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The Language of Images in Roman Art by T. Hölscher; A. Snodgrass; A. Künzl-Snodgrass

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HÖLSCHER, T. *The Language of Images in Roman Art* (translated from the German by A. SNODGRASS and A. KÜNZL-SNODGRASS, with a foreword by J. ELSNER). Cambridge, CUP, 2004. xxxv, 151 p. Pr. £ 15,99 (paperback).

In an ideal world, this translation of Tonio Hölscher's 1987 *Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System* would have been superfluous. The original essay ought to have taken Anglo-Saxon research into Roman art by storm from its publication onwards, and should by now have become a fixed asset in the bibliography of—at least—any analysis of Roman ideology and communication. As it happens, the book has become, as Jaś Elsner formulates in an insightful introduction in which he places the volume in its proper historiographical context, “one of the most important and least well-known books . . . to have been published on Roman art in the last thirty years” (xv). Much like the works of Luca Giuliani (especially his 1986 *Bildnis und Botschaft*) and to a lesser extent Erika Simon, Hölscher has suffered from the ever increasing linguistic gap that impedes even the highly internationalised subject area of studies into the Ancient World.

Still, many of Hölscher's key arguments have become, by now, part of the academic discourse. Crucially, it has become generally accepted that references to specific styles of Greek art in a Roman context express specific values. Romans referred to different Greek antecedents when creating cult statues than when chiselling historical reliefs. The chosen style was determined by function; not necessarily by chronology. Paul Zanker's *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, which appeared in the same year as Hölscher's original and (partly through its translation by Alan Shapiro in the following year) became instantly seminal, made the multitude of connections between style, functions and politics in the Roman world clear for all to see. Likewise, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill's studies have, from 1988 onwards, emphasised the functionality of the—previously mainly chronologically interpreted—styles of the Pompeian mural decorations. Others, amongst whom Elsner, have further disseminated Hölscher's ideas.

The core message of Hölscher's thesis, then, is commonly acknowledged; Roman art functioned as a ‘semantic system’, a language through which certain messages could be transmitted to the heterogeneous—and often illiterate—population of an immense empire. One may wonder whether that does not make this translation unnecessary after all. If the ideas are recognised, why not leave it at that? Apart from the obvious historiographical importance of placing ideas—as much as possible—in their original context, the booklet has much to offer in its own right. Thus, for instance, Hölscher gives examples of how the “system

of ideal values” (p. 96) may have worked in practice. He describes for instance how, when a statue was supposed to express *veritas* or *pulchritudo*, Lysippus or Praxiteles were the models to aspire, but that when a sculptor wanted to convey *maiestas*, *pondus* or *eximia pulchritudo*, he should turn to Phidias (p. 97). The argument has not met with full approval, yet the examples are illustrative all the same: depending on circumstances the same subject could be depicted in different styles. “Different Greek styles were in no way mechanically tied to specific subjects, but . . . were seen as being expressive of specific qualities.” (p. 65) Bacchus as a sensual figure was to be depicted differently from the god in Bacchic revel, or in a more archaic context (p. 66, plate 37; p. 68, plate 39). Occasionally, modern bibliography has limited the novelty value of parts of the text; sometimes because of Hölscher’s own later scholarship, as in the case of the two short chapters on battle scenes in the Hellenistic and Roman settings (pp. 23-46).<sup>1</sup>) But on the whole, the text remains the best coherently argued approach to looking at Roman art in terms of communication. It is to be welcomed that *The Language of Images in Roman Art* will now be available to a wider public, and the translators deserve full praise for their undertaking. But one should still strive for an academic community which does not automatically communicate in English.

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1) Hölscher, T. 2004. *Images of War in Greece and Rome: Between Military Practice, Public Memory, and Cultural Symbolism*, JRS 94, 1-17