The visual culture and the classics: an interview with Jaś Elsner*

A cultura visual e os estudos clássicos: uma entrevista com Jaś Elsner

Jaś Elsner
Interviewee

Edjalma Nepomoceno Pina
Interviewer

John Richard Elsner, better known as Jaś Elsner, holds a PhD in Art History from King's College Cambridge (1991). Since 2014, he has been a professor of Late Antique Art History at the Faculty of Classics at Oxford, where he has also been a senior researcher in Classical Archaeology and Art since 1999. From 2003 to 2013, he served as a regular visiting professor of Art History at the University of Chicago, where he was a founding member of the Centre for Global Ancient Art. Throughout his career, Elsner has been elected to several renowned associations, such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2009), Humboldt University (2015-16), the British Academy (2017), and the Max Planck Society, affiliated with the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence (2019). As can be inferred from his professional trajectory, the focus of his research is on the visual culture of Antiquity, a subject on which he has a vast array of publications. His major contributions include the books *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (1995); *The Art of the Roman Empire A.D. 100-450* (1998); *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (2007); *Comparativism in Art History* (2017); *Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity: Histories of Art and Religion from India to Ireland* (2020); and E*urocentric and Beyond: Art History, the Global Turn and the Possibilities of Comparison* (2022). Through these and various other works, Professor Elsner has established himself as a prominent figure in the field of Art History and Cultural Studies. In recent years, his research has revolved around issues involving the comparison between Eastern and Western artistic expressions, addressing challenges related to Eurocentrism and Christocentrism in the historiography of Ancient and Medieval art.

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1. *Edjalma Nepomoceno Pina: Professor Elsner, as we begin this interview, could you kindly share some insights into what initially piqued your interest and led you to engage with the studies of Roman visual culture?*

A.: I began my academic career as a BA student in Classical Philology and then went on to do a Masters course in the history of art. These two interests – which have broadly dominated my working life as a scholar – come together in my doctorate in an ancient history department on the complex world of Roman visuality as well as its receptions at later times within the history of European culture and its developments elsewhere in the world. Of course, we must never imagine that the field of Roman visual culture, for all its richness, is complete in itself. It cannot be imagined without the range of sociologies and cultural constructions that affected all aspects of the senses and the material sphere in its time. Also, in so many ways, it can only be understood by contrast and comparison with the development of visual culture in other parts of the world and other cultural contexts, both in ancient times and in more recent ones. Here the question of archaeology as a very serious determinant of the empirical means and by which we may understand the ancient world – be that China or India or pre-Columbian Meso-America – as well as Greco-Roman antiquity is immensely significant.

2. *Would you briefly speak to our readers about the contribution of visual culture to our understanding of the ancient societies?*

A.: There has been a longstanding tradition of relying mainly on texts to understand the ancient world. These include not only written sources, whether transmitted by a mediaeval manuscript tradition or from papyri contemporary with the ancient world, but also epigraphic documents. The study of art and archaeology was traditionally secondary and indeed ancillary to the written text. This has changed in the last few decades, and we might argue that visual culture represents the fusion of the two traditions – attempting to understand how the mental and imaginary space (shared by individuals, viewers and participants within ancient culture) was employed to make sense of the material and social world. In this sense, I think visual culture is extremely important not only for art history or archaeology narrowly conceived but for a much deeper and broader understanding of cultural life at any time and context, but of course including the ancient world.

3. *In the course of your career, you have actively engaged with a range of visual sources, including paintings, mosaics, reliefs, artifacts and monuments, often simultaneously.*

Could you shed light on the most significant challenge you have encountered in effectively integrating these diverse sources?

A.: I would say that the greatest challenge for visual culture is fully to understand and command the problem of combining textual with visual evidence of all kinds. It is of course true that different kinds of visual evidence give rise to very different sorts of problems; for example, so much of what we know of the paintings of Pompeii comes from the imagination of 19th century draughtsmen and restorers who give us access to so much that is now lost, but from the problematic perspective of their own taste and interpretations (which are usually not the same as ours). This is a question of looking through the history of reception back towards some kind of best guess as to what ancient evidence really looked like! But this kind of issue, often quite technical when it comes to restoring lost elements of iconography by comparison with other monuments, for instance, is far less complex methodologically than the near impossible marriage of evidence that exists in entirely different media – that is, visual and textual. We cannot for example even be absolutely certain whether the names of kinds of rooms in Roman houses (such as *cubiculum* or *triclinium*) really do map onto the spaces that we designate in this way in the archaeology. But the study of visual culture does demand that we put the two kinds of evidence *together*, examined with all the technical skills needed to elucidate the best insights from each.

4. *Archaeological remains that we currently classify as "art" may have held distinct meanings in ancient times. Bearing it in mind, please provide a brief comment on your definition of "art" within Roman society.*

A.: I think the use of the term 'art' is very problematic because it implies so many deep philosophical assumptions made by centuries of European aesthetic thinking – effectively from Plato and Aristotle via Kant to such dominant and controversial modern figures as Heidegger. But little of that is relevant to the visual materials produced and used by the majority of people in the Greek and Roman worlds. On the other hand, especially within religious culture, there was a consistent worry about questions of mimesis in relation to falsehood which affected not only Platonists but also Jews and Christians. These issues came to a climax, using a vocabulary entirely inherited from the Greco-Roman world, in the period of Byzantine Iconoclasm in the 8th and 9th centuries CE. So we need to be aware that 'art' always had the potential to challenge its viewers existentially, because a given object might have been a deity with agency or power to intervene in its viewer's

world, or because it played on one's sense of what is true, false or real. These problems – no less an issue for much visual production in the modern world than it was in antiquity – means we need to avoid a simplistic or reductive definition of art, but rather maintain a capacious approach to the term. Yet we cannot strip it from aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) baggage, because the idea of art was always in some respects and some contexts touched by this. I am very struck by the fact that Justinian's law code of the sixth century, drawing on much older legal cases from the Roman world, determined that whoever may have owned a piece of wood, the value of it having been painted by the brush of an Apelles or Zeuxis changed its ownership to the person who owned the painting rather than the wooden panel. This is unlike the normal workings of ownership in Roman law and says much about the status and value of art.

5. *In your Ph.D. thesis, published as a book titled 'Art and the Roman viewer', You have studied extensively the changes that occurred in artistic expressions from the Principate to Late Antiquity. In general terms, which of these changes do you consider the most significant?*

A.: In my book I argued that the changes away from naturalism towards relatively more abstract or symbolic forms, which had of course been observed by so many scholars before me, were in a certain sense dependent on the changing visual culture in the context of the rising religious dominance by Christianity, which unlike the polytheist religions of antiquity was exclusivist and profoundly intolerant but at the same time brilliantly inventive of multiple symbolic meanings that could resonate within relatively simple juxtapositions of image types. In this sense, the book is an argument around what I still believe to be the biggest and most complex historical question posed to us by antiquity, which is how a world of consistent multiple pluralisms and localisms in its religious life (something equally true of pre-imperial and imperial systems across Eurasia) should – in the course of less than a century from Constantine's conquest of Rome in 312 CE to the Theodosian legislation that banned all forms of pagan practise in the 380s – have come to a complete end. If that question were simply a matter of fact, it might be unimportant. But it is not only a most unusual and swift kind of change; it is also profoundly ancestral to European culture, its exclusivisms, prejudices and intolerances, as well as many of its special values and qualities.

6. *In the last years, we have witnessed significant advancements in technologies that enable us to identify pigment traces in ancient statues. These traces are then analyzed alongside imagery and textual sources to determine the original appearance of these sculptures. How*

would you measure the impact of reconstructing the colors of Greco-Roman statues on our understanding of art in those societies?

A.: I rather think most of the attempts to restore ancient color to marble statuary are horrible! Now since I think the use of pigment in mosaics or such wall paintings as survive is generally extremely impressive, even masterly, in works that were probably never intended for a much higher level than the sub-elite (at least insofar as what survives from Pompeii and Herculaneum for instance), that does make me doubt the current fetish and the crudity of reconstructed pigments. On the other hand, I have no doubt that the believers in the colour of statuary have a point that the ancient world was not white when it came to its sculptures.

7. *In your contribution to the anthology 'Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon's Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam', edited by Simon Swan (2007), you examine how the ideas of Polemon's physiognomy extend beyond his treatises and manifest in the visual culture of the Roman Empire. Would you provide an overview of the considerations one should take into account when studying the relationship between physiognomy and art in the Roman tradition?*

A.: We need to be careful to distinguish physiognomy (in the sense of the human form and, in particular, its idealised versions that followed the Polyclitan canon) from physiognomics as a brilliant polemical tool in ancient rhetoric that was codified and promulgated by the sophist Polemo in the 130s. I have little doubt however that Polemo proved immensely influential on later writers about art – probably on Lucian (writing in the later second century) and especially on the greatest of all ancient texts on images, the *Imagines* of Philostratus (and also his *Heroicus*), written in the early third century. When it comes to physiognomy, I think it best to regard the ideal nude body (both male and female) as so often represented in Roman painting and sculpture as effectively another form of dress, like the toga or the chiton, into which a portrait or an ideal-typical head and series of attributes could be attached. This is important because we need to understand ancient physiognomy as less concerned with individuality or identity than in the current world – where the horrors of the doctored photography of super-slim models have wreaked havoc on the mental health of so many young people who have mistakenly learned to identify with particular extreme idealizations of the body as if they were normative and desirable.

8. *From 2013 to 2017, you led the 'Empires of Faith' project, which involved esteemed institutions such as the British Museum, the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), and the Leverhulme Trust, alongside a team of dedicated researchers. The aim of the project was to investigate various religious systems through the analysis of data provided by art, going beyond the conventional emphasis on written texts. Would you give us some conclusions derived from this project?*

A.: The Empires of Faith Project was an extraordinary opportunity for me to work in depth between a wonderful museum and a great university. Its focus took me well beyond classical antiquity into the arts and cultures of Eurasia across the first Millennium of the common era. What we found as a group of exploring researchers was that many cultures with different linguistic and religious ways of expression across this vast space adopted similar practices of revising and reformulating ancient iconographies and modes of image making into new models of religion. The religions created or reformulated in this long period – including some polytheistic cults like that of Mithras, post-Temple Judaism, all forms of Christianity (and we should not forget the non-hegemonic forms that thrived from Mesopotamia to China), all kinds of Islam, many developments within the religions of India (especially Jainism, Buddhism and the cults that later came to be called Hinduism) as well as religions now no longer extant like Manichaeism -- were at least in part and to some extent determined by their visual culture as well as by Scriptures. The world of visual determination is very different from that of texts because it is more broadly inclusive rather than exclusive, relatively less apologetic and polemical, always capable of visual syncretism in the sense of borrowing successful iconographies or image types -- indeed, you might say that such borrowing is its key feature. I think our main finding was that, at the level of general principles, the development of religions and especially their visual cultures across Eurasia and across the first Millennium has much more in common than might have been expected. That means methodologically that it enables a series of potential comparative exercises between religious cultures and their visual worlds, that could cast light on their sociological, theological and political underpinnings. At the same time, since the religious changes of this period supply the basis for the 'world religions' as they now exist, and as they animated nationalistic and imperialist identities in the last two centuries, as well as post-colonialist responses to the collapse of empire, these pasts are endlessly contested and appropriated by the changing, tendentious claims of the present. We cannot trust the claims made about the origins or nature of these religions or their art, since they are always inevitably partial, ancestralist and genealogical in essence…

9. *During your participation in the 'OCAT Institute Annual Lecture Series' that took place in 2017, and more recently in the anthology 'Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity: Histories of Art and Religion from India to Ireland' (2020), you sustained the need to expand Art History beyond a Eurocentric perspective. Considering such idea, what would be the main challenge to develop comparative models that address non-European visual traditions in a fairer manner?*

A.: I think this is the fundamental and key question for the history of art in the next generation, and well beyond Greece and Rome. The biggest problem is that all our methods for doing the history of art -- including those so enthusiastically and successfully adopted in China or India today to pursue the art histories of their own cultures – are found upon the philological, philosophical and theoretical assumptions of the long history of the European tradition. That means art history (and of course not only art history but indeed all our disciplines as conceived by the western university system) is inherently Eurocentric. The only way to liberate the discipline would be to construct out of the long philosophical and linguistic systems of the variety of ancient literate cultures across Eurasia a set of languages that have historically described the fundamental concepts we so freely use (such as 'image', 'statue', 'sculpture', 'relief', 'monument' not to speak of 'art') as well as the different kinds of aesthetic judgements that define our tradition, in terms that are entirely indigenous to the different art traditions of all the cultures east of Byzantium. We have absolutely no studies in any depth of the rich indigenous understandings of or linguistic terminologies for, art objects or their aesthetic significances in the cultural worlds of Arabic, Syriac, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, Korean and so forth. If we had this material available to us, we would be able to understand the arts of Islam or India or China from their own perspectives and we would be able to use those discourses against our own to throw light on what is missing (from a non-Eurocentric perspective) in our own accounts not only of their art but of our own. This is not a project of 'decolonizing art history', as is the current obsession in many departments, because I do not think we can or should decolonize what is fundamentally imbricated historically within a series of imperial and colonial enterprises, which were in part about affirming the ancestral significance (and I'm sorry to say often supremacy) of the western tradition. I have absolutely no brief for any arguments about supremacy – in fact my recent work has been about Indian Buddhist art, which is at least as good as anything produced in the West. But I do think ancestralism is very important, although very risky, because unless we proceed with a respect for ourselves and for our past – however partial and limited that may be – then we have nothing to offer. Note that

the attempt to look at literate cultures, a vast enterprise requiring huge philological work to look across long histories of writing in the various relevant languages, is itself profoundly partial. It does not address the world of oral cultures and languages of aesthetics that were never written down, which characterises much of the arts of Africa and Australasia as well as the Americas. Here different kinds of methods will be needed – perhaps more akin to anthropology or to the kinds of archaeology which deal with worlds where there are no texts, such as the Neolithic.

10. *Throughout your extensive body of work, you have delved into numerous facets of Roman visual culture, including the intricate relationships between art and politics, religion, rhetoric, landscape, and more. As we conclude this interview, I would like to ask you if there is a specific aspect that you intend to further explore, one that has not been covered before?*

A.: The great excitement of studying the ancient world, from which perhaps only 1 or 2 % of what originally existed now remains, is that the story can always be told differently and will always be animated by the concerns of a new generation and a new time. So there is indeed much that has not been covered, some of it not even conceivable by us today! In my own work, I want to dwell more deeply on questions that arise from comparison -- in particular that between the transformation of Roman polytheistic culture to Christianity and the development of Buddhism out of the rich polytheistic world of Indian Brahmanic culture at broadly similar periods within antiquity. Both these phenomena are about religion and religious art, about formulating a new identity and new mythologies out of a rich well of ancient iconographies; both are about newly scriptural religions and their particular kinds of relations to visual culture; both developed remarkable forms of monasticism and religious asceticism; neither was in direct intellectual contact with the other (so far as we can tell) but there were many indirect contacts in particular through trade. There are very significant differences, especially in the fact that Buddhism was never exclusive of the other religions in its vicinity, while Christianity was not only intolerant of any other faith but was arguably even more intolerant of models of Christian belief that were considered heterodox. This goes with the fact that Christianity became the vehicle of an imperial state, whereas Buddhism was never the sole religion of any Kingdom or empire within which it flourished.

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