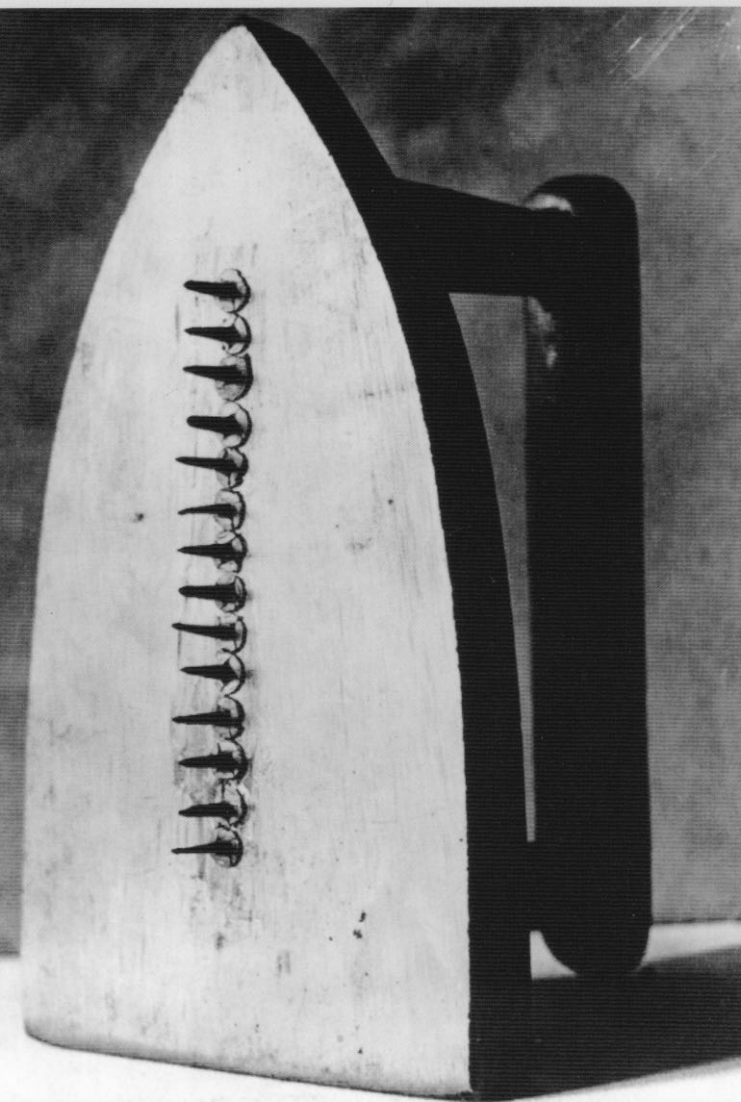


L A R R Y S H I N E R

The  
Invention  
of  
Art



A CULTURAL HISTORY

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## BEFORE FINE ART AND CRAFT

### Overview

IT IS COMFORTING to think that people in the past were “just like us” and to treat Homer’s *Iliad*, Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling, or Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* as if they were art in the modern sense. The next few chapters will show how misleading this practice can be—even though it is often reinforced by popular surveys and anthologies. Although I want to expose the bias of modernizing narratives and displays, I also want to do justice to the aspect of truth they contain. What is true in them is that one can indeed find scattered similarities in the past for the modern ideals and practices of fine art. What is false is to let these reassuring familiarities blind us to the enormous differences and create the illusion that the modern idea of art has always been with us. Obviously, the past leads to the present by many small steps, but there are points at which gradual changes finally coalesce to produce a rapid shift over a couple of generations. The issue is not whether we can find comments of Plato or gestures of Donatello that sound modern but, rather, how and when an older system of art/craft—an integrated complex of ideals, practices, and institutions—was replaced by a new system of fine art *versus* craft.

To show how decisive the break of the eighteenth century was, the following chapters will focus on the radical differences between our assumptions and the dominant conception and organization of the arts from ancient Greece to the mid-seventeenth century. Chapters 1 and 2 show that for over two thousand years Western culture had no word or concept of fine art, viewed the artisan/artist as a maker rather than creator, and generally treated statues, poems, and musical works as serving particular purposes rather than as existing primarily for themselves. There was neither fine art nor craft in the ancient world or the

Middle Ages but only arts, just as there were neither “artists” nor “artisans” but only artisan/artists who gave equal honor to skill and imagination, tradition and invention. Nor was there as sharp a break between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as once believed. In chapter 3, I explore some early signs of the modern idea of fine art in the Renaissance such as the rise in the status and image of painters and sculptors or the new emphasis on the ideal of the permanent literary “work.” But I also show that the arts and their makers in the Renaissance still operated within a patronage/commission system that destined most things for particular audiences, places, or functions, whether the paintings of Raphael or the plays of Shakespeare. The sixteenth century did see the beginning of several new practices (artist’s biographies, self-portraits), some new institutions (art academies), and some hints at new relations of production (a few collectors and art markets), yet the older way of conceiving and organizing the arts remained dominant. Chapter 4 explores the crucial period of transition toward the modern system of art in the seventeenth century. Although the status of painters and sculptors was still debated in most of Europe during the seventeenth century, a new prestige was conferred on writers by the monarchist states, and something like the modern category of literature began to emerge. At the same time, the rise of science and the further development of a market economy were undermining the intellectual and social basis of the old system of art, rendering the liberal arts/mechanical arts scheme obsolete and giving the idea of taste a larger role in the experience of the arts. Although the old system of art was beginning to break up, seventeenth-century societies still managed to hold together art and craft, artist and artisan, pleasure and purpose. We cannot resurrect the old system of art—it was tied to a hierarchical society of orders that will never return—but we might still have something to learn from it.

## The Greeks Had No Word for It

FOR MOST of us, going to a performance of *Antigone* is an “art” experience like going to the symphony or ballet on a Saturday night. But when the ancient Athenians first witnessed *Antigone*, they did so as part of a religious-political festival, the annual “City Dionysia.” Citizens received the price of a ticket from their township council and sat with their respective political “tribes” as they did at civic assemblies held in the same amphitheater. The priests of Dionysus, who performed sacrifices at an altar on the floor of the great amphitheater, sat in specially carved seats in the front row (fig. 2). The five-day festival opened with a great religious procession and ceremonies honoring the war dead, introducing war orphans raised at state expense, and recognizing Athen’s allies and their tribute money. Only then did the contests begin, featuring nine tragedies, three satyr plays, five comedies, and twenty choral hymns to Dionysus. The Roman theater was equally embedded in a religious-political context, and plays often accompanied civic games as “adjuncts to ceremonies that honored the gods and expressed communal solidarity and elation” (Gruen 1992, 221). In such contexts, as Winkler and Zeitlin say of Greek drama, “it seems wrong even to call them plays in the modern sense of the word” (1990, 4). It would be equally wrong to call them “fine art” in the modern sense.

### Art, *techne*, *ars*

In fact, the ancient Greeks, who had precise distinctions for so many things, had no word for what we call fine art. The word we often translate as “art” was *techne* which, like the Roman *ars*, included many things we would call “craft.” *Techne/ars* embraced things as diverse as carpentry and poetry, shoemaking and medicine, sculpture and horse breaking. In fact, *techne* and *ars* referred less to a class of objects than to the human ability to make and perform. Even so, generations of philosophers and historians have claimed that Greek and Roman society embraced a concept of fine art like ours even if they lacked the word. Yet the issue is not about the presence or absence of a word but about the

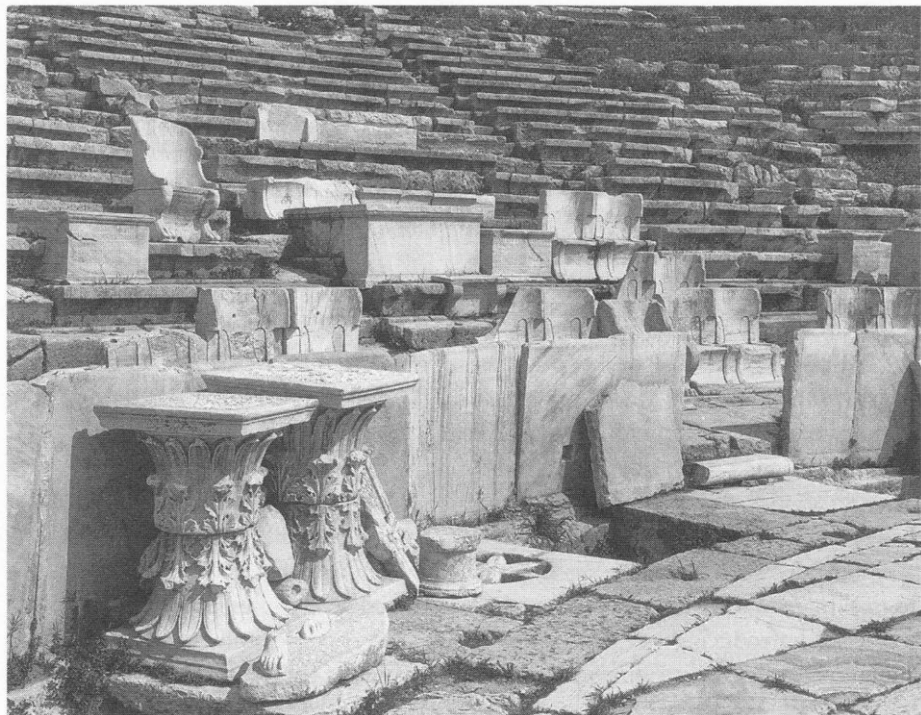


Figure 2. View of benches, Theater of Dionysus, Athens. Courtesy Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

interpretation of a body of evidence, and I believe there is massive evidence that the ancient Greeks and Romans had no category of fine art. Even the scattered statements or practices that seem similar to our own often turn out to have a different meaning when examined in context. However comforting the quest for precedents and origins, we have far more to learn from the profound differences between ancient attitudes and our own.

Since many philosophers and historians persist in anachronistically talking of Plato's or Aristotle's idea of fine art, we might begin by noting that neither Plato nor Aristotle—nor Greek society generally—treated painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, and music as belonging to a single, distinct category. Of course, there were many attempts to conceptually organize the human arts into subgroups, but none of them corresponded to our modern division into fine art versus craft (Tatarkiewicz 1970). The ancient practice, always cited as foreshadowing our idea of fine art, is the treatment of painting, epic, and tragedy as arts of imitation (*mimesis*). But in identifying a common property of imitation for

some arts, Plato and Aristotle did not spin them off as a fixed group; “mimetic arts” in Aristotle does not equal “fine arts” in the modern sense. For Aristotle, what painting and tragedy have in common as imitations does not separate them in their *procedures* from arts like shoemaking or medicine. As offensive as it may be to our postromantic sensibilities, Aristotle believed that the artisan/artist takes a particular raw material (human character/leather) and uses a particular set of ideas and procedures (plot/shoe form) to produce a product (tragedy/shoes). As J. J. Pollitt puts it, “In the mimetic arts the final forms, it is true, are images as well as objects, and this fact distinguishes them as a particular group; but Aristotle nowhere indicates that he thought of their *modus operandi* as different from that of other arts. . . . If he had felt that there was a special group of fine arts, it seems likely that Aristotle would have said so in a straightforward manner” (1974, 98). Although Plato’s famous attack on imitation in book 10 of the *Republic* treats poetry and painting together as imitative arts, Plato elsewhere classifies sophistry, magic tricks, and the miming of animal voices as imitative arts as well. Of course, neither Plato nor Aristotle simply equated everything that was the product of human art (*techne*), as if tragedies were situated no higher than farm tools or statues were no better than sandals (Roochnik 1996). But a hierarchy is not a polarity. After reviewing the arguments of scholars who keep trying to find a theory of fine art in Plato, Eric Havelock concluded that they do so “in defiance of the fact that neither ‘art’ nor ‘artist,’ as we use the words, is translatable into archaic or high-classical Greek” (1963, 33).<sup>1</sup>

If our modern category of fine art had no equivalent in the ancient world, neither did such components of it as “literature” or “music.” Although in late antiquity the term *litteratura* could occasionally be used to refer to a body of writings, “literature” certainly did not have the modern sense of a canon of creative writing. Rather, it connoted grammar or written learning in general. Erich Auerbach has argued that in imperial Rome there was a distinct “literary” or “high” language spoken and written by the small stratum of educated classes who were also the principal reciters/readers of texts. Yet those texts included not only poetry but also legal and ceremonial writings, and if the speakers and writers of this “High Latin” were often preoccupied with style, their cultivated “literary” writing was much broader than modern notions of a special realm of imaginative literature (Auerbach 1993).

Among the ancients the closest equivalent to our idea of literature was the category of poetry. Certainly, poetry held a much higher rank than any of the visual arts, partly because it was associated with upper-class education. As a result, ancient ideas of poetry do more closely resemble ours. Scholars who stress

the continuities between ancient and modern views of poetry have a number of favorite texts, such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, which distinguished tragic poetry as the imitation of an action from versified science and contrasted the universality of poetry with the particularity of history. But we should not exaggerate the parallel between Aristotle's distinctions and our own. The verb form for poetizing (*poein*), for example, means simply "to make" with none of our overtones of romantic creativity.

The only general classification of the arts in the ancient world that significantly resembled modern ideas was the late Hellenistic and Roman division of the arts into the liberal and vulgar (or "servile"). The vulgar arts were those that involved physical labor and/or payment, whereas the liberal or free arts were intellectual and appropriate to the highborn and educated. Although the category of free arts was not a rigid one, the core included the verbal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic and the mathematical arts of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Poetry was generally treated as a subdivision of grammar or rhetoric and music was included because of its educational function and its mathematical nature, as expounded by the Pythagorean tradition of the harmony of octave, soul, and cosmos. Yet the "music" envisaged as a liberal art was primarily the *science* of music, which explored theories of harmony; the skill of singing or playing an instrument was only considered a liberal art when it was part of upper-class education or recreation. Singing and playing at banquets for pay was part of the vulgar arts (Shapiro 1992). Some writers in antiquity added other arts to the core of seven, most frequently medicine, agriculture, mechanics, navigation, and gymnastics, although occasionally architecture or painting were added as well. More often, these additional arts were placed in a third category of "mixed arts," seen as combining liberal and servile elements. Thus, the liberal arts schemes of antiquity generally grouped poetry with grammar and rhetoric, music (theory) with mathematics and astronomy, and either consigned the visual arts and musical practice to the "servile" realm or joined them with things like agriculture and navigation as intermediate arts (Whitney 1990).

### The Artisan/Artist

If we turn to the ancient view of the "artist," we find that it was much closer to our idea of the craftsperson than to modern ideals of independence and originality. In painting and sculpture, as in carpentry and sailing, the Greek or Roman artisan/artist had to combine an intellectual grasp of principles with practical understanding, skill, and grace. In the ancient world, calling an activity "an

art” carried the kind of prestige that calling something “a science” does today. Hence, there were numerous treatises on the question, “Is X an art?” Writers from Hippocrates to Cicero distinguished between productive arts, like ship-building or sculpture, where a maker could guarantee a satisfactory product, and performance arts like medicine or rhetoric, where both knowledge and outcome were less certain. But these treatises did not develop a distinction between fine art and craft in our sense (Roochnik 1996).

Aristotle’s influential contrast of productive art (*techne*) and ethical wisdom (*phronesis*) exaggerated the calculating rationality of the artisan/artist with unfortunate effects on later theories of craft. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle defined productive *techne* as the “trained ability of making something under the guidance of rational thought” (1140.9–10). Yet the general meaning of *techne* for Greek culture was not so narrowly rationalist or “technical” as Aristotle’s formula suggests but included a dimension of spontaneous tact. This wider sense of *techne* as involving supple understanding had a parallel in the Greek notion of *metis*, the “cunning intelligence” of the hunter or of Homer’s Odysseus.<sup>2</sup> The ancient practitioners of various arts from medicine and military strategy to pottery making and poetry were neither “artisans” nor “artists” in the modern sense but artisan/artists: skilled and tactful practitioners.

What is strikingly absent in the ancient Greek view of the artisan/artist is our modern emphasis on imagination, originality, and autonomy. In a general way, imagination and innovation were appreciated as part of the craftsmanship of commissioned production for a purpose, but not in their emphatic modern sense.<sup>3</sup> Although the achievements of Greek naturalism in painting and sculpture of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. were much admired, for the most part painters and sculptors were still viewed as manual workers, and Plutarch said that no talented young aristocrat upon seeing and admiring the famous Zeus of Phidias would want to *be* Phidias (Burford 1972, 12). The broader Greek population did not always share this aristocratic disdain for artisan/artists and later on the status of (dead) Greek sculptors and painters was very high in some Roman circles, although what most ancients admired in sculptors and painters was their skill in producing convincing likenesses. Despite passages in Pliny or Cicero that show a greater respect for painters and sculptors, there remained a strong aristocratic prejudice against all manual production or performance for pay no matter how intelligent, skilled, or inspired it might be.

Of course, the preceding remarks about the somewhat low status of the makers of paintings or sculptures do not apply to the makers of speeches or poetry. The concept and figure of the poet was a complex one and went through many



permutations in the course of the nearly eight hundred years that separate Homer from Plutarch (Nagy 1989). At the beginning of this period, the notions of poet and prophet were not yet fully distinguished, although even when the two became separate, poets continued to receive commissions for festival hymns or victory odes (Pindar). Some philosophers and literary theorists have claimed that Plato's statement in the *Ion* that poetry is not rational production but irrational inspiration (not meant as a compliment) shows that the Greeks made an implicit distinction between a fine art of inspired genius and a mere craft of rules. This claim not only projects a modern depreciation of craft skill onto the past but also overlooks the fact that the formulas for invoking the Muses summon the divinities as much to infuse the writer with information, wisdom, and effective technique as with what we call inspiration (Gentili 1988). Late Greek and Roman allusions to the freedom of the poet should not be read as claims to independence or "romantic conceptions of creative imagination" (Halliwell 1989, 153). Nor should the revival of the Roman figure of the *vates* (priest-poet) by Virgil and Horace be seen through the haze of romantic ideas; Virgil and Horace used the *vates* notion in part to cover their role as patronized writers, in part as a stand-in for the idea of talent as the complement of technique. Yet technique (*ars*) remained absolutely central; Horace's *Art of Poetry* codified for subsequent centuries the doctrines of unity and appropriateness (*decorum*) and the need to polish incessantly.

In fact, the typical Roman writer of poetry was either an aristocratic amateur or a dependent who lived from patronage and rarely had complete freedom to choose themes or styles (Gold 1982). Roman patrons generally "expected poets, like house philosophers, to keep them company and provide distraction" (Fantham 1996, 78). Some poets provided distinguished distraction indeed, and Augustus's patronage manager, Maecenas, knew how to foster gratitude in writers like Virgil and Horace whose celebrations of the Emperor were tastefully indirect. Clearly, the figure of the poet stood far above that of the painters and sculptors who worked with their hands, yet the poet was also a figure quite different in both conception and practice from modern notions of the artist.<sup>4</sup>

## Beauty and Function

If the Greeks and Romans did not have our categories of fine art or the artist, did they perhaps look upon sculpture, poetry, or music with the kind of contemplative detachment we call aesthetic? There are two reasons to think not. First, most of the things we classify as Greek or Roman fine art were thoroughly embedded in social, political, religious, and practical contexts, such as the com-

petitive performance of tragedies at the Athenian festival to Dionysius. The Panathenaia festival, for example, included not only processions and rituals accompanied by music but also competitive recitations from Homer's epics and athletic contests for which the prizes were finely decorated jars of olive oil. A special feature of the Panathenaia was the presentation to Athena of a peplos woven by selected upper-class girls, a rectangular cloth, probably draped around a statue's shoulders, which depicted Athena leading the Olympians to victory over the giants (Neils 1992). Roman epic and lyric poetry were also tied to social contexts as a means of communication, persuasion, instruction, or recreation. The *Aeneid* was memorized and recited primarily not as a work of imaginative fine art in our sense but was used to teach correct grammar and fine style, to inculcate examples of civic virtue, and to show one's membership in the "educated" classes. Similarly, "music," in its broad ancient meaning (which included drama and the dance), was not something to listen to in a silent, aesthetic frame of mind but something to march to, to drink to, and, above all, to sing and play as an aid in memorization, communication, and religious ritual.

Apart from the many social functions of the Greek arts, a second reason there was little of the modern "aesthetic" attitude is that most Greeks and Romans admired sculptures or poetic recitals as they would have admired well-made political speeches—for their union of moral use with felicitous execution. As Martha Nussbaum puts it, "Poetry, visual art and music were all taken to have an ethical role, in virtue of their form as well as in virtue of their content" (1996, 1:175). The most famous example is Plato's argument in *The Republic* against certain meters in poetry and certain rhythms in music because of their effects on the soul. When Aristotle in the *Poetics* spoke of the pleasure derived from represented suffering he might seem to come closer to modern notions of the aesthetic. Yet Aristotle's focus was on the way tragedy combined pleasure with edification, and his famous comment about pity and fear leading to a catharsis seems to mean not only purgation and purification but also, above all, a "clarification," a clearing of the soul and deepening of moral understanding (Nussbaum 1986). Halliwell concludes simply that Aristotle had "no doctrine of an autonomous aesthetic pleasure" (1989, 162).

The visual arts were even more firmly embedded in functional contexts. Architecture, according to Vitruvius, depends equally on solidity, utility, and beauty. As for sculpture and painting, most of what we contemplate in our museums today were things of everyday or cult use: storage jars, drinking cups, votive statuary, funerary markers, parts of temples, fragments of house decoration. Even the free-standing statuary of ancient Greece that we contemplate aesthetically was made not to be admired as fine art but to serve various religious,

political, and social purposes (Barber 1990; Spivey 1996). John Boardman bluntly says of Greek attitudes toward the visual arts before the Hellenistic period: "‘Art for Art’s sake’ was virtually an unknown concept; there was neither a real Art Market nor Collectors; all art had a function and artists were suppliers of a commodity on a par with shoemakers" (1996, 16).

But what about beauty? The idea of beauty in the ancient world usually combined what our aesthetic theories have typically separated. "Beauty" (*kalon*) was a general term of commendation that applied to mind and character, customs and political systems as much as to form or physical appearance. Both the Greek *kalon* and the Latin *pulchrum* were often used simply to mean "morally good." Despite the emergence of a somewhat narrower idea of beauty as sensuous appearance among the Sophists, the broader sense of beauty remained dominant.<sup>5</sup> At the end of antiquity, Plotinus, and later Augustine, who did include sculpture, architecture, and music in their discussions of beauty, still placed these arts far below moral, intellectual, and spiritual beauty. Even in Plotinus’s influential treatise we are far from any notion of a set of fine arts united by a common internal principle and as sharply opposed to the crafts. Nor does Plotinus recommend a disinterested contemplation of art works as ends in themselves.<sup>6</sup> Although the ancients were "confronted with excellent works of art and quite susceptible to their charm, [they] were neither able nor eager to detach the aesthetic quality of these works of art from their intellectual, moral, religious and practical functioning or content, or to use such an aesthetic quality for grouping the fine arts together" (Kristeller 1990, 174).

But in the long Hellenistic period from the death of Alexander in 323 B.C.E. to the beginning of the Roman Empire with Augustus’s victory of 31 B.C.E., there is evidence that attitudes and behaviors more like ours began to appear among the upper classes and here and there even survived the triumph of Christianity. Some Alexandrine writers like Callimachus, for example, focused on poetic technique to the exclusion of moral purpose. And one can cite the claim of the Roman aristocrat Ovid (hoping to reverse Augustus’s decree of banishment) that poetry aims only at innocent pleasures. Quite apart from the fact that the pleasure alluded to here is not likely to have been the specifically disinterested pleasure of modern aesthetic theory, the views of writers like Callimachus and Ovid were hardly the norm. Instead, the mixture of "instruct and please" (*prodesse . . . delectare*) or "use and delight" (*utile dulci*) of Horace’s *Art of Poetry* remained the more typical attitude and was handed on to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

There were also some striking anticipations of modern ideas and practices with respect to the visual arts. When Roman armies had finished plundering

statuary and gold vessels from Greece, many prominent Romans began collecting and ordering copies of Greek works. Some historians have argued that this collecting and the art and antiquities market it produced, along with the Roman copying of statues or paintings by well-known Greek artisan/artists, implies that such works were now enjoyed for themselves as fine art.<sup>7</sup> The Emperor Hadrian, for example, was a passionate admirer and collector of Greek sculpture and an inspired patron of architecture, as the Tivoli gardens and the Pantheon attest. And one can certainly find in Cicero, Pliny, and other writers comments about painting and sculpture that have a modern ring. Yet much of the collecting and copying that occurred at this time had more to do with enrichment and prestige than with an interest in art for itself. And even in the late Hellenistic and Roman imperial era a good deal of Roman visual art was still produced as sociopolitical cult imagery, and the emergent mystery religions also subordinated images to religious purposes (Elsner 1995). The official recognition of Christianity in the fourth century and the subsequent destruction of the Roman Empire further reinforced the functionality of poetry, music, and visual images so that Europe would require another fifteen hundred years before the modern system of fine art and the aesthetic could be established.