

Dialogic art history

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Review of:

Vessels: The Object as Container, edited by Claudia Brittenham, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 196pp, 78 col. plates, 23 b. & w. illus., £38.49 ISBN 9780198832577

Conditions of Visibility, edited by Richard Neer, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 168pp, 66 col. plates, £24.99 ISBN 9780198845560

Figurines: Figuration and the Sense of Scale, edited by Jaś Elsner, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 208pp, 77 col. plates, £36.49 ISBN 9780198861096

Landscape and Space: Comparative Perspectives from Chinese, Mesoamerican, Ancient Greek, and Roman Art, edited by Jaś Elsner, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, 208pp, 95 col. plates, £65.00 ISBN 9780192845955

Visual Conversations in Art and Archaeology Series

This review is belated in many ways.¹ Not only because books reviewed here from the Oxford University Press series ‘Visual Conversations in Art and Archaeology’ were published over several years (2019-21) and during the pandemic (although online access through university libraries greatly alleviated delays in readership), but also because their experimental and collaborative format commands an intellectual latitude still uncommon within current disciplinary practices. Until now, these volumes, conceived as a coherent and ongoing series of methodological experiments in comparative approach to art history and archaeology, have only been reviewed summarily in a journal on classical antiquity (*Greece & Rome*) and partially in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (which singles out the volume on *Figurines* for thematic consideration).² The sparse response evinces the challenge this series poses to the cultures and institutional apparatus of art-historical and archaeological specialisms. This challenge is coeval to that raised by the global turn of the discipline to which the reviewed volumes respond with distinct vision. In a move that further decenters the logic of specialism, the current reviewer – a scholar in art and material culture of early modern Europe – reviews this cluster of texts as someone from the outside and as a scholarly itinerant invested in how movement of disciplinary ideas across fields, specialisms and languages could be meaningfully enacted in an age of globalised yet often asymmetrical dynamic of knowledge exchange.

¹ This review is written after extensive exchange with Sylvia Wu on three of the four volumes that we read together. I thank her for her insights and conversations.

² See Michael Squire, ‘Art and Archaeology’, *Greece & Rome*, 68:2, September 2021, 336-7, which deals with the first three volumes; and Liat Naeh, Review of *Figurines: Figuration and the Sense of Scale*, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2022, <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2022/2022.08.15/>.

The four volumes reviewed here – *Vessels: The Object as Container* (2019), *Conditions of Visibility* (2019), *Figurines: Figuration and the Sense of Scale* (2020) and *Landscape and Space: Comparative Perspectives from Chinese, Mesoamerican, Ancient Greek, and Roman Art* (2021) – respond to the ongoing and much-debated turn towards ‘global art history’ with what the author of the general preface to the series Richard Neer calls ‘comparativism of method’.³ This phrase announces both the ambition and astute caution of this team of scholars (Claudia Brittenham, Jaś Elsner, Wu Hung and Richard Neer at University of Chicago’s Center for Global Ancient Art), and offers a perspective still largely underdeveloped in the global turn. This ‘comparativism of method’ incorporates three aspects that I see as illuminating and generative for the disciplinary status quo.

To start with, let me remark on a seemingly paradoxical feature of the series – that what purports to be the result of an initiative with ‘global’ ambition are a series of volumes thinner than usual edited academic publications. Somewhat contrary to predominant pretence of global art history to accede to a geographic expanse beyond traditional regional limits, this series of books is distinctly contained, modest, and indeed small in scale. This smallness is manifest in the group’s commitment to the paradigmatic form of case study and close reading of objects as a site of scholarly demonstration and methodological reflection, and in its compact and reader-friendly four-essay format. Such commitment is manifest, for instance, in Elsner’s masterful treatment of individual artefacts such as the Muse Casket⁴ and the Pola Casket,⁵ Brittenham’s considered discussion of carved undersides of Aztec sculptures⁶ and the dynamic of ‘scaled relationship’ at La Venta,⁷ Wu Hung’s careful parsing of the system of vessels in the fourth-century tomb of the king of Zhongshan in Pingshan,⁸ and Neer’s examination of the social and political logic of visibility at Acropolis.⁹ The decision to keep contributions for all volumes to a steady four not only affords careful reading and comparison across individual texts without losing focus or being overwhelmed by too wide a range of materials, but

³ For some of the main debates in the form of questionnaires and conversations, see for instance: Zainab Bahrani, Jaś Elsner, Wu Hung, Rosemary Joyce, and Jeremy Tanner, ‘Questions on “World Art History”’, *Perspective*, 2, December 2014, 181–94; George Baker and David Joselit, ‘A Questionnaire on Global Methods’, *October*, 180, June 2022, 3–80.

⁴ Jaś Elsner, ‘A Roman Vessel for Cosmetics: Form, Decoration, and Subjectivity in the Muse Casket’ in Claudia Brittenham, ed., *Vessels: The Object as Container*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 50–80.

⁵ Jaś Elsner, ‘Concealment and Revelation: The Pola Casket and the Visuality of Early Christian Relics’ in Richard Neer, ed., *Conditions of Visibility*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 74–110.

⁶ Claudia Brittenham, ‘What Lies Beneath: Carving on the Underside of Aztec Sculpture’ in Richard Neer, ed., *Conditions of Visibility*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 43–73.

⁷ Claudia Brittenham, ‘Shifting Scales at La Venta’ in Jaś Elsner, ed., *Figurines: Figuration and the Sense of Scale*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 51–87.

⁸ Wu Hung, ‘Practice and Discourse: Ritual Vessels in a Fourth-Century BCE Chinese Tomb’ in Claudia Brittenham, ed., *Vessels: The Object as Container*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 120–171.

⁹ Richard Neer, ‘Three Types of Invisibility: The Acropolis of Athens’ in Richard Neer, ed., *Conditions of Visibility*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 7–42.

also keeps the dialogic and collaborative engagement tight, experimental and open.¹⁰ Indeed, these edited volumes are better read as a dialogic whole, contrary to the usual mode of utilitarian readership where scholars choose to read what relates most closely to their subject of interest. The smallness testifies to the intimacy and trust in long-term intellectual exchange and signals a potential caution against making comparativism fully programmatic.

A second characteristic is that the series offers comparison as a motive for collaborative research within the field. As the global turn continues to challenge the disciplinary structure of regional specialisms and pressures scholars of diverse generations to reckon with the delicate balance between fine-grained, philologically sensitive scholarship and intellectual and contextual breadth, collaboration of all kinds has become a strategy increasingly adopted by scholars to combine linguistic and disciplinary expertise in constructing narratives of transcultural exchange.¹¹ This series, in contrast, proposes collaboration as a site of thought experiments in bringing materials from largely unconnected traditions into consistent dialogue with one another. It presents a model for combining the collaborative with the comparative through the collective endeavour of four scholars, each an authoritative figure within their respective fields. This ensures the depth and contextual nuance of case studies and fosters responsible and more self-consciously triangulated conversations. For some readers, actual ‘comparisons’ between artefacts and artistic practices across cultural and regional divide might seem sparse within the four volumes. The most prominent of such forays lies in Jaś Elsner’s essays on the disappearance of figurines in Abrahamic religions,¹² on ‘landscape’ in Buddhist sutra, prehistoric stone monuments, and ancient Roman paintings¹³ and

¹⁰ My use of the term ‘dialogic’ refers positively to Mikhail Bakhtin’s formulation. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.

¹¹ There are at least two major collaborative works on global art history in the fields of medieval and early modern art that are either ongoing or in press. For the joint project by Beate Fricke and Finbarr Barry Flood, see Beate Fricke and Finbarr Barry Flood, ‘Premodern Globalism in Art History: A Conversation’, *The Art Bulletin*, 104:4, November 2022, 6-19. Their book project entitled *Tales Things Tell: Material Histories of Early Globalisms* is due to be released by Princeton University Press at the beginning of 2024. The collaboration between Elizabeth Horodowich and Alexander Nagel resulted in Elizabeth Horodowich and Alexander Nagel, ‘Amerasia: European Reflections of an Emergent World, 1492-ca. 1700’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 23, May 2019, 257-295. Their book is being published by Zone Books this year too. In addition, Monika Juneja and Edward Cooke also recently penned theoretical treatises on transcultural and connected approach to art history: Monika Juneja, *Can Art History be Made Global?: Meditations from the Periphery*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023; Edward S. Cooke Jr., *Global Objects: Toward a Connected Art History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2022.

¹² Jaś Elsner, ‘The Death of the Figurine: Reflections on an Abrahamic Abstention’ in Jaś Elsner, ed., *Figurines: Figuration and the Sense of Scale*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 130-181.

¹³ Jaś Elsner, ‘Space-Object-Landscape: Sacred and “Sacro-Idyllic” from Dunhuang via Stonehenge to Roman Wall-Painting’ in Jaś Elsner, ed., *Landscape and Space: Comparative*

the less extensive mention of the *Admonition Scrolls* in another essay on a late Roman cosmetic box.¹⁴

This reticence in explicit comparison by individual authors is certainly a self-conscious choice within the research team, as one of the regular team members has devoted significant amount of critical reflection to the pitfalls as well as colonial legacies of past practices of art historical comparison within the canonical historiographies of both European (the case of formalism in general) and non-Western art histories (as in the case of early twentieth-century attempts for instance to compare non-perspectival tradition of representation and Western perspectivalism).¹⁵ As the authors in a previous volume on comparativism have argued, such comparisons have often been construed in binary, hierarchical, and self-serving terms (“syncretism”¹⁶) and from the subject position of scholars with all the mental equipment of art history as it was developed in Europe for the region’s own cultural production. And they were often made with uneven, if not utterly disproportionate, knowledge, of the various visual and cultural traditions involved. It is within this context of a cautious and critical evaluation of comparison as a viable methodological framework that the volumes emerged as a fully triangulated or even quadrangulated structure,¹⁷ involving case studies from ancient Greek, Roman, Chinese and Mesoamerican contexts whose primary goal is to develop thoughtful analysis both within the respective specialist fields and in light of conversations that arose from various occasions of preliminary symposia. Comparison therefore is more latent and dialogically construed than performed as a single-author enterprise. Comparison should also be seen more in terms of long-term collegial conversations and conceptual affinities that shaped these individual essays from initial research and conference presentation to its final dialogic form. The durational aspect of these conversations is crucial and marks these volumes as somewhat apart from the emerging scholarly format of conference proceedings where research on a global range of cultural contexts that speak to a common theme

Perspectives from Chinese, Mesoamerican, Ancient Greek, and Roman Art, Oxford: Oxford University press, 2021, 132-183.

¹⁴ Elsner, ‘A Roman Vessel’, 73-4.

¹⁵ Jaś Elsner, ed, *Comparativism in Art History*, New York and London: Routledge, 2017. This volume was reviewed in this journal by John Clark, “Comparativism from Inside and Outside: Not only a matter of viewpoint”, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2017, 17, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/clark-rev1.pdf>. The colonial and imperial legacies of art historical comparisons were tackled by the wide-ranging essays in Jaś Elsner, ed. *Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity: Histories of Art and Religion from India to Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

¹⁶ See Stanley Abe and Jaś Elsner, ‘Introduction’ in Jaś Elsner ed, *Comparativism in Art History*, New York and London: Routledge, 2017, 2.

¹⁷ For the importance of triangulation to overcome the binarism and essentialism of the two-term model of ‘compare-and-contrast’, see the Chinese edition of Jaś Elsner’s lecture series delivered in Beijing in 2017, where he drew lessons from an early collaboration on comparative studies of Chinese, Roman and Maya sarcophagi. Jaś Elsner, *Eurocentric and Beyond: Art History, the Global Turn, and the Possibilities of Comparativism (Quanqiu zhuanxiang xia de yishushi: cong ouzhou zhongxin zhuyi dao bijiao zhuyi)*, trans. Hu Moran et al, Beijing: Horizon Books, 2022, 88-9, 358-9.

encounters one another one-off and is grouped together in a final volume.¹⁸ Indeed, each of the four articles included in each volume is, to use the French comparatist anthropologist Marcel Detienne's words, 'at once singular and plural'.¹⁹ In the sense that each is both an independent piece of scholarship within their respective fields and borne out of long-term and self-consciously comparative conversations with colleagues from other fields. Reading them solely as autonomous texts in many ways diminishes their epistemic value, whereas reading all four together affords an experience of witnessing four scholars tackling the same thematic concept from a variety of intersecting angles, thereby showing that central theme in a multi-perspectival relief.²⁰

This type of collaboration became possible and in some ways necessary as the academic infrastructure of art history departments especially in North America, but also to a certain degree in Britain and Europe, shifted in the past two decades towards a more even distribution of fields. These four volumes present a way forward for generative dialogues across specialists in various regional traditions within a single department and for creative imagining of future art histories to come through collective encounters and debates. In contrast to earlier discussion of comparison vs connectivity in the discipline of history for instance, where global and connected histories were pitted against potentially essentialist and universalist approach of comparative history that assumes regions and cultures as unconnected,²¹ comparatist art history here is offered as a complement to, rather than displace or undermine, the by now ubiquitous and necessary examination of transculturation across historical periods.

A third characteristic of 'comparativism of method' refers to the second term invoked in the phrase – that is, its focus on 'method' adds a crucially reflexive dimension to current practice of 'global art history'. Such reflexivity is, first and foremost, visible in and practiced through the conscientious choice of themes. That picking a theme for focused and sustained conversations is no small intellectual endeavour could be seen in the coeval and earlier attempts of comparative research in historical anthropology alluded to earlier. In describing conversations between

¹⁸ For example, Beate Fricke and Aden Kumler, eds, *Destroyed – Disappeared – Lost – Never Were*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2022, which includes essays on Chinese, Japanese, Islamic art as well as a similar cast of contributors.

¹⁹ Marcel Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Redwood City, California: Stanford University Press, 2008, 24.

²⁰ For this reviewer, the reading experience afforded by the four-essay format recalls Michael Baxandall's thoughtful composition of four individual short essays on four limewood sculptures by four individual artists of Renaissance Germany, where his purpose is as much to demonstrate an interlinked set of varied interpretive methods that could be used to tackle the genre as a whole as to tease out individual particularities of works and the stylistic spectrum of artists working within specific social, historical, and geographic circumstances. See Michael Baxandall, *Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980, 164-216.

²¹ For a lucid overview of the debate among historians, see Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard, 'Histoire globale, histoires connectées : un changement d'échelle historiographique? Introduction', *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine*, 54-4:5, October-December 2007, 7-21.

historians and anthropologists exploring how societies establish their territory, Detienne resorts to the memorable phrase of ‘constructing comparables’. Such ‘comparables’, Detienne says, should be ‘generic enough to allow the beginnings of a comparison but neither too general nor too specific to any particular culture’.²² He continues: ‘it [the concept] was neither too strong nor too weak. Had it been too strong, too powerfully classificatory, it would have impeded the work of comparison; if too weak, it would have produced nothing to think about as a group’.²³

Within the context of these four volumes specifically, one could observe that the practical and conceptual need for ‘constructing comparables’ naturally leads to themes and concepts deemed both fundamental to and crucially current in art historical and archaeological practice. Constructing comparables is thus in itself part of methodological reflection. Indeed, these themes act as mediating concepts across the disciplinary boundaries of art history and archaeology and of regional divisions. Both ‘vessel’ and ‘landscape’ are fundamental categories of visual and material culture. A comparative conversation on them thus offers opportunity to critically interrogate the latent Eurocentric framing of these concepts and contribute to current conceptual debates on objecthood, agency, and spatiality. ‘Visibility’ and ‘scale/figurine’, to note, are themes borne out of recent methodological reflection on what kind of embodied viewing experience *in situ*, or the lack thereof, specific objects might offer, both in relation to the physical space in which they are situated and to the viewing human body that encounters them within that space.²⁴ A concomitant effect of such reflexivity is again to offer new directions on how to construe the global. Three decades of experiments and debates within global art history have mostly seen the gradual maturation of studies of transcultural exchange; this has led to the contributions of both scholars within European art history branching out to look at various instances of exchange (at times perhaps rightfully criticised as ‘neo-colonial’) and from the fully fledged fields of non-western art histories, at times with distinct postcolonial and decolonial stances. What has fallen out of critical attention and reflection, however, is how much the latter fields were historically and historiographically developed out of a process of methodological and conceptual transfer (albeit never smoothly nor without transformation or subversion) of Eurocentric disciplinary apparatus into non-Western cultures.²⁵ The discipline as it stands now is merely at the difficult

²² Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable*, 25.

²³ Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable*, 25.

²⁴ For recent discussions of scale, see Joan Kee and Emamuele Lugli, ‘Scale to Size: An Introduction’, *Art History*, 38:2, March 2015, 250-266; Jennifer Roberts, ‘Introduction: Seeing Scale’ in Jennifer Roberts, ed., *Scale: Terra Foundation Essays*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2, 2016, 10–24.

²⁵ Historiographic reflection on the (colonial and imperialist) formation of the disciplines of various non-Western art histories is an ongoing academic enterprise, not least promulgated by special issues collated within this journal, for instance the special issues on Islamic (eds. Moya Carey and Margaret S. Graves, June 2012), Oceanic (ed. Jaynie Anderson, June 2011), Persian (eds. Yuka Kadoi and Andrés Barati, June 2023), and modern and contemporary

beginning of redressing the historic methodological asymmetries and hierarchies that undergird the modern intellectual formation of art history as a whole. The four volumes' humble proposal for a triangulated comparison of methods offers a timely corrective to the status quo, whereby the potential dialogue could become multi-directional and thus less asymmetrical or unidirectional. It seems that by critically examining the limits and applicability of linguistic terms and concepts such as vessel vs *mingqi*, or figurine vs *yong*, one both deconstructs the supposed universality of concepts and allows for methodological reflections to speak back from outside of the cultural contexts in which these anglophone terms emerged.²⁶ All authors are also astute analysts and observers of the etic/emic divide between ancient discursive and artistic practice and modern disciplinary framework. The effect is a constructive and multi-layered de-familiarisation and relativisation of disciplinary terms and concepts on which more comments to follow. While conceptual transfer should always be treated with caution – the danger of potential incommensurability and/or effects of homogenisation and false universalism is never completely absent –, the four volumes do offer a distinct counter-model to the long legacy of how early twentieth-century western art historians brought such concepts such as style, perspective, space, and iconography (all developed from research into western art history) to bear upon non-western art. The series seems to be a distant echo of what Oleg Grabar some forty years ago envisioned and lamented as the failed project of non-Western art histories of his generation – 'the day would come, some of us thought, when introductions to the history of art would be based on any artistic tradition and when African sculpture or Persian miniatures would help us to understand Bernini and Titian'.²⁷ In this respect, the Center for Global Ancient Art at University of Chicago harbours decolonial/postcolonial potential that continues to be relevant to the discipline and in need of sustained debate.

Having examined the conceptual framework of the series and its intervention into current debates in global art history, it is now time to assess how successful the comparisons, both explicit and implicit within the series, are. Before doing so, let me reference one concept to start. In anthropological debates on comparative method,

Chinese art (ed. Wenny Teo, June 2014), although it bears mention that in the field of Islamic art for instance, the rise of historiography has been seen as concomitant with the increasing difficulty to access first-hand materials under geopolitical complexities of the new millennium. For a globally oriented and critically conceived volume on the historiographic conundrum of colonial comparison and writing of religious art across Eurasia throughout the twentieth century, see Jaś Elsner, ed. *Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity*, 2020.

²⁶ See Wu Hung, 'Practice and Discourse', 120-171; Wu Hung, 'Thinking Through Scale: The First Emperor's Sculptural Enterprise' in Jaś Elsner, ed., *Figurines: Figuration and the Sense of Scale*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 88-90.

²⁷ Grabar's claim towards a 'universal' method of art history aside, there is much within this series that could be seen as anticipated by Grabar's methodological formulations, as well as his own scholarly attempt at comparativism most visibly in *The Mediation of Ornament* (1989). See Oleg Grabar, 'On the Universality of the History of Art', *Art Journal*, 42:4, Winter 1982, 282.

'scaled comparison' is often mentioned as a key.²⁸ That is, any effective comparison requires the things compared to be of commensurate scale. Indeed, the dialogic structure, the intellectual endeavour to find themes of commensurable interests, and the contained and neatly arranged four-article format are all scholarly techniques in establishing a shared scale of reference. Even more important is all four authors' commitment to philologically sensitive and fine-grained case study of objects or art historical phenomena. Indeed, it is precisely when the scale of all four case studies offered matches one another that the comparative dimension is brought out most compellingly and inspiringly.

For instance, in *Vessels*, the issue of anthropomorphism and biomorphism in vessel designs was broached in compelling ways by both Neer and Brittenham, whereas Neer's discussion of how users of such vessels experience and engage with these bodily forms found its counterpart in Elsner's adept examination of the multiple subjectivities that might have come into corporeal contact with the Muse Casket, a fourth-century cosmetic box. As noted in Brittenham's Introduction to the volume, a central question in the study of vessels in archaeological and art historical contexts is the relation of singular objects to a sequence of similar things.²⁹ This Kublerian problem found its instantiation in all four articles yet in somewhat disparate forms: for Neer, the dazzling sequencing of a range of bodily metaphors mobilised by ancient Greek drinking vessels from breast to mask to genitalia (an emic artefactual logic) helps to question the typological and classificatory impulse of archaeological research (an etic framework); for Elsner, vessels with similar formal, technical, medial and iconographic features are adduced to contextualise and differentiate the case of the Muse Casket from cognate or adjacent material artefacts and to excavate its artefactual logic and symbolic significance; compared to Neer's largely synchronic treatment of vast array of anthropomorphic vessels in ancient Greece, Brittenham offered a diachronic contextualisation of the different political and cultural circumstances in which corporeal forms came in and out of fashion in Mesoamerican vessels; and lastly, Wu Hung's similarly focused case study of the system of funerary vessels, necessarily confronts them as a sequence with their internal structure and ideological and discursive frame of reference, while also providing an emic recontextualisation of this system against its decompartmentalisation in archaeological report.

Similarly, *Conditions of Visibility* presents various case studies of objects (Aztec sculptures, a late Roman reliquary casket), monuments and archaeological sites (Acropolis and two Chinese tombs) as a catalyst for reflection on how art history could productively engage with instances of invisibility, absence, and absconding and their implications for historical viewership. While the social function and phenomenological scale of each discussion item differ vastly, the four authors again converge on their conceptual intervention and context-bound explication of how

²⁸ See for instance Susanne Kuchler, 'Comparativism in Anthropology: Big Questions and Scaled Comparison – an illusive dream?', in Jaś Elsner ed, *Comparativism in Art History*, New York and London: Routledge, 2017, 130-143.

²⁹ Claudia Brittenham, 'Introduction' in Claudia Brittenham, ed., *Vessels: The Object as Container*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 3-4.

and why ancient cultures engaged with image and objects made invisible, and how the invisible interact with the visual realm. As Neer succinctly summarises in his introduction, the four essays resorted to and critically assessed a spectrum of explanations for why artworks were made invisible that helpfully and sophisticatedly expanded the conventional repertoire: for Neer, the question of how the monumental complex of the Acropolis came to be differentially visible to disparate social groups in Attic Athens is mainly a question of power distribution; for Brittenham, elaborately carved yet invisible undersides of Aztec sculpture were intended to be a structural and ontological counterpart to the visible sculptural forms, thereby offering an analogue to binary poetic formulations (*difrasismos*) and raising questions of learned viewer's response and the differential distribution of such literary knowledge. Elsner's and Wu's contributions might be helpfully read together. Both authors are interested in developing theological, intellectual, and ontological discourse out of the objects and sites that they study – for Elsner, a buried-away reliquary casket with complex iconographies self-consciously alluding to, and indeed materially embodying, theological debates on the (in)visibility of the divine and the practice of pilgrimage; for Wu Hung, a system of passageways, apertures and windows materially constructed through precious artefacts such as the jade *bi* disks and the architectonic of the tomb itself, which reveals bipartite notion of the soul and its movement during afterlife in early China.

In contrast, the two other volumes display moments of divergence from scaled comparison which complicates readers' engagement to a certain degree. In *Figurines*, the first three articles still largely conform to the established structure, whereas the last piece by Elsner ranges outward to embrace a transregional and transreligious evaluation of what he calls 'the death of the figurine' in Abrahamic religions. Each of the first three authors provides expository rumination on the issue of scale in art history, and reflects on its manifestation in particular cultural artefacts. For Neer, the more urgent question seems to be to withhold scale as a concept within the realm of qualitative, experiential and context-bound evaluation, so as to resist an archaeological impulse to quantify (a recurrent theme in his other essays³⁰). Brittenham, following current methodological reflections, highlights instead the distinction between size (absolute) and scale (relative) and offers a range of Mesoamerican examples in which the smallness or bigness of an object's size and scale does not align with each other. Instead of adding to these reflections on scale as a contemporary analytic category, Wu Hung dwells on the 'asymmetrical' linguistic reference of *yong* as a type of funerary sculpture of diverse dimensions in Chinese art and *figurine* as a modern western disciplinary classification 'devoid of explicit ritual or architectural context'.³¹ These somewhat divergent methodological reflections on scale are followed by contextual studies. The dialogue between Brittenham and Wu Hung seems again the most compelling, where both authors seek to excavate a fluid and multilayered system of 'scaled relationships', within their respective archaeological sites of interest – for Brittenham, La Venta with its

³⁰ See for instance Richard Neer, 'Ancient Greek Vessels between Sea, Earth, and Clouds' in Claudia Brittenham, ed., *Vessels: The Object as Container*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 24.

³¹ Wu Hung, 'Thinking through Scale', 88-90.

range of small-scale objects and monumental structures, and for Wu Hung, three different projects of *yong* related to the First Emperor of China, their respective political contexts, as well as the subtle orchestration of scale within what seems largely homogenous group of life-size terracotta statues, for instance. Both offer demonstrations of how nuanced and thorough application of scale as a concept to the study of specific spatial configurations and the interrelations between objects and sites in archaeological contexts could yield fresh analysis and insight. In contrast to the Chinese and Mesoamerican studies on scalar relationality (therefore putting ‘figurines’ and statue of small scales in relation to other objects and in their spatial contexts), Neer and Elsner converge on their theoretical ambition in assessing the ‘figurine’ proper. The former adopts a dual discussion of the philology and material culture of smallness and small-scale figural statues and highlights the ‘plasticity’ of ancient Greek figurine in defying normative disciplinary or social categories such as iconography and gender, whereas Elsner’s article seeks to embrace a more macroscopic and comparative survey of figurine production and its absence across the major religions of Eurasia. It is precisely upon reading this last article that the scaled comparison seems to break out of frame however. The article effectively takes the readers on a global survey of archeological evidence across the Mediterranean, Near East and the Islamic world, to establish, with the prominent exception of Egypt, the fact of a drastic diminution of figurine production as the world transitioned towards monotheism. Its argumentative thrust also embeds Elsner’s discussion of figurine as a conceptual category within a more religiously oriented discourse, somewhat apart from all other contributions. By adducing several textual sources from the ancient Roman period and subsequent Christian legislation, he presents an argument for mimetic anthropomorphism and affective engagement with the small scale as a defining feature that later monotheistic traditions found problematic and sought to expunge. As a stand-alone article that also harkens to Elsner’s long-term collaborative project on world religions (therefore in effect combining two globally oriented research initiatives³²), it does mark an instance in which divergence from a shared scale of scholarly inquiry leads to difficulty for readers to draw connections across the articles, despite its own argumentative insights and impressive intellectual scope.

Yet the series’ intention to revise disciplinary concepts in art history and archaeology through the dialogic format of the books is also the strongest in both *Figurines* and *Landscape and Space*. Most notably in the case of the terminological mismatch between figurine and *yong* which Wu Hung lucidly disentangles. If ‘vessel’ and ‘figurine’ are both somewhat specialised terms with distinct semantic baggages in archaeology and art history alike, the concept of ‘landscape’ is perhaps almost too ubiquitous, generic, and overly rehearsed to require any further revision.

³² This research initiative resulted in four scholarly volumes. Besides the historiographic volume signalled previously (*Empires of Faith*, 2020), see also Jaś Elsner and Stefanie Lenk, eds., *Imagining the Divine: Art and the Rise of World Religions*, Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2017; Philippa Adrych, Robert Bracey, Dominic Dalglish, Stefanie Lenk, and Rachel Wood, *Images of Mithras*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; Jaś Elsner and Rachel Wood, eds., *Imagining the Divine: Art in Religions of Late Antiquity Across Eurasia*, London: British Museum Press, 2021.

Beyond the careful specification of the term in relation to both disciplines, what is most intriguing to observe is how the heterogenous selection of exemplars representing 'landscape' in the four essays unsettles the canonical concept itself and opens the term beyond its conventional, Eurocentric frame. Wu Hung's account of the earliest schematic representation of landscape on bronze vessels in the Warring States Period effectively defamiliarises the more visible *literati* tradition of *shanshui* in later Chinese art, a tradition that Sherman Lee, in an opening quote to the entire essay, alluded to as a comparative foil to landscape representation of the ancient Mediterranean. Neer chooses the equally unconventional subject of turning posts and standing stones in Classical Greece as a type of monument that itself effects a configuration of place and produces 'landscape' in physical sites as well as literary representations. He therefore emphasises landscape more as enacted, performed, and physically demarcated in space than something merely seen or pictured. Brittenham, in turns, contends with the 'absence of landscape in Maya art', a methodological conundrum that pushes her to examine indigenous conception of space (town, field and forest), linguistic representations in both textual and pictorial contexts, cartography, and the actual experience of space as such. This thought-provokingly 'expanded field of landscape' signalled by the preceding essays – perhaps with the sole omission of an ecological or environmental perspective³³ – is synthesised in Elsner's final paper. It pivots around an experimental cluster of 'thought-objects' from other fields – a pagoda formed out of Buddhist sutra text whose significance shifts between emptiness and form, and prehistoric and medieval stone monuments such as Stonehenge and insular crosses in Britain – before coming back to a trenchant critical reflection on the historiography of the 'sacro-idyllic' in ancient Roman landscape murals. All four articles demonstrate respective efforts in negotiating with the historiography and disciplinary bounds of how landscape came to be defined within their own fields, which in turn generates a profoundly relativised and pluralistic vista of what landscape could be in the emic contexts of global ancient art. The conceptual work of this volume, then, has the great benefit of potentially reopening questions of landscape not only in archaeology, but also in art history of later periods, where the notion itself has either shrunken, ossified, or become too rigidly inscribed within a Western modern pictorial tradition.

As inspiring as the entire series is, this reviewer does have several further comments on its achievement and program. An initial moment of reflection and pause arose when I finished reading the third volume and continued into the fourth. While the smallness of the series was previously praised as both a sign of scholarly experimentalism and intimate collegiality, it does also mean that ultimately the 'comparativism of method' proposed here should perhaps not be taken in a fully programmatic sense but rather with some limits. Ultimately, I would like to propose that as a project, such comparativism might better remain productively *uninstitutionalised*. As scholarship on transcultural exchange has grown

³³ Landscape ecology and the ongoing environmental crisis are sparsely evoked in Elsner, 'Introduction' in Jaś Elsner, ed., *Landscape and Space: Comparative Perspectives from Chinese, Mesoamerican, Ancient Greek, and Roman Art*, Oxford: Oxford University press, 2022, 2, 6; and in Elsner, 'Space-Object-Landscape' in Jaś Elsner, ed., *Landscape and Space*, 159.

exponentially within the past few decades into a veritable academic industry, a flattening and homogenisation of discourse could be visibly observed. One wonders how much institutionalised conversations as such might breed similar homogeneity beyond its clear benefit of facilitating much-needed mutual listening. As my reading progresses, it became increasingly clear that, besides the intellectual breadth and openness of the four authors (what grounds a demonstration of ‘method’), each also has a different scholarly voice and style of writing and thinking. In an era where the subjectivity of scholarship is both self-consciously and at times openly embraced especially in contexts where feminist, queer and affect theories advocate for embodied and positional knowing to disrupt normative disciplinary *habitus* of argumentation, such scholarly style and personal commitment are certainly welcome. But as readers deepen their conversations with the four authors, the boundary between method and personality also begins to blur. And although many of the essays included in the volumes could also serve as an overarching exposition of how materials from their respective fields instantiate the themes discussed (i.e. a state of the field overview), increasingly, the comparison between methods shapeshifts into more of a comparison between *personal* methods. The most prominent case might be Neer’s articles, where one could observe a visible common thread. His argumentative strategy in *Figurines, Vessels and Landscape and Space* tends all to mobilise emic logic of artefacts and philological evidence to better question the modern taxonomical concepts that classify them in the first place. These discussions around the limits of these concepts in turn afford cautionary remarks on the need to think beyond certain art historical methodologies such as formalism and iconography. The plasticity of ancient Greek figurines, for instance, challenges iconographic identification of specific deities and their gender, whereas the corporeal metamorphosis of often ludic drinking vessels plays on the very boundary of what archaeology understands as vessels. In light of Brittenham’s recently published monograph, it also seems more apparent that issues of embodied vision and sensory engagement with objects and spaces are integral to her eloquent conceptualisation of vessels and the tactility of figurines scaled to the human palm.³⁴ To be sure, these observations on ‘personal methods’ do not entail a wholesale discrediting of the validity of comparisons as such. It only highlights a limit to which readers might take each ‘visual conversations’ – not as full-fledged demonstration of codified methods, but as individual/personal explorations of and reflections on disciplinary possibilities.

Related to the question of institutionalisation is another where long-term, small-scale collaboration might shift from an initial, experimental and open-ended form into an established format. As Beate Fricke and Finbarr Barry Flood have noted in their own ‘dialogue’ on pre-modern globalism, the current power asymmetry between anglophone, European and first-world scholarship and academia from the Global South is far from being redressed, despite continual effort to open channels of communication and exchange.³⁵ It seems a distinct conundrum

³⁴ Claudia Brittenham, *Unseen Art: Making, Vision, and Power in Ancient Mesoamerica*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2023. For relevant statements within the four volumes, see Claudia Brittenham, ‘Introduction’ in *Vessels*, 1-5; and Brittenham, ‘Shifting Scale’, 57-63.

³⁵ Fricke and Flood, ‘Premodern Globalism’, 16.

of 'global art history' that the disproportionate institutional resources between the West and the Rest in accessing collections of and scholarships on artistic traditions not rooted locally (given the colonial legacy of most modern museums in the West) and in instituting generative dialogues among scholars within diverse fields have created significant (if not widening) gaps between research capacities, resources and basic academic infrastructures in writing a global art history at all. If institutionalised, projects like the Center for Global Ancient Art could potentially become yet another instance in which scholars from Euro-American universities benefit from intense scholarly exchange and sharing of intellectual resources, what Flood called 'hegemonic consumption',³⁶ to the detriment of colleagues from the Global South who have limited access to even conduct fine-grained studies on any of the artistic traditions discussed here at all.

Thirdly, in terms of the publishing format, the current reviewer also wonders if besides the single-authored introduction and postface included in each volume, it would be helpful to readers and to current debates in global art history to include a concluding 'roundtable' among participating authors, either to reflect on how the texts speak to one another, what they have learnt from each other, or to offer more insight into how comparative conversations shaped their writing and thinking process in the first place. This would not only add another scale and meta-layer to the architectonic of the volumes, thereby consolidating comparativism as practiced through this dialogic mechanism, but also make the latent conversation and collaboration between individual texts – signalled mostly through scattered inter-citation and cross-referencing in the volumes – more explicit through a direct encounter and coming together of individual voices.

As a young scholar consciously situated outside of the specialist fields of the volumes' contributors, it is also apparent that the themes and concepts broached by all four volumes have broader significance for the general practice of art history and archaeology, therefore not limited to a discussion of ancient art and material culture *per se*. Just to name a few examples closer to the reviewer's field of competence, the issue of (in)visibility or partial and shifting visibility – beyond the special issue in *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* on 'Absconding' prominently mentioned in *Conditions of Visibility* – has been most imaginatively addressed by Western medievalists such as Herbert Kessler and more recently Jacqueline Jung.³⁷ Similarly, while recent publications on the art of objects and vessels were acknowledged in individual articles, it also seems regretful that books by such authors as Adrian Randolph and Margaret Graves on European and Islamic objects and containers

³⁶ Fricke and Flood, 'Premodern Globalism', 16.

³⁷ *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 'Absconding', 2010, 55/56. This issue features several members of the Center of Global Ancient Art. For several different approaches to (in)visibility in Western medieval art, see for instance: Herbert Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000; Jacqueline Jung, *Eloquent Bodies: Movement, Expression, and the Human Figure in Gothic Sculpture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020; and Amy Knight Powell, 'A Short History of the Picture as Box', *Representations*, 141:1, February 2018, 95-130.

were not discussed more explicitly.³⁸ These are not lacunae within the publications *per se*. In fact, it is very much a strength and focus of the volume to carefully frame and define each theme within the disciplinary practices of ancient art and archaeology. Rather, given the broader implications of the self-reflexive discussion presented here, the reviewer wonders if it would be productive to at times invite respondents and interlocutors from beyond the historical and disciplinary limit of ‘ancient art and archaeology’ to provide concluding thoughts and further provocations. This could be in the form of a postscript or response from an external observer equally invested in the thematic proposed by each volume.³⁹ Such editorial arrangements could alleviate the risk of discursive siloing, keep the dialogic momentum continuous, and allow insights to ripple outward.

These caveats and potential suggestions aside, it is apparent that this tightly argued, conscientiously crafted, and consistently insightful series of multi-essay volumes offers a model of small-scale, reflexive, collaborative research that would not only inspire specialists in ancient art, material culture and archaeology, but generate methodological insights for the practice of a more dialogic, less epistemically asymmetrical, and thus global art history.

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³⁸ Adrian W. B. Randolph, *Touching Objects: Intimate Experiences of Italian Renaissance Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014; Margaret S. Graves, *Arts of Allusion: Object, Ornament, and Architecture in Medieval Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

³⁹ I am thinking, for instance, of Rebecca Zorach, ‘Envoi: Framing “Antiquity”’, in Verity Platt and Michael Squire, eds., *The Frame in Classical Art: A Cultural History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 583-603.