

Review article

Objects, Romans, materialities

Caroline van Eck*

ACHIM LICHTENBERGER & RUBINA RAJA (ed.). 2017. *The diversity of Classical archaeology* (Studies in Classical Archaeology 1). Turnhout: Brepols; 978-2-503-57493-6 €130.

ELLEN SWIFT. 2017. *Roman artefacts and society: design, behaviour, and experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-878526-2 £85.

ASTRID VAN OYEN & MARTIN PITTS (ed.). 2017. *Materialising Roman histories* (University of Cambridge Museum of Classical Archaeology Monograph 3). Oxford & Havertown (PA): Oxbow; 978-1-78570-676-9 £40.



The three books reviewed here document the emergence of the new paradigm in Roman and Mediterranean archaeology, often associated with the material turn that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s in all disciplines related to human artefacts. It is a paradigm that puts things, not makers or users, at the centre of enquiry and that studies what things do, not their meaning. Its key notions are material and materiality, agency, practice, connectivity, the trajectories of objects and globalisation. It is also a rejection of the representational approach to material culture, which takes objects to represent people or immaterial aspects, such as religious ideas or group identities of the culture that created them. At first sight this new paradigm looks very materialist, but it is in fact driven by the attribution of all kinds of immaterial qualities and activities, such as agency, the capacity to act or afford human-thing entanglement, to objects.

One of the refreshing results of the material turn, to use this umbrella term for this new paradigm, for Mediterranean archaeology is that it has created the

space for a revival of what had become a very discredited discipline: Classical archaeology. As a result of the relinquishing of Marxist, socialist or other politically inspired rejections of the Classical as a norm, and the general acceptance of a rethinking of the relation between the Greek and Roman worlds, and other parts of Europe, North Africa and the Near East, it has become far less ideologically fraught to return to Classical archaeology from this new perspective. This part of archaeology is also one of the most productive because it has become a territory where all disciplines working on Graeco-Roman material, including art-history or anthropology, can meet.

The diversity of Classical archaeology illustrates this very well. It is the *ouverture* in a new series of studies in Classical archaeology, meant to showcase the liveliness, innovation and diversity of this field at present, and does so ably. It revisits founding fathers, such as Winckelmann, and founding themes such as polychromy, and offers arguments for the breaking down of barriers between archaeology and economics, numismatics and cognitive psychology. The volume also includes a case study on Gandhara to argue for the geographic extension of Classical archaeology, and a section on art and material culture. It is a useful overview of current developments in this field, but does not address in a systematic manner the concepts, methods and conflicts at work in this new paradigm.

The book by Ellen Swift, *Roman artefacts and society. Design, behaviour and experience*, is an extremely thorough, well-documented and consistent attempt to apply design theory to Roman artefacts. It addresses a range of themes, including: the relations between forms of objects and their uses, those between their material properties and social behaviour; cultural traditions and social experience; the information that object design can provide about intended users; and finally the ways in which aspects of production affect human relationships with objects. Swift takes as her case

* Department for the History of Art, University of Cambridge, 1 Scroope Terrace, Cambridge CB2 1PX, UK (Email: cav35@cam.ac.uk)

studies everyday objects produced in large quantities such as spoons, key rings, dice, pens or shears—these are mainly anonymous objects made to be regularly handled in daily life, of no exceptional artistic or aesthetic value. In the absence of information about makers, patrons, commissions, prices or sales conditions, or any substantial textual contextualisation, the author develops an artefactual analysis whose key concepts are function, affordance and design, defined as the production of an object in relation to a social context of use and the needs of users (p. 4). This making is a collaborative process, building on tradition, and benefiting from feedback between makers and users. The result is a very close analysis of the shapes of these groups of artefacts in terms of function, use and affordance. The experience mentioned in the title is not some conscious reflection, by makers or users, of their using key rings or pens, but a reconstruction of their use as conditioned by the material and functional affordance of their design. In other words, experience, with its connotations of conscious awareness, should here be taken rather as the perception or physical handling of artefacts.

Swift's book is challenging in its decision to ignore almost completely the long tradition in art-history on style. In fact, her book does not mention style at all, whereas this was the heading under which, from Aristotle and Cicero onwards, the design of artefacts was analysed, based on the distinctions between form and matter, or *res* and *verba*. There is also no mention of the studies by Alois Riegl on style, or the art industry of late Roman Antiquity, an omission given that he was one of the first to grapple with the problem of how to analyse the relations between the design and use of artefacts produced in large quantities and surviving without much contextual evidence. This has to do, I believe, with Swift's decision, adhered to with admirable consistency, to consider the design of artefacts only in relation to use and experience from the perspective of the objects and how they can be said to shape human behaviour. The art-historical tradition of stylistic analysis had very different aims, namely chronological classification, attribution and aesthetic appraisal, all of which are connected to immaterial ideas about artistic excellence, the social, moral and religious values of artefacts, the values of materials or the importance of what was perceived as truth to them. The artefacts in Swift's book are made, used and sometimes act in a world that appears to consist entirely of objects and their affordances.

The books by Lichtenberger and Raja, and Swift show a range of methods that are all part of the material turn at work, but *Materialising Roman histories*, edited by Astrid van Oyen and Martin Pitts, presents itself rather as a methodological manifesto of this emerging paradigm. It attempts to redefine not just Roman archaeology, but also to understand human culture, defined here as material culture, through the artefact. In the Introduction, Van Oyen and Pitts set out this programme with admirable concision. The three main parts of the book articulate in a very logical way three key elements of their argument: rethinking representation, which they need to do because they reject the tradition of considering artefacts as representations of the society that produced them; standardisation, as it forces one to rethink ways of categorising objects; and the last part, on matter, sets out to show what it means to go beyond representation. All three parts include case studies and more analytical essays by discussants. The ultimate aim of the book is to reconsider traditional representational and instrumental readings of objects in Roman archaeology, to investigate what objects did in the Roman world and how this changes historical narratives. As a result of this organisation, the book has a coherence that one rarely finds in volumes resulting from seminars.

One of the core issues in this ambitious intellectual project is representation. A very interesting slippage, or perhaps one should call it productive ambiguity, takes place in the way this concept figures in the book. The Introduction's opening salvo is a rejection of the traditional approaches to the archaeology of the Roman imperial period; the cultural-historical equation between objects and people, in which objects represent people, or, by extension, status or group identity. Here, representation is used in the sense of a *pars pro toto* or synecdoche. The authors rightly reject this view of material culture. But as the Introduction proceeds, representation is gradually used in a much wider sense of standing in for, signifying, meaning or referring to something outside the object, whether another object, a living being, a situation or a mental event. But this much wider notion of representation is not discussed, and can certainly not be dismissed as easily as the much more limited synecdochal variety.

A second slippage occurs when another main principle of the material turn is discussed, namely its questioning of a radical, absolute distinction between living beings and inanimate objects. To investigate

what Roman artefacts *did* is one of the main aims of this book. The authors cite the work of Malafouris, Ingold and Gibson to problematise a clear-cut boundary between humans and their environment, or between humans and things, citing examples of anthropologists recounting how in some societies “rocks can be people, or jaguars can be people” (p. 10). Even though van Oyen and Pitts prefer to move away from the question of what objects are to the question of what they do, this passage shows a tendency to elide, or confuse, the phenomenological and the ontological. Things may appear to be able to act and exercise agency; for instance, when one billiard ball appears to push away another one, but the underlying ontology is one of cause and effect, not of intention, will and action. The anthropological aspect here is that phenomenology can vary with each culture but the underlying metaphysics do not. As a consequence, an investigation of what Roman artefacts did cannot concentrate only on tracing the physical trajectory of objects. To understand not only

the movements of objects but also their impact on Roman society, the phenomenal world of their perception and experience needs to be included.

Taken together, these three books well illustrate the renewed productivity brought to the study of Graeco-Roman archaeology by the material turn. Its radical ambition to rethink completely how objects can be said to shape culture, in their individual life cycle of design, production, use and destruction, as well as in their *longue durée* trajectories through time and place, generates enormous intellectual energy. At the same time, as the books by Swift and by van Oyen and Pitts show particularly well, it may not be tenable in the end to do away completely with the realm of representation. Understanding Roman material culture through the trajectories of objects and the object-scapes that they create is not the greatest challenge. That would be to integrate the materialist ontology of artefacts on the move with the phenomenology of how they shape the world of which they are part.