

Week three: Art & class in Roman society



“Arte plebea” is a term coined by Italian scholars to describe an artistic current, which stands out for being supposedly “un-Greek”: it is alleged to derive from an Italic tradition. Art assigned to this style is characterised in terms of content by its concern with everyday life, and in form by a disregard for “correct” perspective and anatomy. The patrons of these monuments are often identified as belonging to the middle and lower social levels, as well as to less urbanised areas, but the origins and characteristics of “plebeian art” are hotly debated. Many scholars doubt the usefulness of postulating such a category altogether, which makes it all the more worth discussing. The identification of “freedman art” arose from the discussion of the relationship of class and image-style. This term has been equally contentious.

Below is some general reading on this topic. However, I suggest that those presenting focus on a couple of case studies and, to avoid over-lap, agree these with one another. I would suggest that one of you choose an example from the funerary context and one from the domestic. For example, the **tombs of the Haterii** and the **House of the Vettii** would make excellent case studies. However, you can make your own choices.

Questions to think about:

How can we define class in Roman culture and society?

How was art used to express class identity?

How useful are the categorisation ‘Arte Plebea’ or ‘freedman art’?

How important was context to interpreting this art, i.e. who was the intended audience and how did this impact how the concerns of the patron were articulated?

To what extent do you think artistic style belonged to a specific social class?

Bibliography

Petronius, *Satyricon* chs. 26-78, esp. 26-32 and 71-78 (“Dinner with Trimalchio”)

****READ THIS****

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