

Classical Art Research Centre Workshop 2017
Oxford, 28-29th September, 2017

Transmission: The Migration of Iconography in Classical Art

Generously supported by Jean-David Cahn and Tony Michaels

One hallmark of Greek and Roman art is the persistence of certain schemes of imagery and their movement between media and across space and time. For example, certain compositions of figures or mythological scenes, invented at particular times and places, enjoyed an extraordinary longevity and were reproduced across and beyond the Graeco-Roman world. The phenomenon is especially notable in the period of the Roman Empire, when the conditions of Roman rule enabled particular scenes and motifs to spread through Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East.

This is not only a matter of individual figure types, gestures, iconographical attributes etc, the vocabulary of Graeco-Roman art. Often elaborate compositions were transmitted with a high degree of consistency through the traditions of painting, relief sculpture, mosaics, illustrated manuscripts, and the applied arts. Some mythological vignettes survived through many generations of artistic production and crossed from one medium to another. Some popular non-narrative scenes, like the so-called Totenmahl or 'funerary banquet' used in Hellenistic and Roman funerary art, also enjoyed popularity for centuries.

In trying to understand such movements of imagery we have to discern them through fragmentary evidence and the processes are often unpredictable and obscure. Small, apparently incidental details may be faithfully reproduced across vast chronological and geographical spans, while in other ways the imagery is adapted to suit the purposes of those who made or used art in specific circumstances. This tension between the local purposes of ancient works of art and the big picture of the classical tradition, visible to the 'all-seeing' archaeologist offers an excellent opportunity for understanding how classical art worked at different levels of analysis. Yet much remains obscure about the particular mechanisms by which iconography was transmitted, whether through artistic training, artists' imitation of portable objects, or the hypothetical models known as 'copy-books' or 'pattern-books', which are often assumed to have existed, but for which there is little hard evidence.

This workshop builds upon CARC's recent events dedicated to Roman replicas and Greek artists. Through the contributions of international speakers and lively, informal debate, it will aim to cast new light on ancient imagery and on the lessons that can be learned from examining its adaptive success. The workshop will focus on mythological scenes (but not exclusively) and on Hellenistic and Roman periods (but not exclusively). Probable topics for discussion include: the evidence for and against 'copy-books'; the transmission of imagery between luxury art and stone reliefs such as Roman mythological sarcophagi; the role of ceramics and plaster models as vehicles for transmission; mythological mosaics; the movement of imagery across Roman provinces; and the persistence of classical schemes in the illuminated manuscripts of Late Antiquity.

