974) 281.
126 Ibid.

Conclusion

The above overview of Roman relationships to art and to decoration and visual perception makes clear, I hope, that the Roman context is an appropriate one in which to investigate some of the possible functions of decoration suggested by scholars of style and decoration across many different periods and cultures. The Roman world certainly provides a rich array of examples through which the particularities of the relationships between decoration and living can be explored. In this book, I have chosen to focus on three categories of material culture: interior decor (with a focus on non-figurative mosaics), vessels and dress accessories.[127] These categories have been chosen because they relate to the three primary areas of social display and conspicuous consumption in the Roman world: social space, entertainment and dress.[128] In Chapter 2 on interiors, the focus on non-figurative mosaics attempts to address a general neglect of this category in scholarly studies. Chapter 4 on dress necessarily concentrates on accessories, as survival of textiles is poor by comparison. Each category will be examined in turn in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, looking at concrete examples in a variety of media through time. The book covers a wide chronological range, in which 'Roman' is taken to include late antique as well as early Imperial material. Some Roman material of the Republican period is included, but my principal focus is on the everyday art of the Roman empire. It is in the centuries-long transition to late antiquity that decoration becomes increasingly prevalent in the Roman world, and, simultaneously, changes significantly in character. Following previous studies, most particularly Riegl, I am interested in the nature of this change, which is explored further in the concluding chapter.

In Chapter 2, there is a particular focus on material that can still be seen today within its original archaeological context, and surviving or 'reconstructable' context is a factor in the selection throughout, though inevitably archaeological context does not survive for a significant proportion of the objects examined. In addition to a broad chronological range, I also examine material from diverse parts of the Roman empire, broadly from Italy and the western Roman provinces. It would not be possible in a book of this length to deal adequately with the whole of the Roman world, and the art of the Graeco-Roman East is something of a special case because of the previous history of, and wide cultural influences on, this particular region. I have therefore largely avoided examples from this area, though occasionally examples of material from the East are considered. The selection is also, of course, conditioned in part by my own specialism in the material culture of the western empire.

The ways in which particular items functioned actively within the social context can be investigated through a careful consideration of both the *features*

[127] Roman decoration is well documented in scholarly monographs and catalogues. Recent publications include two impressive catalogues of Roman mosaic decoration: Balmelle et al. (1985), Balmelle et al. (2002).

[128] Smith (1997) 5.

and the *context* of individual decorative schemes. It will be argued that it is at this kind of level that that the function of Roman decoration in the shaping of everyday social relationships is to be found.