

Roman decorative habits

Review of:

Ellen Swift, *Style and function in Roman decoration: Living with objects and interiors*, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, 231pp., 18 col. Plates, 70 b. & w. illus., hdbk,bpl ISBN 9780754664632.

With this volume on Roman decorative habits, Ellen Swift offers an interesting, thoughtful and well-constructed survey of the social experience of design. Although she chooses to discuss decoration as it was implemented and encountered in domestic settings, through a sequence of studies dealing with rooms, clothing and jewelry, the volume ends up offering all those interested in Roman visual culture (as well as all those interested generally in the social history of design) a rich springboard for further thought.

The three body chapters are bracketed by an introduction that establishes the parameters and theoretical foundations of the study, and by a conclusion that recaps how scholars might reasonably think about social experience as preserved by decoration. Both introduction and conclusion are helpful contributions to the work, not duplicating or reiterating the body content. Swift grounds this study in the works of Alois Riegl, especially his *Late Roman Art Industry* of 1901, and the much more recent work *Art and Agency* (1998) by Alfred Gell. The former provides her with the basics of an approach to Roman decoration specifically, and the latter offers an anthropological summary of visual theory (mainly using non-Western examples to supplement and push beyond Western reception and semiotic theories) that provides a framework for more speculative reconstructions of visual experience. Nowadays, Riegl is often brought out only in discussions of Roman historiography and to see his ideas still shaping a contemporary discussion is rewarding. In addition to Gell, theorists of visual experience such as Ernst Gombrich, Rudolf Arnheim, Jerome Voss and Robert Young, Henri Lefebvre, and James Trilling are brought to bear. Throughout the work, Swift applies these theoretical frameworks lightly, not presupposing a system through which Roman decorative habits can be definitively explained, but allowing for support of her reconstructions of decorated space. The final sections of Swift's introductory chapter introduce the decorative and perceptual vocabularies of Romans themselves, with some comment as to how Roman terms might best be understood by modern thinkers.

Chapter 2, titled *Interiors: Non-figurative Floor Mosaics and Other Domestic Decoration*, is the first (and longest) of the three studies of social experience of décor. Swift presents several parameters for the analysis, some more convincing than others. She chooses mosaic remains for her focus because of their abundant survival, and in relatively good context, but avoids painted walls because they have been treated so thoroughly already. She chooses tessellated mosaics because this technique was used to

create the widest variety of decorative patterns. She prefers mainly to use examples from the 2nd-4th centuries (minimizing, for example, evidence from Pompeii) because mosaics from these later centuries more readily compare across the geography of the empire, yet leaves out mosaics from the Eastern Mediterranean because, as she claims (p. 33), “the East Mediterranean is more influenced by the Hellenistic tradition.” In regard to this last limiting criterion, and although I am sympathetic to the need to control the subject matter, claiming that Hellenistic tradition complicates the history of Roman use of decoration is not viable. On page 44, for example, Swift herself describes how Greek motifs were installed by Greek artists in Roman homes in order to perpetuate an esteemed tradition and to set up social divisions between those educated in the patterns’ sources and those who might be excluded by them. And what of the claim on page 51 that Roman methods of assimilating Greek prototypes consist of meditations on a theme? It would perhaps have been better to leave this qualifying diagnostic (of Eastern = too Greek) completely out, in preference merely to stating that she will use contextualized domestic mosaics from Italy, Gaul and North Africa.

Swift provides the reader with useful typologies both of Roman mosaic patterns, as well as of installation practice (as for thresholds, for “placement” locations within rooms, for framing devices, or for static or dynamic directional cues). Color, scale, complexity of design motif, number of adjacent motifs, and apotropaic inclusions are also given sensitive and highly convincing explication. Readers who have paid less attention to the non-figural aspects of Roman mosaics will find these accounts to be enlightening, and likely will never again be as casual in their reception of these complex floors. In the remainder of the chapter the reader is taken on several “house visits” (as Swift calls them). Four houses are treated here, selected for the relatively complete preservations of their groundplans, their relatively contemporary (unified) decorative schemes, their geographical range in the western empire, and their chronological range within the period of Swift’s interest (2nd-3rd centuries). In addition, each house makes use of at least one room-sized non-figural mosaic. The houses are the *Domus delle Muse* in Ostia, Italy (c. 130 CE), the house in the *Couvent du Verbe Incarné* in Lyon, France (c. 200 CE), the *Maison des Masques* in Sousse, Tunisia (c. 200 CE again), and, once more in Ostia, the *Domus dei Pesci* (3rd century with some 4th century remodeling).

Swift is at her best in taking the reader through the spaces of these houses, with focus on the spatial relationships among occupants that the floor patterns encouraged. The inclusion of subtle apotropaic devices simultaneously at the feet of the patron and his visitor on the *Verbe Incarné* floor (fig. 2.23), for example, gives some weight to the idea that such mosaics were designed to create axial lines of force, designs with persuasive and/or protective effects. Later (p. 101) Swift suggests that complex patterning was one way in which owners (and artists?) asserted power over visitors. Other aspects considered during the house visits are the relationship of the mosaic design to the shape of the room itself, and the experiential moments of surprise, of shifting perspective, and of 2D/3D instability resulting from a person’s movement over the mosaic (the dizzying spiral mosaic from the *Maison des Masques* deserves special attention in this regard). Although such design effects are to be found in all four of the

houses considered, there are also signs of development over time that Swift feels the houses represent. These changes over time include a tendency to turn an isolated border motif from earlier eras eventually into a general pattern subject for a larger floor, as well as a tendency from the late 2nd century to increase the visual complexity of all components. Changes in fashion might be detected in the “downgrading” of motifs from prominent spaces to more marginal ones as time goes on, for example, when the main reception room floor motif in the *Domus delle Muse* is relegated to a placement holder in the *Verbe Incarné* villa (p. 98).

The remaining body chapters (*Vessels: Articles for Dining and Toiletry* and *Dress: Jewelry and Accessories*) are appended to the larger mosaic chapter in order, as Swift states, to restore an idea of *lived* space, as detectable separately from *ideal* or *represented* space (à la Lefebvre). The first of these chapters opens with a survey of vessel types, greatly helpful to scholars who might see one vessel form here or another vessel motif there, but might not have a general framework in mind for their functions, dates, or media. With attention to selected examples of terracotta and silver, Swift explores the role of appropriateness in the choices made by Romans to decorate their vessel. Most often, appropriateness is judged by the use the particular vessel is put to, such as Dionysiac imagery on wine vessels, or by the shape of the vessel, as when squared patterns surrounded a rather blocky bowl. But sometimes, and more noticeably in the 3rd-4th centuries when complexity in floor mosaics was celebrated, the appropriateness emerges from the spaces in which the vessels were design to be used. The beautiful silver plate from Soissons (fig. 3.9) for example, clearly employs a common geometric mosaic pattern on its main surface. As for items used in the toilette (and here the link to mosaic decoration is less clear, except as parallel examples of Roman thinking on appropriate decoration), Swift again delineates the tendencies and closes with an argument on the celebrated Projecta casket, which she think should be considered primarily as having to do with Projecta herself, and not as directly about her marriage. The visual associations brought together by Swift are intriguing throughout and I, for one, would have liked more than her brief explorations of decoration on glass beakers, silver utensils, and terracotta lamps.

The final chapter, on dress and jewelry, takes a look at changing Roman habits of both male and female adornment, understood here generally as partaking of the general pattern-language of a well-appointed home. Obviously, the almost complete loss of textiles from the Roman world is to be regretted, and so it is to jewelry and other metal clothing objects that Swift must turn. The main theme produced here is the move from a relatively sparse use of jewels and precious metals to adorn the Roman body (always more sparse for men than for women, but sparse for both nevertheless) to the gradual (but different) elaboration of adornment for both genders. Swift argues that the keys to understanding this evolutionary dynamic are the increasing role played by provincial value-systems (in contrast to elite Roman conservatism), and linked to this, the increasing social prominence of the military - with all of its metal paraphernalia. Among the interesting topics explored here are the gendering female of *opus interrabile* metalwork technique (and its later, cheaper, evolution into ‘chip-style’ jewelry), the use

of embroidery panels on clothing items, selections of colors and stones for amulets, and the borrowing of architectural ornament for items such as the crossbow brooch. The labeling of small rectangular appliqués with rudimentary human heads on them as “portrait medallions” is peculiar, as they seem to be neither portraits nor medallions, yet we may still take up Swift’s idea that they represent the type of an “ideal young man.” (p. 165).

Swift is engaging, thoughtful and persuasive throughout, and her strong writing skills make for a smooth and accessible read. The book is abundantly illustrated, and even though one may always regret the cost-effective reliance on black-and-white photography, Swift has also provided the reader with 18 well-chosen color plates in addition to black-and-whites with clear resolution. The floorplans interspersed with the photographs are also of good quality and help greatly in allowing the reader to follow her reconstructions of spatial experience. So both in content and in presentation, Swift has met her goals, which she states (on p. 187) have “been to demonstrate that Roman decoration is a lubricant of elite and aspirational Roman living; it has myriad roles in relation to the creation and maintenance of a network of social relations.”

The two critical observations I close with are thus not to be understood as marring the volume’s usefulness or value. The first one has to do with the three separated bodies of evidence brought together (using a general rubric borrowed from J. Smith’s study of Roman villas) under the common heading of Roman decoration-as-display tactic. Although the general (and intended) effect of this volume is to allow for a consideration of the rich visual environment of a Roman reception room, in all the complexity of its furnishings and occupants, there remains a frustrating gap between the discrete categories of evidence. Swift cannot help that mosaics have survived and are unearthed in entirely different ways from jewelry or dining vessels, nor that the categories of evidence come from slightly different timeframes (in that the occupants of the original *Domus delle Muse* can hardly be imagined wearing the jewelry studied in Chapter 4). The disconnection that necessarily remains among the various object-types will continue to destabilize even the general conclusion that we can observe, in mosaic design, vessel adornment, and the use of jewelry, an increasing decorative complexity beginning at the turn of the second to the third centuries. We all await the excavation of a room that provides for all types of evidence simultaneously, and if it is ever found, Swift must be among those to interpret it! The second observation has to do with how Swift uses the term “art-historical.” Swift explains in her opening paragraphs that she has been inspired by authoritative historiographies of the decorative arts that have been produced by art historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists separately, but that she wishes to produce something more than any one of these in the present volume. Art historians here seem to be characterized as those who (as formalists, perhaps, or connoisseurs) assemble types of images as bodies for study. Later on she uses the term in a more limited way that seems not to deal with academic disciplinary boundaries, as when (p. 140) she says, in reference to clothing practices, “...art-historical examples of toga-wearing provincials are known.” Here she simply means examples of Roman images, which in-and-of themselves are not art-historical, even if catalogued by art

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historians. At the risk of sounding like a touchy art historian, these vague references seem to relegate the practice of art historians to some illustrative capacity, better serving a footnote than a social history of images. I assert, however, that Ellen Swift *is* an art historian, at least as I understand the occupation, and has produced with this volume some high quality social art history.

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