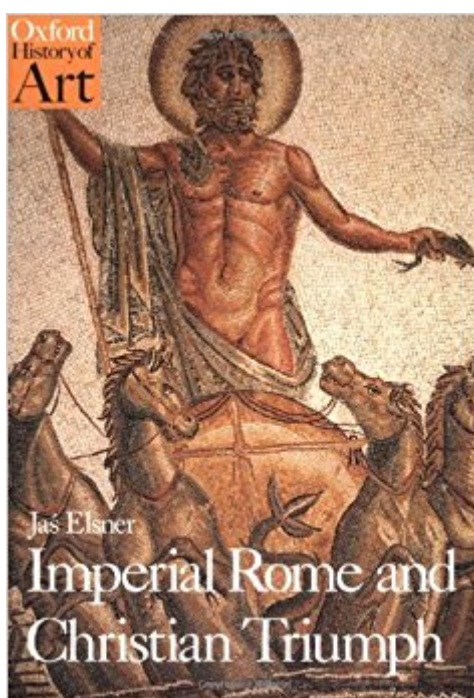


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# Imperial Rome And Christian Triumph: The Art Of The Roman Empire AD 100-450 (Oxford History Of Art)



## Synopsis

This stimulating book offers an exciting new approach to the twin themes of the arts of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christian art. Beginning in the second century, with its rich revival of ancient learning and artistic practices, and ending in the fifth with Christian narrative and liturgical cycles and the pilgrimage arts, this book explores the art of the Roman Empire by tackling two inter-related periods of internal transformation: the 'Second Sophistic' (c. ad 100-300), and the era of late antiquity (c. ad 250-450). For the first time, these two themes are treated together, throwing a more penetrating light on the radical change undergone by the empire in becoming a Christian imperium. Vases, murals, statues, and masonry are explored in relation to such issues as power, death, society, acculturation, and religion. By examining questions of reception, viewing, and the culture of spectacle alongside the more traditional art-historical themes of imperial patronage and stylistic change, Elsner presents a fresh and challenging account of a rich cultural crucible in which many developments of later European art had their origins.

## Book Information

Series: Oxford History of Art

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press (November 19, 1998)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0192842013

ISBN-13: 978-0192842015

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 0.7 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #282,262 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #73 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Design](#) #98 in [Books > Arts & Photography > History & Criticism > Themes > Religious](#) #430 in [Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Rome](#)

## Customer Reviews

a highly individual work ... wonderful visual and comparative analysis ... I can think of no other general book on Roman art that deals so elegantly and informatively with the theme of visuality and visual desire. Professor Natalie Boymel Kampen, Barnard College, New York exciting and original ... a vibrant impression of creative energy and innovation held in constant tension by the persistence of more traditional motifs and techniques. Elsner constantly surprises and intrigues the reader by

approaching familiar material in new ways. Professor Averil Cameron, Keble College, Oxford

Ja? Elsner is Lecturer in the History of Art at the Courtauld Institute, London.

Jas Elsner divides his text by topics, (1) images used to clarify imperial power, (2) and images defining family life, social status, and death. He explains the political and social importance of sculptures and images in representing the power and presence of both deities and emperors, stating that images were understood to, "have the same meaning as the gods themselves." "To behave incorrectly before a statue imbued with this kind of sanctity, or even to bring a coin with the imperial image on it into an inappropriate place, was dangerous." In his description of a marble portrait of Commodus (191-192 CE), Elsner poses the question, is Commodus dressed as Hercules, or is Hercules now embodied in Commodus? For Elsner, the first Christian millennium is not viewed in light of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, but as a significant transition with important roots established in antiquity. He presents the transition from Augustus and Trajan to sixth century Christianity in Ravenna as part of the "constant process of conserving, restoring, and adding to earlier art . . . an affirmation of continuity and an authorization of status." Elsner handles the transition from the earlier close attention to realism in favor of a more abstract, hieratic, and iconic emphasis as simply a means for artists to signify the social and political changes that emerged from the adoption of Christianity as the official cult. For example, he describes the portrait of Theodosius on the silver *missorium* (388 CE) as a, "truly magnificent example of such sanctified splendor. . . This image combines the emperor's sacred isolation with a symbolic portrayal of his social world." Without any comparison to the aesthetic quality seen in first century relief carvings, Elsner describes characteristics such as the use of halos and the scale of primary image in dominating the visual field in giving us an, "insight into how the state wished its rulers to be seen and how changes in time - social, ideological, intellectual - effected quite significant changes in the forms, appearances, and styles of such self-presentations." Elsner's approach is strongly supported by the descriptions and comments he has included from contemporary writings. The book was published as part of the *Oxford History of Art* on acid free paper. It is smartly reasoned and gorgeously illustrated. I was thrilled that the Marketplace was able to locate a copy for me.

Elsner's writing is insightful, persuasive and presents some interesting arguments. Useful in the context of a college course, and from the perspective of a student it is informative without being dull and thought-provoking without being inaccessible to those with little familiarity with the subject.

Historians today are in the process of taking a closer look at periods traditionally seen as "outside" the high points of history. As Jas Elsner demonstrates, the period usually seen as the decline of ancient Roman tradition was in reality a period of rich tradition as people continually reworked their traditions to produce a society just as interesting in its own right as that of Charlemagne or Augustus. The many illustrations to this book are excellent at illustrating the main points, though they could be larger. That aside, Elsner's vivid writing style makes the complex changes of this period easy to understand even to one new to the field. This is a must-read, not only for those interested in Roman art, but for anyone interested in cultural change or art in general.

This was a very engaging book that I was required to have for my Roman Art History class. It was a nice read that didn't put me to sleep and it was also very informative.

For anyone interested in ancient Rome, ancient art, and the beginning of the Christian era, this is a great buy. Glossy, thick pages, marvelous color photographs, and a broad overview of the subject. The Romans had a schizophrenic reaction to art. On one hand, art itself, whether sculptures or paintings or mosaics, was revered. On the other hand, the artists who created the pieces were considered of no consequence, perhaps because so many of them were slaves. The Roman elite considered "no marker of identity...more profound...than the 'private' house" (p 44) and everyone longed to have a grand home, filled with mosaics of chariot racing and fishing and pictures of the gods. Cicero almost bankrupted himself purchasing statues. Every city under Roman rule had plenty of imperial propaganda in the form of portraits or statues of the emperor. The Romans famously preferred truth in portraiture, as opposed to the Greeks. So the portraits of Augustus, for example, did portray his likeness, although the Augustus of the official statues never aged. Even when Augustus was near death, his imperial portraits showed a young man. As the empire grew, new cults sprouted. One such cult was that of Mithras. "What was different about Mithras was his novelty, as a newly created god adapted from the Persian Mithra some time in the first or second century (p 208). As Christians slowly took over the empire they triumphantly took over deserted temples. For example, Christian churches in Rome were triumphantly built "over Mithraea, for instance San Clemente and Santa Prisca" (p 218).

This very readable book interweaves Roman Imperial Art from the second century of our era with evolving Christian traditions. The reader comes away with a nuanced and richly textured picture of

place of Christian art in the broader visual culture of the Late Empire. Altogether a wonderful single-volume treatment of this complex period. This book shows us what can be lost when we study art in narrow categories. Once you read it you won't soon forget that Early Christian art is also Roman art. I found it a very good read.

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