

Art and Death in late Antiquity

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Introduction

If there were one central concept I could use to summarize ancient art as I have now come to know it – it would be that art functioned and revolved primarily around death and afterlife, as well as the adoration of deities which would impact the quality of afterlife. From the Mesopotamian ziggurats, Egyptian burial chambers, Greek temples, Etruscan tombs, and Roman catacombs, and even their functional or decorative architecture - all seemed to be adorned or filled with images relating somehow to cultural beliefs and conflicts, all of which affect the afterlife. In the Late Antiquity period, from about 200 to 500 CE, these same sort of beliefs came colliding together in the vast Roman Empire as a hodge podge of ideas and beliefs that incorporated (and rejected at the same time) Pagan, Jewish and emerging Christian concepts.

In addressing this proposition, I'll discuss 3 words (and concepts) that have been added to my inventory:

1. Prefiguration
2. Typology
3. Ateliers

1. Prefiguration

Definition - Prefiguration in the context of this period of art is the belief and acceptance that the events of the OT foretold events that would occur in the future. And specifically that the birth, life, death, and aftermath of Jesus was predicted in the OT. Accordingly, the story of Adam and Eve represented the “original sin” and that sin foretold Christ’s sacrifice to atone for and save all humanity. The story of Jonah and the whale, being swallowed and then spewed out of the whale 3 days later, prophesied the death and resurrection of Christ 3 days later. Abraham taking his only son, Isaac, to the altar to sacrifice his life to God was the prediction for Christ’s sacrifice and crucifixion, and acceptance as the son of God. All of these and more, made sensible, obvious and mandatory fodder for burial art, especially as belief in monotheism evolved.

Evolution - This idea of prefiguration is a Christian concept. As Christianity started to evolve, believers depended on oral history to convey the basic tenet and ideas of what was to become the basis of that religion. Probably by around 200 CE, the NT was in written form. The OT, upon which writers of the NT relied, was not written down till probably in the 700-200 BCE timeframe, although the events it recorded based on oral history occurred many centuries before.

Contemporary thoughts – While pondering this concept and to try to put some of this in perspective, I think about what people know today vs. what was known and accepted at the take-off of Christianity. While some take the OT literally and as the undisputed Word of God, we know today there is solid substantiation that the OT (and NT) was written by many authors over many years, and in many different styles. Anachronisms and scientific historical evidence have challenged the accuracy of the events described. Camels were not domesticated till way beyond the period of Abraham’s times. There is no physical evidence of 40 years of Israelite’s wanderings in the Sinai. Noah’s Ark, Jonah and the Whale, and a host of retellings are now interpreted by many as meaning to teach moral lessons and not necessarily be a literal happening. To complicate matters more, when translations of the bible were made from Hebrew into Greek about this time, errors in translation were made, causing lasting misunderstanding, prejudice, and mistrust.

Roman Culture - But, whether or not one considers the Testaments literally, the culture existing in Rome as emerging monotheism was displacing polytheism, was to promote and incorporate these prefiguration-based biblical prophecies as they knew them without questioning, into their art work during the Late Antiquity period. The integration of these various and changing religious beliefs

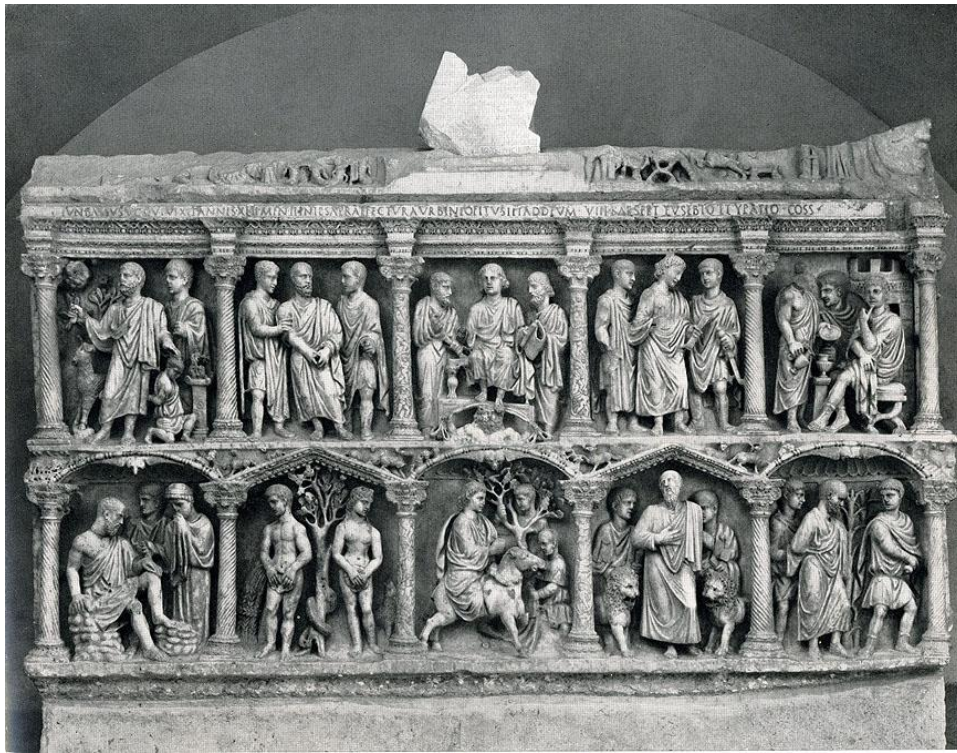
formed the core of their art work, particularly with funerary art and the application of these subjects in the growing popularity of catacombs and sarcophagi. It's understandable that this conglomeration of emerging and sometimes conflicting ideas and cultures would impact the way art was defined and executed for many years.

2. Typology

The Next Step - Carrying this idea of prefiguration to its next logical level, artisans would now include images from both the OT and NT, as well as bits and pieces of Roman Mythology into their repertoire. And as citizens crossed over, willingly or not to Christianity, combinations of old Roman beliefs, and OT and NT beliefs could be logically integrated into a single piece of art.

Contemporary Thoughts - Again, as a way of picturing this in today's environment I think about just as today's Crypto-Jews of New Mexico, who have wondered why their grandmother always lit candles on Friday night or why they were not served pork at home, now discover when exploring the roots of their Catholic upbringing they conclude their ancestors had converted years before, and yet retained some of the same customs of their earlier belief in Judaism. Maybe a loose example of Typology? So in Roman times, perhaps to respect the past, plus to acknowledge prefiguration, and maybe even increase the odds of a fruitful resurrection and afterlife, a combination of these religious concepts would be collocated into artistic representations on sarcophagi.

Execution - A prime example of typology is the Junius Bassus Sarcophagus, a multifaceted well planned scheme incorporating Jewish, Roman, and Christian ideas of the time. The Roman Columns and arches, and orderly "registers" with scenes reflecting Roman society and hierarchy are cleverly assimilated with scenes from the OT and NT. Junius Bassus was a high placed senator in Rome, and was baptized near his death as was the practice of the day. So his family was conscious of keeping motifs and subjects common to and respectful of Roman art in his sarcophagus. There's little argument that what I like to think of as a smorgasbord of intertwined images is spectacular, and is widely considered to be the finest example of relief art of the late Antiquity period.



Interpretation - Some examples of how this was carried out on this sarcophagus include:

- Roman culture - The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on a donkey mirrors the Roman art depictions of triumphal emperors entering a city. The attire and style of clothing with lavish details in the folds is in keeping with Roman formulas for art. The depiction of Jesus sitting on a throne echoes the portrayals of emperors on their thrones.
- Old Testament References - Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of knowledge, and Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac, his son, are included as references to the OT.
- Allusions to Roman Mythology - Reference to Caelus, God of the Sky from Roman Mythology is made by the figure holding a veil. And the Anemoi, Roman God of the Wind is depicted under Christ's feet in the central panel.

All of these allusions integrated into a common piece of artwork made perfect sense to the times.

Roman Culture - In any case, at this transitional point in time, working artisans needed to juggle the varying beliefs of their customers in executing their portrayals including OT and NT scenes. They typically depicted Jesus as youthful and clean shaven. Many reliefs of this period showed bodies somewhat stocky with somewhat large heads proportion wise. It would be later that Jesus was shown bearded and with a halo. So while Roman politicians and society were trying to sort out their relationship with Christianity, so were the artists and patrons of sarcophagi. To this end, Typology played an important role not only in the art of Sarcophagi, but also early Christian mosaics, and paintings.

3. Ateliers

How - While our study of ancient art has focused clearly on discussing the “when, where, who, and why” what I have been personally sorely missing is the “how.” How have these amazing and sometimes monumental works of art been created? What tools, techniques, manpower, skills, training, design standards, materials, and organization, did it take to create these pieces? (Having been trained in printmaking, painting, pastels, etc., I look at a piece of artwork not only for its content and meaning, but just as much – if not more - as to what techniques and process were used to produce it.) I understand that only so many words and images can be stuffed into a text book, so I am going to explore the aspect of “How” the artists of this period executed the design and construction of Sarcophagi, and what was involved in the process. And Ateliers are the key.

Atelier Organization – The most basic aspect of the Sarcophagi story is that it literally took a village to produce the higher quality and intricately designed and sculpted boxes. Ateliers in the Roman Empire were highly organized and specialized workshops that were set up specifically to design and create sarcophagi. It was a large well-established industry. Generally they consisted of free men and as each artisan served his harsh apprenticeship, he then moved up in the hierarchy. Ateliers were often family businesses where the craft was passed down through generations. The Roman ability to organize and build monumental sculptures no doubt enabled smaller enterprises to do the same. As the popularity of inhumation increased, Ateliers flourished. Eventually, the Sarcophagus trade became so big that workshops came under the control of the Government. In some cases, a renowned artist from an Atelier might be commissioned to were commissioned to travel to certain areas to finish off deigns.

Logisitcs - Obtaining material from quarries was a major logistical challenge. Originally limestone was used for the coffins. . Limestone would decompose the enclosed bodies. The word "sarcophagus" derives from the use of limestone in that it comes from the Greek "flesh" and "to eat." As embalming techniques improved, carvers used stone and finally marble to execute their designs. Production became centered on the quarries where the sarcophagi boxes and lids were rough carved on the spot in standardized forms and dimensions. This could also include some standardized patterns and design elements such as garlands and leaves. The ateliers would then finish off the boxes to their customers' specs. Transportation was a major factor, and the “San Pietro in Bevagna” Shipwreck where 22 partially carved marble sarcophagi were discovered off the coast of Italy in recent years. In the case of *Sarcophagus with the Myth of Dionysus and Adriana* the marble came from the Marmara Quarry in Turkey.

Off-the-shelf Production - the notion that the ateliers operated as assembly line workshops can be pretty much concluded. Designs were completed up to a certain degree, and then customized for the inhabitant of the box. In some cases the patron would arrange for the details before his death, other times, not so. In any event, the ateliers had a stock of partially finished stone ready to be customized at a moment's notice. And sometimes a sale that would fall through or a box that had not been paid for, could be modified to fit the needs of a new paying customer. Also, sometimes stone pieces intended for use in another application could be retooled and used for a sarcophagus. In the *Dionysus and Adriana* piece in Baltimore, the back of the sarcophagus has sketches of horse's heads and some incised circles and guidelines from a previous design. It could have been originally intended as a chest. Unfinished Portraits have been a particular topic of interest. There are several theories about the reasons for the roughly 30% of sarcophagi found having "blank" unfinished faces of the intended occupant. These include:

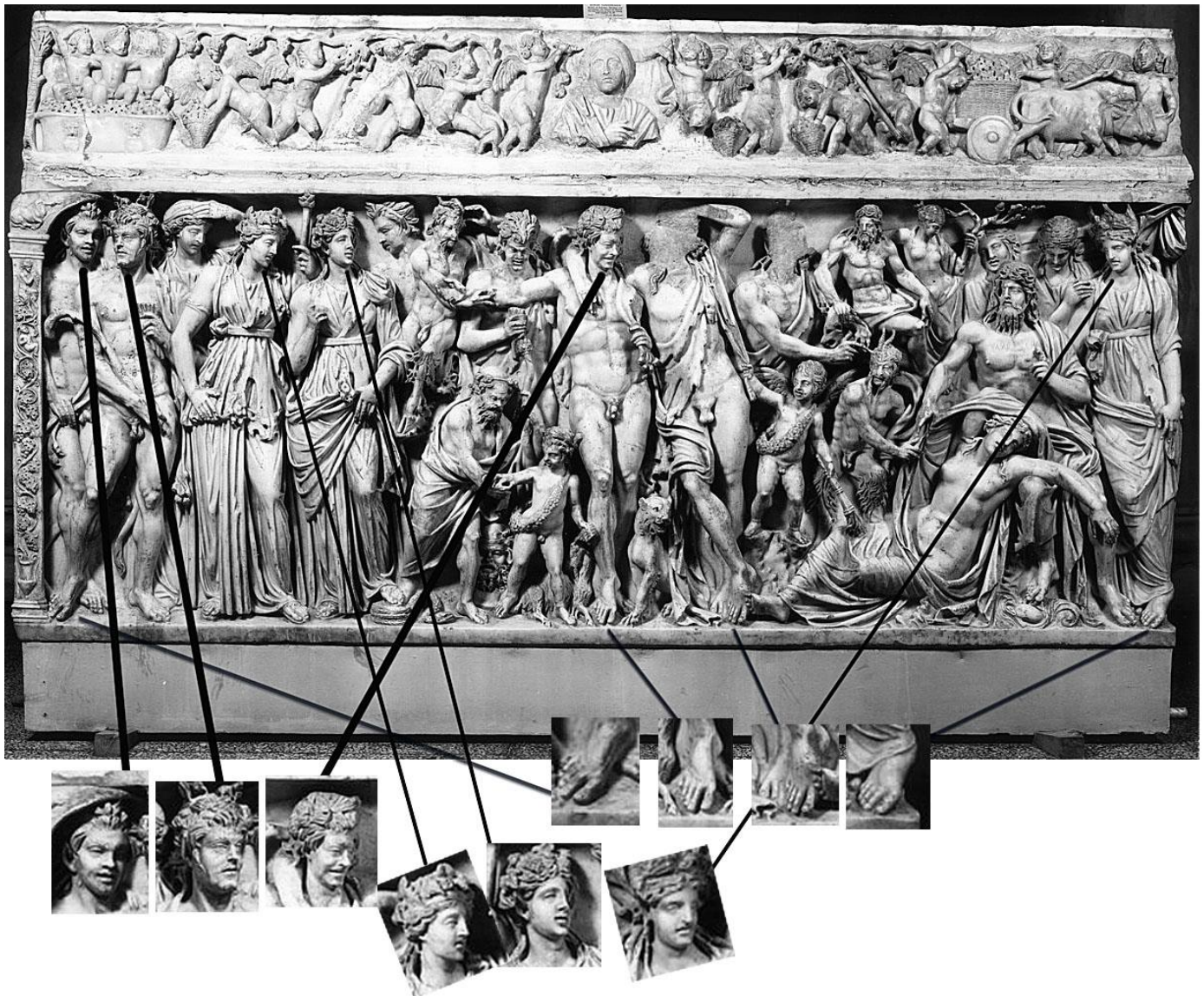
- The heirs could not afford to have it finished off. (Most common supposition – but not necessarily so)
- The patron needed to be interred and positioned too quickly to finish off the portrait
- The patron just simply did not want his own image on the sarcophagus
- The heirs did not want to have the face carved on purpose – wanted to have the image of their loved one left unfinished for religious or other reasons.
- Some Sarcophagi would have two or even more occupants (maybe a whole family) and therefore impractical to individualize faces.
- The sarcophagus was already in position in the catacombs and could not be accessed or moved for carving a new occupant being added to it.

Sarcophagus with the Myth of Dionysus and Adriana

I'm going to finish up my discussion of ateliers with this piece. In this piece neither prefiguration nor typology are a factor. It's purely Roman Mythology. Images of Dionysus were commonly used to invoke a sense of celebration and also to dismiss the woes and cares of the world. In this case it shows Dionysus surrounded by his attendants and satyrs, and several mythological and allegorical figures, getting ready to save Ariadne whose head is resting on Thanatos, god of death. The theme of celebration and overcoming death would be a good message to send off the patrons to their afterlife in this Sarcophagus made for two.

Specialization of Labor

To wrap up my discussion, I'll finish with what really set me off on this whole quest of "How." When I looked at this image, something bothered me. I eventually recognized what it was. The female faces/with long straight noses all looked identical. Same with the male faces and tiny scrunched up ski-hill noses. And oddly placed feet with enormous long toes. Same for the six-packs, robes, and so forth. My conclusion was that there must be artists sculpting only feet, only robes, only faces, etc. To check this out, I used my rusty Photoshop skills to look more closely, and verify and demonstrate my theory. Looking at the image below, I "pulled out" some faces and feet to place them side by side. (Please note, I had to "flip" a couple of the faces just to get them in a side by side comparison.) It is clear that Artist A does female faces only. Artist B does male faces only and Artist C does feet only. And they each do their specialty in their unique style. I was delighted to find validation of my conclusion, in an article by T.M.Kristensen, *Ateliers and Artisans in Roman Art & Archeology* that "workers in an atelier specialized in carving particular features on sculptures and sarcophagi." In order to create such a complicated piece of work, many hands needed to be involved, and the organized division of labor was one way to accomplish this.



Some sources I used:

Ateliers and Artisans in Roman Art & Archeology, T.M.Kristensen,

The Economics of the Roman Stone Trade, Ben Russell

The Sarcophagi from the wreck of San Pietro in Bevagna, Roberto Petriaggi, Barbara Davidd

Walters Art Museum, Baltimore Website

Louvre Website

Metropolitan Museum of Art Website