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First-Generation Diptychs in the Discourse of Visual Culture

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Citation

Kinney, Dale. 2008. "First-Generation Diptychs in the Discourse of Visual Culture." In A. Effenberger, A. Cutler, G. Bühl (eds.), *Spätantike und byzantinische Elfenbeinbildwerke im Diskurs*, Wiesbaden, Reichert Verlag: 149-166.

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Spätantike und byzantinische Elfenbeinbildwerke im Diskurs

herausgegeben von
Gudrun Bühl, Anthony Cutler
und Arne Effenberger

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REICHERT VERLAG WIESBADEN 2008

First-Generation Diptychs in the Discourse of Visual Culture*

Dale Kinney

Ernst Kitzinger in memoriam

Large, paired, ivory plaques with relief imagery on one side and a smooth writable surface on the other were first made, as far as we can tell from clues of style and iconography, in the latter part of the fourth century. We call them diptychs. Coincidentally, the first known instance in Latin of *diptychum*, a loan word from Greek, seems to be in the decree dated 384 that prohibits the distribution of ivory diptychs (*diptycha ex ebore*) at public spectacles, except by ordinary consuls.¹ Symmachus used the new word in four epistles, three following the quaestorial games of his son Memmius Symmachus in 393 and one after the same son's praetorian games in 401, always to announce the dispatch of the objects denoted by the word as gifts. *Diptycha* and ivory writing tablets (*pugillares*) were sent on Memmius' behalf to the family's best friends (*amicissimis*), "the mightiest" (*potissimis*), and once to the emperor, "our lord and prince" Eugenius.² No diptychs are mentioned in the letters referring to Symmachus' own consulship in 391, when his colleague in the East, Fl. Eutolmius Tatianus, sent ivory "double writing tablets" (*dithyro grammateio*) to the venerable sophist Libanius in Antioch.³ But Stilicho evidently dispensed diptychs at his consular inauguration at Rome in 400, as Claudian's poem on the occasion describes ivory plaques (*tabulas*) "inlaid with gold to form the glistening inscription of the consul's name ... pass[ing] in procession among lords (*proceres*) and commons (*vulgus*)."⁴ Presumably, after the spectacle at least some of the tablets were bestowed upon the *proceres* as souvenirs.

We do not know what these presentation plaques or diptychs looked like, save that some were framed or inscribed with gold. The assumption that they were decorated with figural reliefs like the diptychs we have, and conversely that the diptychs we have were made to

* This printed text is greatly changed from the one read in March 2002, as subsequent reiterations have helped me to refine my understanding of the issues. I am especially grateful to the colleagues assembled by Peter Brown in the Group for the Study of Late Antiquity at Princeton University in March 2003, for their many challenging questions and brilliant suggestions.

- 1 *CTh* 15.9.1: "...exceptis consulibus ordinariis nulli prorsus alteri ... diptycha ex ebore dandi facultas sit." On the sources see A. CAMERON, "Consular diptychs in their social context: new eastern evidence", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 11 (1998): 398–400.
- 2 Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 2.81, 5.56, 7.76, 9.119, MGH, *Auctores antiquissimi*, 6.1:66, 140, 198, 268; J.-P. CALLU, *Symmaque. Lettres* (Paris, 1972–95), 1:206, 2:194, 3:85; S. RODA, *Commento storico al Libro IX dell'Epistolario di Q. Aurelio Simmaco* (Pisa, 1981), 362; G. A. CECCONI, *Commento storico al Libro II dell'Epistolario di Q. Aurelio Simmaco* (Pisa, 2002), 103–4. On Symmachus' gifts see A. CAMERON, "Observations on the distribution and ownership of late Roman silver plate", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 5 (1992): 180–82; I. WOOD, "The Exchange of Gifts among the Late Antique Aristocracy", in *El Disco de Teodosio*, ed. M. ALMAGRO-GORBEA et al. (Madrid, 2000), 301–14.
- 3 Libanius, *Epistula* 1021, ed. R. FOERSTER, *Libanii opera* (rept. Hildesheim, 1963), 11:149. For Tatianus see *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, ed. A. H. M. JONES and J. R. MARTINDALE (London, New York, 1971), 1:876–8.
- 4 Claudian, *De consulatu Stilichonis*, 3.347–9, trans. M. PLATNAUER (Loeb, 2:67); Cameron, "Consular diptychs", 399.

mark the taking of high office, may hold for later, fifth- and sixth-century examples but is not obviously true for those of the first generation (by which I mean, arbitrarily, plaques that might have been made before the sack of Rome in 410). Only about half of the first-generation diptychs show imagery overtly appropriate to such an official function: Probianus, Probus, "Stilicho", the Hermitage *Venatio*, the singleton *Venatio* in Liverpool, and the plaque of the Lampadii. The remainder display figural scenes that range from apparently irrelevant to actively unsuitable: Asclepius/Hygieia, NICOMACHORVM/SYMMACHORVM, the Carrand Diptych, the *Myrophores* in Milan, and the *Consecratio* in London.

The scholarly discourse around first-generation diptychs is driven by the desire to close the gap between these objects and the written *testimonia*. Originating in the time of ANTONIO GORI, the discourse has been more historical than art historical; that is, questions of style and iconography are pursued with the aim of fixing the date, function, and context of plaques rather than their authorship, artistic intention, or value. That this is so is partly because answers to the second category of question – especially those of intention and value – are dependent on the answers to the first, and answers to the first category of question are unreliable, constructed as they tend to be by circular inference: date from (hypothetical) function, function from (hypothetical) date, context from (hypothetical) date and function. The discourse seeks, but never reaches, closure: after 250 years, Probus is still the only first-generation diptych on whose date (405/406) all interested parties can agree.⁵

I have made my own contribution to this discourse, proposing an iconographic reading of the Diptych of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi that stopped short of intention and value precisely because there are no external determinants of function and date, which remain contingent hypotheses.⁶ GORI's idea that the tablets may have been nuptial gifts (*sposis dono datas*) was inferred from his reading of the iconography as women performing rites of the Greek *Gamelia*; GRAEVEN's suggestion that the diptych was made to be presented to a temple followed from *his* reading of the imagery as related to mystery cults; and so on down to ALAN CAMERON, whose proposal that the diptych was commissioned by Memmius Symmachus to commemorate his newly deceased father rests on the authority of *his* interpretation of the lowered torches on NICOMACHORVM as funereal, and ROBERT TURCAN, whose adaptation of Cameron's proposal rests on a different interpretation of the torches as Eleusinian.⁷ All of these historical speculations are plausible; none is conclusive. We are in the realm of judgment, or opinion.

5 The consul is Fl. Anicius Petronius Probus, son of the much more eminent Sextus Claudius Petronius Probus and Anicia Faltonia Proba. He shared the consulship with the Emperor Arcadius: *Prosopography*, 2:913–4. B. KILLERICH and H. TORP, "Hic est: hic Stilicho. The Date and Interpretation of a Notable Diptych", *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 104 (1989): 368–71.

6 D. KINNEY, "The Iconography of the Ivory Diptych Nicomachorum-Symmachorum", *JbAC* 37 (1994): 64–96.

7 A. F. GORI, *Thesaurus veterum diptychorum consularium et ecclesiasticorum*, ed. I. PASSERI (Florence, 1759) 1:203; H. GRAEVEN, "Heidnische Diptychen", *Römische Mitteilungen* 28 (1913): 250–66; A. CAMERON, "Pagan Ivories", in *Colloque genevois sur Symmaque à l'occasion du mille six centième anniversaire du conflit de l'autel de la Victoire* (Paris, 1986), 42–51; R. TURCAN, "Corè-Libéra? Eleusis et les derniers païens", *Academie des Inscriptions & Belles-lettres. Comptes rendus des séances* (1996): 743–67, with a comment by J.-P. CALLU. BENTE KILLERICH's argument for the function of the diptych also was built on Cameron's, while ERIKA SIMON'S

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This paper affords the welcome opportunity to examine an alternative discourse in which unanswerable historical questions are bracketed, the discourse of visual culture. Not yet a discipline, visual culture (or visual studies) emerged and is provisionally defined in opposition to existing disciplines and their domains. In the U. S., this opposition can be strong or weak, depending on such factors as the politics, education, and academic situation of the analyst. W. J. T. MITCHELL, for example, offers a relatively weak distinction and a concomitantly expansive definition of visual studies as a field of inquiry encompassing "documents of visual culture" from the Golden Calf through television.⁸ The strong stance is more restrictive, insisting that visual culture is a distinctive product of the characteristic imaging technology of modernity, photography.⁹

Common to all definitions of visual culture is the refusal to privilege objects invested with aesthetic value.¹⁰ Some would ignore objects altogether, equating visual culture with "images" that are situated culturally but not physically contained. The "Visual Culture Questionnaire" published by the editors of *October* in 1996 proposed as its third debating point: "... the precondition for visual studies as an interdisciplinary rubric is a newly wrought conception of the visual as disembodied *image*, re-created in the virtual spaces of sign-exchange and phantasmic projection. Further, if this new paradigm of the image originally developed in the intersection between psychoanalytic and media discourses, it has now assumed a role independent of specific media."¹¹ Most of the questionnaire's respondents acceded to this proposition as an account of prevailing opinion, even if they advocated finding a place for objects after all, holding out, as one put it, for "the material dimension of the object ... [as] potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly particular, and of the subversively strange and pleasurable."¹²

"Material", "particular", even "subversively strange and pleasurable", ivory diptychs offer a test case for visual culture as an appropriate conceptualization of premodern or nonmodern visual communication. From an extreme position one could dismiss the case *a priori*, on the grounds that visual culture could exist only after the invention of printing and the means to mechanically reproduce large quantities of images from single blocks of wood or metal plates. But Roman antiquity had its own means of mechanical reproduction, including the pointing that allowed sculptors to copy statues, the dies used to impress coins, and the molds used to make multiples of objects in pliable materials, metal or terracotta. Through these technologies images, dissociated as models or "types" from the materials in which they were mechanically realized, could be broadcast to every stratum of society. The

marties GRAEVEN and GORI: B. KILERIC, "A Different Interpretation of the Nicomachorum-Symmachorum Diptych", *JbAC* 34 (1991): 115-28; E. SIMON, "The Diptych of the Symmachi and Nicomachi: an Interpretation", *Greece & Rome* 39 (1992): 56-65.

8 W. J. T. MITCHELL, "What is Visual Culture?" in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from Outside. A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968)*, ed. I. LAVIN (Princeton, 1995): 207-17.

9 See, for example, N. MIRZOEFF, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London, New York, 1999), 1-33.

10 For example, *Visual Culture. Images and Interpretations*, ed. N. BRYSON, M. A. HOLLEY, and K. MOXEY (Hanover NH, 1994), xv-xxix.

11 "Visual Culture Questionnaire", *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 25.

12 C. ARMSTRONG, in "Questionnaire", 28.

imperial portrait is the excessive example: the emperor's image was ubiquitous, in gold, silver, bronze, marble, and wax. This could be a form of visual culture.¹³

The capture of the imperial likeness in bronze, marble or ivory would not have been made from the emperor's own face, but from another portrait in a series of incalculable regression, so the handcrafted image lacks the indexical status of modern photographs. This fact has fundamental implications for the ontology of the image and for the scope of what images can represent, but from a semiotic perspective, in their iconic function the handcrafted portrait and the photograph are the same: both signify by evoking a subject to which they appear to be identical. The identity creates a distinctive semiotic situation for the viewer. Awareness of this unusual situation was commonplace in late antiquity; witness the well-known passages from fourth-century Christian writers who employ the analogy of the emperor's portrait to illustrate the identity of persons in the Trinity:¹⁴

So that when one looks at the icon, one sees the king in it, and contrariwise if one happens upon the king, one sees that he is the same as in the icon. The icon might say ... "I and the king are one; for I am in him and he in me: and that which you see in me you see in him: and that which you have seen in him you see in me." He, therefore, who venerates the icon also venerates the king in it.

While art historians might draw on this formulation by Athanasius of Alexandria to explain the emergence of a recognizable "iconic" style in late antiquity, or to speculate on the meaning of "likeness" in representation, visual studies would emphasize the icon's compelling power. If icons receive cults it is because they are coercive; they engage the beholder in a form of psychological collusion that makes undue attention inevitable. Visual studies aims, at least in theory, not only to recognize this peculiar "power of the image" but to deconstruct and even to subvert it. In its anglophone manifestations, the study of visual culture has an agenda informed, directly or indirectly, by Marxist cultural critique and psychoanalysis.¹⁵ Analyses of visual culture typically uncover the work done by images in the constitution and perpetuation of coercive regimes, be they political, social, psychological, or (often) all three.

The case for a visual culture of late antiquity, and conversely for late antique artifacts as remnants of visual culture, has already been made, notably by JAS' ELSNER in *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* of 1998.¹⁶ Three diptychs or singletons appear in the first section of this handbook, titled "Images and Power": the *Consecratio* (Fig. 1), the plaque of the Lampadii (Fig. 2), and the Diptych of Probus (Fig. 3). All three fit the visual culture paradigm well and vice versa. The *Consecratio*, which appears in ELSNER's analysis as an illustration of a ritual or of verbal descriptions of that ritual, is said to have reinforced the

13 See also the comments by HANS-PETER L'ORANGE on "the predominant importance of the eye in [the] entire conceptual and cognitive apparatus" of late antique Romans: H. P. L'ORANGE with R. UNGER, *Das spätantike Herrscherbild von Diokletian bis zu den Konstantin-Söhnen 284–361 n. Chr.* (Berlin, 1984), 80.

14 Athanasius of Alexandria, *Third Oration against the Arians*, trans. C. BARBER, *Figure and Likeness. On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton, 2002), 75.

15 See, for example, *Visual Culture: the Reader*, ed. J. EVANS and S. HALL (London, 1999), especially the "Notes on contributors", ix–xiv.

16 J. ELSNER, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph. The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100–450* (Oxford, 1998).

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socializing effect of “the central ceremony in the public exaltation of the office of emperor” – the deification – by isolating it for representation.¹⁷ The plaque of the Lampadii performed the same socializing function but with respect to a different ritual, the *ludi circenses*. LAMPADIORVM also extends the realm of “public exaltation” beyond the emperor to the senatorial families who sponsored the races and so made them available to the public. ELSNER recognizes LAMPADIORVM, unlike the *Consecratio* relief, as a manipulated image, in which form contributes as much as content to the image’s political efficacy.¹⁸

In larger scale than the dignitaries who accompany him (they may be his sons), and bearing a sceptre topped by imperial busts, the great man watches the action below, and is himself on display to both the implied circus audience and the viewer of the ivory. This kind of image ... is an iconic portrayal of a relationship. It exalts the dignitaries portrayed ... in a position of power as statue-like objects of the gaze: they preside over the games as the ultimate visual goal not only of the Roman populace which watched the actual events, but also of the viewers of the diptychs. The very stylization of images ... marks a relationship of hierarchy... The isolated aristocrats ... seem to exist in a different sphere from the games they have donated, the populace which would have watched them, or the viewers who look at these plaques.

In the discourse of visual culture, specifics of date, patronage, and place of manufacture – the questions around which the art historical discourse perpetually revolves – are unimportant. It does not matter whether the *divus* in the *Consecratio* is Christian or not, whether Antoninus Pius, Constantius Chlorus, Julian, or Theodosius *senior*, or whether the monogram at the top should be deciphered as HORMISDAS or SYMMACHORVM; nor does it matter whether the three Lampadii are of the generation of C. Ceionius Rufius Volusianus *signo* Lampadius (PVR 365), Postumius Lampadius (PVR 403/408), Rufius Caecina Felix Lampadius (PVR 429/450), or the western consul in 530, nor when and why this plaque might have been paired with another inscribed RVFIORVM.¹⁹ Art history is a minutely particularizing discipline, while the patterns of visual culture are generally of longer *durée*.²⁰ The criticism of art history is that its infinite particularizing becomes tedious and inconsequential, while the criticism of visual culture is that it is reductive. ELSNER’s eloquent description of LAMPADIORVM could as well be applied to the Liverpool *Venatio* or to Probianus, rendering any separate analysis of these plaques otiose.

17 ELSNER, *Imperial Rome*, 30–32.

18 ELSNER, *Imperial Rome*, 39.

19 On the *Consecratio*: R. DELBRUECK, *Die Consulardiptychen und verwandte Denkmäler* (Berlin, Leipzig, 1929), 229; L. CRACCO RUGGINI, “Apoteosi e politica senatoria nel IV s. d. C.: il Dittico dei Symmachi al British Museum”, *Rivista storica italiana* 89 (1977): 425–89; CAMERON, “Pagan Ivories”, 45–53; J. ARCE, *Funus Imperatorum: Los funerales de los emperadores romanos* (Madrid, 1988), 151–55; J. ENGEMANN, “Herrscherbild”, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (Stuttgart, 1988), 14:1029; D. TROUT, “The Verse Epitaph(s) of Petronius Probus: Competitive Commemoration in Late-Fourth-Century Rome”, *New England Classical Journal* 28.3 (2001): 172–3. On LAMPADIORVM: GRAEVEN, “Heidnische Diptychen”, 246–9; DELBRUECK, *Consulardiptychen*, 218–21; C. FORMIS, “Il dittico eburneo della cattedrale di Novara”, *Contributi dell’Istituto di Archeologia* (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano) 1 (1967): 187–91; CAMERON, “Pagan Ivories”, 53–62; *Prosopography*, 1:978–80; 2:655–6; 3B:764.

20 Peter Brown made this point in conversation.

The tendency to reductivity is evident in the treatment of the Diptych of Probus (Fig. 3), which appears in Elsner's chapter "Art and Imperial Power" as an example of innovations in the portrayal of the Christian emperor: isolated, sacralized, a "distant and hieratic symbol" rather than a semblance of historical reality. In these respects the diptych is mostly redundant with other imperial representations, including the portraits in the Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Missorium of Theodosius I; only the presence of armor permits a slightly more specific reference to traditions of representing imperial triumph.²¹

The only other ivory plaques featured in Elsner's handbook are those of the Nicomachi and Symmachi (Figs. 4 a–b). They are contextualized very differently from the others, in a chapter called "Art and the Past: Antiquarian Eclecticism", and the language differs as well:²²

... [The diptych] appear[s] to celebrate the alliance of two great pagan families in late-antique Rome ... [One] panel shows a priestess, executed in a cool classicizing style, in neo-Attic dress wearing a fillet and ivy wreath in her hair. She appears to be making a Dionysiac offering by scattering incense ... at a country altar ... Its figures owe much to earlier types, especially Roman coins bearing the image of Pietas. Made in the context of the Theodosian empire, with its rigorous ban on pagan sacrifice implemented after 391, the ivory's elegant Classical form reinforces the pagan emphasis of its iconography – which looks back to the religious practices at the heart of paganism.

This passage stands out as unreconstructedly art historical: genealogical ("owes much to earlier types"), evaluative ("cool", "elegant"), and intentional ("looks back to ... paganism"). Save for a modified reading of the iconography (*Pietas*), the description of the diptych reads very much like that offered by Ernst Kitzinger in 1977:²³

... These panels proclaim their patronage *expressis verbis*. They depict in solemn and accurate detail [pagan] rites ... and are clearly intended as professions of unswerving devotion to the ancient gods ... Most important ... the past is here being resuscitated also by purely formal means. The carver of these ivories must have studied classical Greek sculptures and their Roman replicas. Indeed, he must have deliberately set out to create an equivalent of such works ... The Greek revival under Hadrian ... has a chilly, academic quality. In our ivory this quality is enhanced. What distinguishes these carvings ... is that their classicism is so studied and conscious. They are exercises in nostalgia undertaken in the service of a very specific cause.

21 ELSNER, *Imperial Rome*, 82–6. In art historical discourse the diptych is featured mostly as a touchstone for undated comparanda, e. g., R. H. W. STICHEL, *Die römische Kaiserstatue am Ausgang der Antike. Untersuchungen zum plastischen Kaiserporträt seit Valentinian I. (364–375 n. Chr.)* (Rome, 1982), 49–50; A. GIULIANO, "Ritratti di Onorio", in *Felix temporis reparatio* (Milano Capitale dell'Impero Romano. Atti del Convegno Archeologico Internazionale Milano 8–11 marzo 1990), ed. G. SENA CHIESA and E. A. ARSLAN (Milan, 1992), 76. For an intentional interpretation see KILLERICH and TORP, "Hic est: hic Stilicho", 368–71.

22 ELSNER, *Imperial Rome*, 191.

23 E. KITZINGER, *Byzantine Art in the Making. Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art 3rd–7th Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1977), 34. Similarly B. KILLERICH, *Late Fourth Century Classicism in the Plastic Arts. Studies in the So-Called Theodosian Renaissance* (Odense, 1993), 145.

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Stepping back from the case study, the programmatic differences between KITZINGER's art history and ELSNER's visual culture come back into focus. KITZINGER presented classicism as a constant, transcendent principle, a humanistic mode of representation that tempered its opposite – "hieratic", "irrational", and "symbolic" – throughout the early Middle Ages and, in so doing, kept alive the visual expression of physical beauty, human autonomy, and harmony. In the narration of the principle's survival, the Diptych of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi appears as one of its most persuasive (albeit "chilly") "resuscitations", and the diptych fittingly illustrates a chapter titled "Regeneration". ELSNER, by contrast, describes classicism as a deliberate mode of cultural identification, self-consciously eclectic and antiquarian, appealing to a repertoire of particular visual or literary exemplars rather than to a spirit of past art. When pagan temples were closed in the fourth century and their statues were recontextualized, this repertoire became safe for Christian consumption. "... The vast collections of fourth- and fifth-century Constantinople and Rome ... packed with ... great originals ... had become theme parks of the vanishing pagan past."²⁴ In ELSNER's narrative, the Diptych of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi is an exceptional case in which antiquarian imagery retained its religious specificity, and neo-Attic form signified more than "a generalized and now slowly evaporating classicism confined to [a] pastoral ambience..."²⁵

If context allows us to see that ELSNER's description of NICOMACHORVM/SYMMACHORVM does function in the frame of visual culture, the passage remains an eruption of art historical language in his text. The intrusion is explicable not only by the power of a deeply entrenched discourse to reassert itself, but also by the absence of a clear alternative. In its flight from the aesthetic dimension of objects, visual culture has not developed a comprehensive approach to style or a distinctive vocabulary to describe it. ELSNER presents style as an "art-historical problem", and defines classical style in terms of the qualities articulated by art history, "naturalism" and "illusionism".²⁶ Freighted with value, these terms evoke not only a specific range of Greek and Roman objects, but the narrative that casts those objects as protagonists and objects with different formal features as antagonists. ELSNER's explicit rejection of the "false" dichotomy between classical and late antique art is undermined by the discourse of art history, which habitually describes the not-classical in terms of lack of classical features ("no sense of perspective") or of antonyms to classical qualities: "schematic", "hierarchic", "symbolic".

That style is not, or not only, an art historical problem is demonstrated by the work of the sociologist PIERRE BOURDIEU, which was foundational for visual culture.²⁷ Despite the flaws and limitations decried by later critics, BOURDIEU's writings can still be mined for revisionist inspiration.²⁸ *Distinction*, originally published in 1979, employs a relativistic, functionalist approach to style that obviates the binary oppositions of art history. In BOURDIEU's scheme style is a factor of taste, and taste is in a mutually determining relationship with social

24 ELSNER, *Imperial Rome*, 190.

25 ELSNER, *Imperial Rome*, 192.

26 ELSNER, *Imperial Rome*, 15–23. ELSNER confronts the latency and residual force of style within art history in his interesting essay "Style", in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. R.S. NELSON and R. SHIFF, 2nd ed. (Chicago, London, 2003) 98–109.

27 See the index to J. A. WALKER and S. CHAPLIN, *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Manchester, 1997), 220. (Among theorists only ROLAND BARTHES and RAYMOND WILLIAMS have more entries.)

28 MIRZOEFF, *Introduction*, 11–3, dismisses BOURDIEU's work as inadequate and outlines its failings.

class. The response to style in “worked-upon objects” differs among classes because it is inculcated by formal and informal education, which are themselves class driven. Education creates “cultural capital”.²⁹ Aristocrats and their epigones, typically well endowed with cultural capital, might display a predilection for old objects (and by implication old styles) because antiques embody their prerogatives: “Family heirlooms ... bear material witness to the age and continuity of the lineage and so consecrate its social identity.”³⁰ The upper classes’ privileged relation to old objects confers “a social power over time”³¹.

... the supreme excellence: to possess things from the past, i. e. accumulated, crystallized history, aristocratic names and titles, châteaux or “stately homes”, paintings and collections, vintage wines and antique furniture... all those things whose common feature is that they can only be acquired in the course of time ... that is, by inheritance or through dispositions which, like the taste for old things, are likewise only acquired with time...

On BOURDIEU’s model, we might replace the word “classical” in descriptions of the Diptych of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi with “heirloom”. Understood as an heirloom style, functioning to identify the owners or bearers of the object as culturally empowered, the classicism of the diptych loses some of its more problematic implications. Affect (“nostalgia”), allegory (“professions of devotion”), and revivalist agenda are no longer obvious or even plausible.³² Heirlooms precisely do not bespeak revival; their rôle is to represent a past that is claimed *as past* by a privileged descendant in the present. Heirloom imagery concomitantly would be recognizably old-fashioned, not the expression of current significance.

The heirloom style of NICOMACHORVM/SYMMACHORVM is so accomplished that the diptych looks much older than it is. GORI took it for the real thing, and attributed the fourth-century family names to a later reuse.³³ With the possible exception of Asclepius/Hygieia, no other extant diptych has the same effect, yet in art historical discourse, most first-generation plaques are associated with these two pairs as somehow “classical”. KITZINGER’s chapter “Regeneration” includes Probianus, Probus (Fig. 3), LAMPADIORVM (Fig. 2), the Liverpool *Venatio*, and the Milan *Myrophores*; and BENTE KILLERICH’s more recent book on late fourth-century classicism embraces most of the same works (excluding only the *Venatio*), as well as “Stilicho” (Fig. 5) and the Carrand Diptych.³⁴ Not one of these objects could be mistaken for a product of the first or second century, and there is no evidence that they registered as classical for fourth-century observers.

29 P. BOURDIEU, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. NICE (Cambridge, MA, 1984), 11–96.

30 BOURDIEU, *Distinction*, 76.

31 BOURDIEU, *Distinction*, 71.

32 ALAN CAMERON gives other reasons for skepticism about these artifacts as “professions of devotion”: “The last pagans of Rome”, in *The Transformations of the Vrbs Roma in Late Antiquity*, ed. W. V. HARRIS (Portsmouth, R.I., 1999), 109–21.

33 GORI, *Thesaurus*, I:203.

34 KITZINGER, *Byzantine Art*, 34–40; the Leningrad *Venatio* is also mentioned in this chapter, but as an example of the opposing trend toward “abstract two-dimensional designs”; p. 38. KILLERICH, *Classicism*, 65–7, 136–59.

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In the art historical discourse around diptychs “classical” denotes not a period style but a congeries of qualities, including skill, polish, and pleasing effect, which may be seen in Augustan or Hadrianic exemplars but also in artifacts from other times and cultures.³⁵ In BOURDIEU’S framework these qualities would not be classical but *aesthetic*; signs by which “within the class of worked-upon objects ... the class of art objects [is] defined..., i. e., in terms of form rather than function.”³⁶ On this model, we might say of first-generation diptychs that technical precision, fine detail, and polished surfaces are traits not of style but of status; traits that constitute the plaques as aesthetic objects, and their makers, patrons, and beholders as possessing the “aesthetic disposition”.³⁷ The aesthetic disposition is part of one’s cultural capital.

The term “classical” is unexamined in *Distinction*. BOURDIEU employs the category as an art historian cannot, without defining it. I propose that the Diptych of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi can be called classical because of the characteristic treatment of the bodies – idealized proportions, visible sexual features, clinging or cascading damp-fold drapery, contrapposto – and because of the single viewpoint, which implies unity of space and time. These traits are also prominent in three other first-generation diptychs: Asclepius/Hygieia, Probus, and “Stilicho”. On all six panels of these diptychs, the classical effect is diluted by the competing principle of frontality, which diminishes the heirloom value of the style. On “Stilicho” (Fig. 5) the marriage of frontality and contrapposto is so remarkable that it appears to be a deliberate sign of the artifice of the late antique *eborarius*, while on Probus (Fig. 3), frontality seems to have been inherited with the type, the imperial cuirassed statue reformulated for a Christian dynasty some 70 years before (Figs. 6 a–b).³⁸ In defining the classicism of first-generation diptychs, then, it might be productive to distinguish heirloom classicism (NICOMACHORVM/SYMMACHORVM) from modernized classicism (“Stilicho”) and from residual classicism (Probus).³⁹ Probianus (Fig. 7), which KITZINGER recuperated for classicism chiefly by the perception of space around the main figure, is compositionally, as he admitted, a paradigm of the representational mode normally described as anti-classical, governed by “abstract principles of symmetry, frontality, and differentia-

35 KILLERICH’S most frequently used descriptors for “Classicistic currents of the fourth century” include “smooth”, “soft”, “refined”, and “gentle”: *Classicism*, 220–34. She frankly states that “Fourth century classicism ... does not seem to be modelled on one particular period style”; p. 234.

36 BOURDIEU, *Distinction*, 29.

37 BOURDIEU, *Distinction*, 28.

38 L’ORANGE, *Herrscherbild*, 58–67; S. E. KNUDSEN, *The Portraits of Constantine the Great: Types and Chronology A.D. 306–337* (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1988), 179–85; K. FITTSCHEN and P. ZANKER, *Katalog der römischen Porträts in den Capitolinischen Museen und den anderen kommunalen Sammlungen der Stadt Rom*, 2nd ed. (Mainz, 1994), 1:144–5 (No. 120). The statue now at the Lateran is generally agreed to be an original portrait of Constantine, while that on the Capitol is thought to be the reworking of a tetrarchic image (hence the very small head) to represent Constantine or one of his sons.

39 Unlike KILLERICH, I do not think that such stylistic distinctions can be used to fix dates or places of origin of the diptychs; cf. the cautionary remarks of FRANÇOIS BARATTE regarding contemporary silver: “Les ateliers d’argenterie dans l’antiquité tardive. Données actuelles”, in *Felix temporis reparatio*, 96–101. And as should be clear, I am discussing a different level of style than that of the “hand” of the individual craftsman-interpreter, for which see the many remarkable contributions by ANTHONY CUTLER, e. g., “The Making of the Justinian Diptychs”, *Byzantion* 54 (1984): 75–115.

tion by scale and registers [that] serve to express power and authority".⁴⁰ The problem of what to call this mode is acute in English – in which it has no proper name – although not in German, which has the apposite, untranslatable word *Repräsentation*. German discourse has the further advantage of a long tradition of treating such images semiotically, in terms of their relation to the social matrix of production and reception:⁴¹

The centralized, two-register composition is not so much necessitated by a particular way of seeing space; rather it reflects a symbolizing way of thinking that is rooted in the hierarchically organized Roman social structure of the imperial period.

Categorical nouns like *Tribunaltypus* and *Repräsentationsbild* denote the hierarchical, focalizing, aggrandizing manner of presenting Probianus and also connote that manner's structural characteristics, making it unnecessary to strain for other adjectives to describe them, still less to employ words inflected by twentieth-century art criticism like "space" and "abstract".⁴² In practice, however, the vocabulary of modernist formal analysis pervades the German discussion of such objects no less than the English.⁴³

"Abstract" seems remarkably malapropos for Probianus, which puts the Vicar of Rome directly and tangibly in the viewer's face. His images are powerful and empowering, and difficult to construe historically: were they appropriations of the image of imperial majesty ("*schema basilikon*") and if so, were they innocently honorific or a calculated *lèse majesté*?⁴⁴ Or were they not appropriations? To whom was the frontal, axial portrait mode legitimately available, and what were its connoted characteristics?

BOURDIEU, again, gives food for thought. In a classic essay on photography he observed:⁴⁵

Photographs ordinarily show people face on, in the centre of the picture, standing up, at a respectful distance, motionless and in a dignified attitude... To strike a pose is to offer oneself to be captured in a posture which is not and which does not seek to be "natural".

- 40 KITZINGER, *Byzantine Art*, 36; he also pointed to the "strong bodily presences" with "easy, natural movements". KILLERICH's reasons for finding this diptych classicizing are not nearly as clear: *Classicism*, 141–3. On Probianus see Delbrueck, *Consulardiptychen*, 250–6; A. CHASTAGNOL, *Les Fastes de la Préfecture de Rome au Bas-Empire* (Paris, 1962), 275–6; V. H. ELBERN, "Der Werdenener Buchschrein mit dem Probianusdiptychon", in *St. Liudger und die Abtei Werden*, ed. B. SENER (Essen, 1962), 89–101; P. BERGER, *The Notitia Dignitatum* (Ph. D. Dissertation, New York University, 1974), 55–60.
- 41 H. GABELMANN, *Antike Audienz- und Tribunalszenen* (Darmstadt, 1984), 203. See also J. ENGMANN, "Akklamationsrichtung, Sieger- und Besiegtenrichtung auf dem Galeriusbogen in Thessaloniki", *JbAC* 22 (1979): 150–60. This strain goes back at least to Andreas Alföldi at the beginning of the twentieth century.
- 42 GABELMANN credits the coining of the term *Tribunaltypus* to DELBRUECK: *Tribunalszenen*, 205.
- 43 For a recent example, see R. WARLAND, "Die neue Symbolik der Macht. Der visuelle Beitrag der spätantiken Kunst zur Neuordnung von Herrschaft und Religion", in *Epochenwandel? Kunst und Kultur zwischen Antike und Mittelalter*, ed. F. A. BAUER and N. ZIMMERMANN (Mainz, 2001), 17–26.
- 44 KILLERICH, *Classicism*, 69 employs *schema basilikon* after L'ORANGE, who borrowed it from the twelfth-century historian George Kedrenos to denote "the mask-like icon of the holy Roman empire" (meaning the empire after Constantine): L'ORANGE, *Herrscherbild*, 79. The term applies specifically to the head.
- 45 P. BOURDIEU, "The Social Definition of Photography" (1965), in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, 166, 167.

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The same intention is demonstrated in the concern to correct one's posture, to put on one's best clothes, the refusal to be surprised in an ordinary attitude... Striking a pose means respecting oneself and demanding respect.

It is certainly possible that the spontaneous desire for frontality is linked to the most deep-rooted cultural values. Honour demands that one pose for the photograph as one would stand before a man whom one respects and from whom one expects respect ... The sitter addresses to the viewer an act of reverence, of courtesy ... and demands that the viewer obey the same conventions and the same norms. He stands face on and demands to be looked at face on and from a distance, this need for reciprocal deference being the essence of frontality.

As in *Distinction*, reception and aesthetic engagement are linked to class. "The spontaneous desire for frontality" is found to be characteristic of lower classes, workers and "peasants". These audiences with the least cultural capital value the object of representation above the representation itself; for them "the signifier [is] completely subordinate to the signified".⁴⁶ As viewers and as subjects, they understand frontality (and its correlate, axiality) as a matter of decorum. It is also a compensatory strategy for subjects who feel uneasy about their subjecthood, who are⁴⁷

... embarrassed by their bodies, ... unnatural and clumsy in all the occasions which demand that one relax and present one's body as a spectacle... It is always as if, by means of obeying the principle of frontality and adopting the most conventional posture, one were seeking as far as possible to control the objectification of one's own image. ... Adopting the most ceremonial bearing means reducing the risk of clumsiness and *gaucherie* and giving others an image of oneself that is affected and pre-defined ... Offering a regulated image of oneself is a way of imposing the rules of one's own perception.

Were we to call the representative mode of Probianus simply a portrait mode – or a mode of selfportraiture – we would demystify its connection with the emperor and simultaneously complicate our understanding of its potential connotations for late antique viewers. Without forcing BOURDIEU's modern French social stratification and terminology onto fourth-century Rome, we might nevertheless begin to think of a range of uses and receptions of this mode that were linked to class and cultural capital.

In this and other examples, the discourse of visual culture functions vis-à-vis art history as critique. Lacking its own historical methods, the study of visual culture can neither replace nor surpass art history; it is something different, *en plus*. Its most useful role for practitioners of historical disciplines, in my opinion, is to force us to re-examine our habitual language and the assumptions encoded in it. It can be an eye-opening exercise.⁴⁸

46 BOURDIEU, "Photography", 170.

47 BOURDIEU, "Photography", 168.

48 In an attempt to forestall misunderstanding, I want to state that my focus on ELSNER's *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* is an homage to a very interesting and pioneering book. Moreover, the dedication of this essay to ERNST KITZINGER – despite the fact that he might have found little to like in my argument – is not ironic; it is an homage as well. Anyone who writes about late antique style must bow to the elegance and integrity of KITZINGER's thought and to the spare, almost Spartan beauty of his prose.

Figures

- Fig. 1 Diptych leaf showing a consecratio. London, British Museum (photo: ©The British Museum).
- Fig. 2 LAMPADIORVM. Brescia, Santa Giulia – Museo della Città (photo: Museum).
- Fig. 3 Diptych of Fl. Anicius Petronius Probus. Aosta, Museo del Duomo (photo: Alinari/Art Resource).
- Fig. 4a NICOMACHORVM. Paris, Musée du Moyen-Age – Thermes de Cluny (photo: Réunion des musées nationaux/Art Resource, NY).
- Fig. 4b SYMMACHORVM. London, Victoria and Albert Museum (photo: Museum).
- Fig. 5 Diptych of a magister militum (Stilicho?) and his son. Monza, Tesoro del Duomo (photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY).
- Fig. 6a CONSTANTINVS AVG. Rome, San Giovanni in Laterano (photo: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Brenzi, No. 78.2240).
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- Fig. 7 RVFIVS PROBIANVS VC. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. theol. lat. fol. 323 (photo: Staatsbibliothek).



Fig. 1



Fig. 1 Diptych leaf showing a consecratio
British Museum.

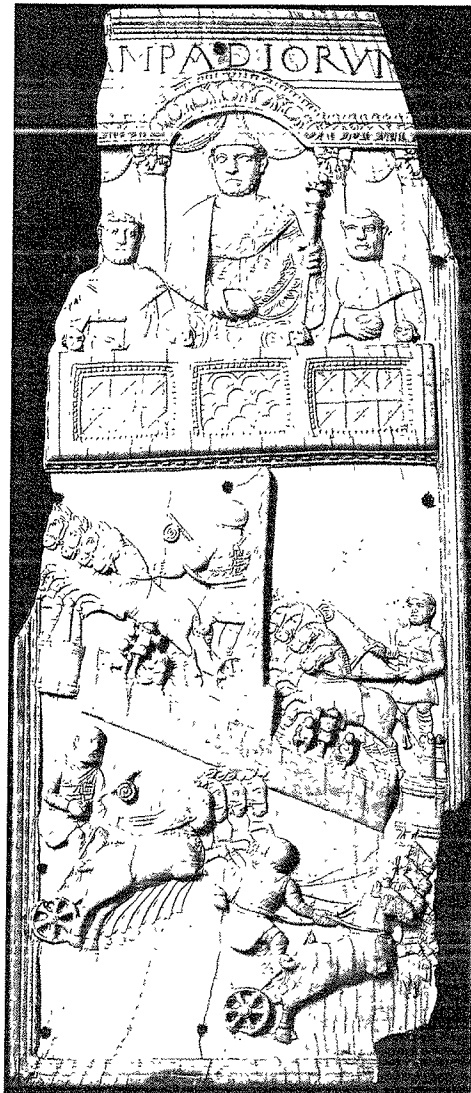


Fig. 2 LAMPAD IORVM. Brescia,
Santa Giulia – Museo della Città.



Fig. 3 Diptych of Fl. Anicius Petronius Probus. Aosta, Museo del Duomo.



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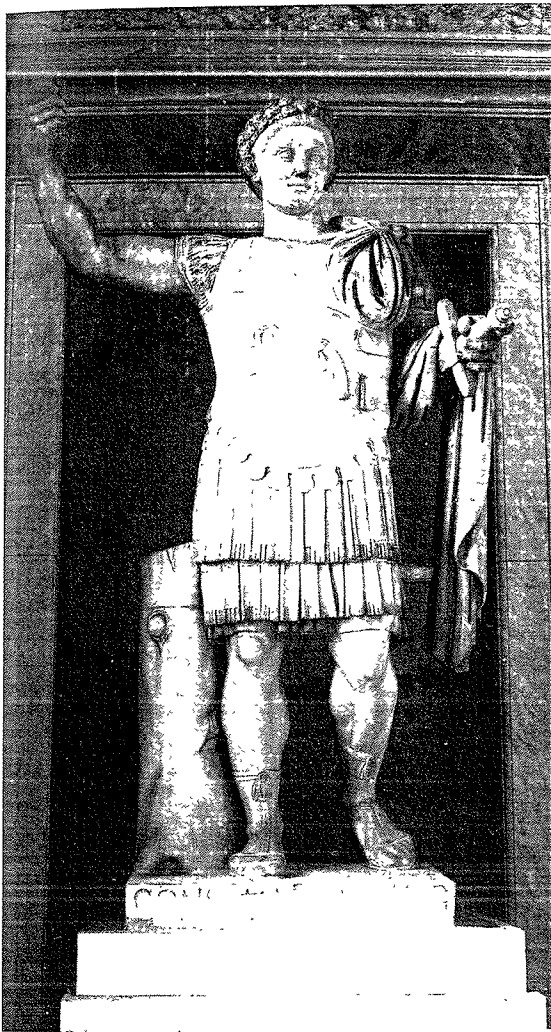
Fig. 4a *NICOMACHORVM*. Paris,
Musée du Moyen-Age - Thermes de Cluny.



Fig. 4b *SYMMACHORVM*. London,
Victoria and Albert Museum.



Fig. 5 Diptych of a magister militum (Stilicho?) and his son. Monza, Tesoro del Duomo.



*Fig. 6a CONSTANTINVS AVG.
Rome, San Giovanni in Laterano.*



*Fig. 6b CONSTANTINVS AVG.
Rome, Piazza del Campidoglio.*

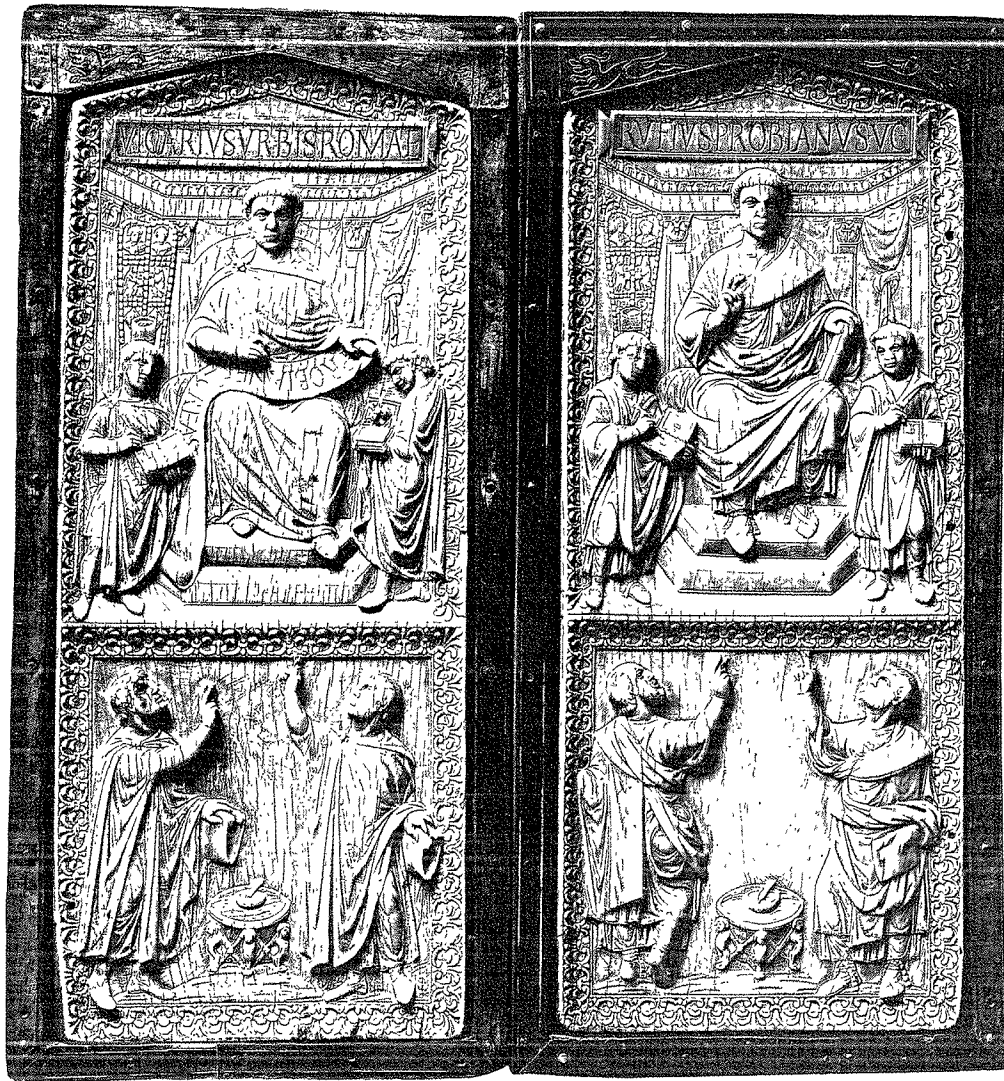


Fig. 7 RVFIVS PROBIANVS VC. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. theol. lat. fol. 323.

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