The Domesticity of Their Darkness

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Snapshots of the Enslaved in Roman Art

Iain Ferris

Archaeopress Archaeology

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Cover: The *delicium* or child slave Festius, Ferrara;
Background: A child slave giving a reading at a Bacchic ritual. Wall painting, Pompeii. c. 70-60 BC.

To the Spirits waiting on the strand,
at North Beach,
Montrose and the Second Nab, Whitby.

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In Bristol, England on June 7th 2020 during a Black Lives Matter protest the late nineteenth century bronze statue of the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century local merchant Edward Colston was vandalised and then toppled from its plinth and base in the area known as The Centre in the city and dragged to the nearby dockside edge from where it was thrown into the water. Colston had been involved in the transatlantic slave trade and like so many of Bristol's merchants of the time became rich through his involvement.

Preface

This book is about the appearance of images of the enslaved in Roman art: it is hoped it presents a discussion of these images that can serve as a resource for undergraduate students of archaeology and ancient history and for those just broadly interested in the art of the ancient world. The word *snapshots* has been used quite deliberately, and very specifically, in the subtitle of this study because of the impossibility of there ever being the material evidence and opportunity to write a full, linear, chronological narrative about images of the enslaved in Roman times. The ancient enslaved are now to us like shadows out of time: yet, most importantly, they seem to have existed *between* the images discussed here. Images of the enslaved in Roman domestic interiors often appear now as being somehow quite weird, in terms of the strange *within* the familiar and the familiar as strange in a Freudian sense. There is something weird about the way in which the domestic world portrayed, its domesticity, does not coincide with itself. There is a wrongness here, a delusive envelope, yet all is depicted as being right. Yet such negativity should not constitute the last word here, and indeed maybe it should be somehow sublimated to issues of reason, as so many aspects of this material evidence speak to the future, cognisant of Toni Morrison's definition of memory as 'an act of willed creation'.[1] This book represents an attempt to foreground the background.

Inevitably, in the images we can find intimations and reflections of a kind of existential angst, a crisis of confidence. We seem to be looking into the void, seeing nothing but black darkness that with time dissolves into shadows and shades of black, grading incrementally, tone by tone, to a dark grey. There is light, and figures seem to emerge, shapes form and step forward out of the gloom. Even in the deepest black, the Bible black, as Dylan Thomas so memorably described a shade of the colour, there are subtle variations and varieties: ebony, sable, raven, pitch, tar, all synonyms of the colour black. Interminable imaginings of presences there in the darkness usher in an interval of lucidity, with proportions of time and being completely distorted by the multitude and the intensity of sensations and ideas that the shadow images of figures generate. They seem to have lived several human lives in the space of a single viewing: repeated viewings simply enhance their latent power to shock, surprise, and inform. It is invariably true that bad memories welcome and usher in nothingness in this way. In the images of the Roman enslaved individuals, real people,

[1] Morrison 1984: 385.

gaze with melancholy faces through the depths of the years, and boldly sink in to the infinite prospects that open up. That *they* open up for us. An interest in this subject might be thought to involve the need for a certain degree of apprehension, even feelings of dread. However, apart from some hesitations, such feelings can be banished by derealising the factual and realising the fictional. The trauma of the enslaved ruptured the very fabric of (real) experience itself: any resolution or ending representing the tunnel at the end of the light can only be imagined on our part. Commensurate with a compulsion towards a certain kind of critique, this study operates by always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside, bringing about a particular kind of perturbation.

In these works it was never their aesthetic value that counted: they were to be read and understood, so that their meaning came across. They are like marks, made up of freedom and poetry, apparent lightness, but with almost overwhelming depth, marking the redemption of physical realities. In the Roman world everything was art, including the history of enslavement and of the enslaved. They are solid yet transparent, in a way not unlike what will happen in a future dominated by virtual presence and remote intimacy. The floating roots of so many of these enslaved individuals cannot be located in a world where for the elite name, roots, and family lineage created an ideological geography of belonging, of being *inside*, reaching into the future as well as back to the past. For the enslaved the tranquillity of simply inhabiting space could never be enough.

The future could not be talked about, or even perhaps be thought about, in a place in which for many there was no time there any more. It must have seemed like nowhere, and somehow forever. Many Romans had a technician's indifference towards the lives of those who could simply be bought, sold, and owned. Anachronism and inertia in Roman society at times afflicted all of society, slowly cancelling many futures and severely disrupting others. The Romans did not think about change in terms of progress in the way we might do today: indeed, theirs was a society in which the jumbling up of time helped define the present. If they had a perceptual concept of the direction of future time it was enmeshed with cultural expectations that things could only get better by looking back to the Roman past. The Roman future did not disappear overnight: it was a slow cancellation, a gradual and relentless erosion of values and place. They were required to come to terms with the disappearance of the very conditions which allowed Rome to exist, to thrive, to be. The objects and spaces of the city had to be functional, and eventually the people there had to operate in an ostensibly functional way, bringing the background of life to the foreground, which involved the conscious development of the slave economy and the legal framework that supported it and maintained it, that justified it. Not everyone brought in to the society could share and shape its mores and trajectories. The paradoxes of this new situation in which the enslaved found themselves meant that they perhaps could not comprehend the sheer persistence of recognisable forms in Roman culture and a lack of what we would call today 'future shock'. In one very important sense they had no present to grasp and articulate any more. This was all part of the enslaved person becoming present but absent.

I am well aware of the sensitivity around the very use of the words *slave* or *slaves* themselves, with many academics quite deliberately avoiding the use of the words in favour of terms like *the enslaved* or *the enslaved person* and so on. Again, the terms *master* or *mistress* can be substituted by *slave*

Figure 1. Relief of captured barbarians destined for slavery, Trieste. Second century AD. *Lapidaria Tergestino*, Trieste. (Photo: Author).

owner, *enslaver*, or *slaver*. I have found myself using a mixture of these terms here, but I have made sure that discussion of individual slaves or enslaved persons is never mitigated by their situation being somehow lessened through the use of positional euphemisms.

Of course, in many instances it is obvious when a particular image was of an individual who was a slave, standing in attendance, waiting on diners or drinkers, assisting a mistress in toilet preparations, or dressing hair, or proferring a jewellery box and so on. In many cases museological practice still continues to present to visitors a confusing and ambiguous reading of such scenes by regularly describing the slaves in such images not in fact as 'slaves' but most commonly as 'servants', 'attendants', or even 'assistants', as I found very much to my

surprise in a great deal of museum labelling in Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. Such practice very subtly blurs boundaries and potentially confuses visitors reading the labels. Again, in a similar vein, one relatively recent Roman art book I have read refers to male attendant slaves as 'butlers'.

There will be no attempt to make this a history of the Roman slave trade or to map it geographically by tracing the origins of the slaves at one particular time, how sources and 'markets' changed with regard to this. I try to work principally with images of individual enslaved people and with individualised images. This study traces diverse strands of evidence in the form of images that can be identified as central to understanding these visions that speak to the future across various media, and allow us to rethink the relation of self and world in the case of the enslaved of the time: eroticism, exploitation, sexualisation, and disempowerment, symbolic engagements with political ideology and historical trauma, with hints of suicidal melancholy, all feature. In some of these artworks we can see matter and spirit reconciled, in others we see any connection between the two severed and rent asunder. Their plasticity of meaning emits a sense of potential and malleability in terms of its capacity for transformation rather than its obdurateness. Taken together as an archive they present the process of intertwining the individual and the world, the detail and the environment, the visual and often question the (con)sensual. These intertwinings often take shape in the recurring motifs and tropes deployed in the images as they immortalise the ephemeral, touch the edge. The images are invitations to pose questions. The dichotomy between the surface of the images and the image as surface is at times confusing, at other times somehow reassuring. Like the enslaved, some images are detached, separated from their origins, monologues resounding with silence. Coherence arises paradoxically from the fragmentation of identities, and supports the theme of unity through multiplicity.

The artworks discussed, along with other items of material culture linked to the system, determine both the authentic sites of the enslaved experience and the contours of Roman cultural memory. The discursive emphasis of the study will be on process, dynamism, and contingency-temporal, spatial, and juridical-as many previous discussions of Roman slavery have sometimes tended towards brevity or concentration on the literal and the exceptional, but the Roman slave can no longer be conceived of as a stable subject. Any work such as this owes a great deal to the pioneering work on the images of Roman slaves by Jerzy Kolendo and Leonhard Schumacher, and on images of Greek slaves by Nicholas Himmelmann in particular.[2]

A study of images of the enslaved in the Roman world is most certainly not a history of Roman slavery and its ideological and legal superstructure: however, at times the study will tangentially stray into such territory for short periods of time. The study of the historiography of the Roman system of enslavement has passed through its quantitative phase, and there is no longer a conception that the Roman literature on slavery largely consists of bureaucratic records. The academic literature on both Greek and Roman slavery is vast, and continues to grow almost exponentially year on year, and academic attention has quite recently turned to the study of the material culture of Roman slavery, that is objects or artefacts connected to the enslaved at this time. This is best reflected in the 2012 volume *Roman Slavery and Roman*

[2] Kolendo 1979; Schumacher 2001; and Himmelmann 1971.

Figure 2. Statue of a resting child slave, a lantern set down by his side, Rome. First to second century AD. *Museo Nazionale Romano Terme di Diocleziano*. (Photo: Author).

Material Culture edited by Michele George.[3] Other studies have been concerned with very specific aspects of the depiction of the enslaved and their exploitation.

Images of the enslaved were, perhaps surprisingly, common in Roman art, but it is the contexts in which they appeared that provide information on contemporary mores and attitudes. By depicting the enslaved in certain contexts the Romans were recognising the realities of their world-building and empire building. By omitting such images in other contexts they still contrived to *show the absences*, such weighty absences. Roman slavery on the surface might seem to have represented a relationship of service rather than servitude, but, based as it was on power, economic arguments like this start to ring hollow.

It is usually quite obvious in Roman art to which strata of society most individuals portrayed in statue form, in portraits, on reliefs and funerary monuments, in wall paintings, on mosaics, and on coins belonged. Context, exclusivity of certain media, appearance, bearing, clothing, attitude, and gesture all acted to signify those who were of the imperial family or the Roman elite, or who were still high in the social order through magistracies or religious position. However, when others appeared, usually as incidental characters or members of a crowd, sometimes it is difficult to understand or identify who they might have been. Figures represented in group or crowd scenes could have been freeborn members of Rome's plebeian class or they could have been slaves or freedmen/freedwomen. This is quite a grey area in this present study almost inevitably. What was the social make-up of the body of rioters portrayed outside the arena of Pompeii as depicted in a well-known wall painting? Or of the crowd that greeted the emperor Trajan as he hands out alms on one of the friezes on the great arch at Benevento? The Roman plebeian class did not commission artworks portraying themselves, nor obviously did slaves, but later on freedmen/freedwomen did just this. Slaves that 'spoke back'.

[3] George 2012.

This study has grown almost organically as a concept out of my interest in images of enslaved barbarian peoples and more positive images of freedmen and freedwomen artisans who left behind interesting funerary monuments, as discussed respectively in my books *Enemies of Rome. Barbarians Through Roman Eyes* of 2000 and *The Dignity of Labour. Image, Work, and Identity in the Roman World* of 2020 (4).[4] It has also drawn upon my interest in post-colonial studies. But this project is not one of decolonialisation of any aspect of Roman studies, nor is it setting out to be a comparative study of Roman slavery in relation to the slave trade in later historical periods.

In *The Dignity of Labour* I very consciously decided to omit extended discussion of slaves from the study because of their completely anomalous position in the Roman world and in its economy, and because of the sheer complexity of the system of enslavement as formulated in Roman law and demotic practice. Slaves as a group were not altogether outside the contemporary money economy though: many received a regular form of payment-cum-retainer from their master or mistress and some of those working in business or trade on behalf of the master/mistress, that is making them a profit, were allowed to earn and retain a certain amount from these activities for themselves. The system allowed some slaves to purchase their freedom or that of others, and their allowance and earnings enabled some of the enslaved to do just this. Some owners so appreciated the work and character of their slaves that they legally freed them and then became their patrons. Quite commonly, some male owners freed and then married a particular female slave. Some slaves were freed as a condition in the will of their deceased master or mistress. The size and significance of this new freedmen/freedwomen class in Roman society grew over time, as they became a kind of *de facto* Roman upper working class and middle class, as did the influence of the freeborn sons of former slaves. Most freedmen and many freedwomen worked in hands-on occupations requiring regular or continual physical labour, many of the highly-literate ones worked in the professions, particularly the bureaucratic ones, and more still worked in routine jobs that never generated much money or satisfaction and which are not reflected in the epigraphic record that has come down to us. That the imperial slave Montanus could direct his slave Vegetus to purchase the female slave Fortunata for six hundred *denarii* in London in AD 80 demonstrates how the very system of slavery replicated itself again and again within that system on occasions. This action is recorded in a legal text, a deed of sale, recorded on a waxed wooden writing tablet recovered from excavations at the site known by its address as No. 1 Poultry in the City of London in the mid-1990s.

The Roman agricultural writer Varro in a somewhat offhand manner described slaves on a farm estate as being simply 'talking tools', there just to work and to know their place, and thereby lacking in human value.[5] Yet such large farming estates would not have existed, let alone functioned at any level, without the labour of the enslaved. Even if household slaves were thought of and treated less contemptuously, as generally seems to have been the case, their common portrayal in Roman art, in wall paintings, on mosaics, and on reliefs mainly, and their appearances as images on small items of material culture lack any kind of suggestion of personal agency. Their identity in these instances was being chosen and presented *for* them, not *by* them. That is the distinction

[4] Ferris 2000; 2020.

[5] Varro *Res Rustica* 1.17. On this quote from Varro see, for example: Lewis 2013.

Figure 3. Funerary slab dedicated to Euhodus Eupla, with image of a woman accompanied by a miniaturised figure of a slave, Rome. First century AD. *Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria*, Perugia. (Photo: Author).

that means their images have a subtly different ethos and value to the workers' images that formed the core of that previous study of mine.

At best, what we can see (and read about in the works of Roman writers) is the shadow of the reality of the lives of the enslaved: beyond this umbral silhouette we know very little about the shape, content, and texture of the presence of the community of the enslaved at Rome and on the great estates of the Roman countryside. The presence of the enslaved is a shorthand that rarely represents actual substance. But is this just a problem of recognition, not residing in the historical and archaeological archive but with theoretical orientations and

intellectual priorities and positions? The increase in the number of slaves present in Rome seems to have led to a reconstituted urban identity, with so many people here without roots in land, self governance, and language. The forging of an economic identity, perhaps a religious one too, living in an autonomous household, identifying with a master/mistress or sponsor when free, and local ties, involving also the identification with localised symbols and referents. A culture born of (economic and geographic) dislocation became localised. Recognition by the Romans of the *macula servitutis*, the stain of slavery, marks a self-recognition of moral turpitude, and constitutes a point where economics and necessity met with, and interacted with, moral expediency and a generalised hypocrisy that is almost too difficult, complex, and nuanced for us to comprehend today, as we pore over and examine the recycled aesthetics of their pasts.

For a long time I have been fascinated by the fact that in his writings the British cultural theorist and leftwing intellectual Stuart Hall made it clear that he wanted a socialism that could somehow engage with the dreamings and yearnings that he heard in the music of the jazz musician Miles Davis. Just what form such an informed politics would take was never fully elaborated by Hall however, but it was the hoping *for it* that inspired him. How did Hall ever conceptualise such an abstract linkage as this? Such an act of memory. In a similar manner, Miles' music seems to present a kind of soundtrack to the delineation of many kinds of abstractions. Therefore it does not seem too leftfield to suggest here that the sheer strangeness of Roman society and culture to my mind has been best brought into focus not necessarily by academic publications but rather by Federico Fellini's films *Satyricon* and *Roma*, dreamlike studies in cultural dislocation and of the liminal but central place of the enslaved in Roman society. The former of these films Fellini himself described as 'science fiction of the past'.

If there *was* a soundtrack to accompany this study it could not in any way be literal, but would have to include music that both accompanies and animates the subject of the images, that evokes the sense of shadow and shade that their domesticated darkness exudes. Certainly I have written large parts of this book while listening to, or imagining I was listening to, the music of the Durutti Column, Virginia Astley's *From Gardens Where We Feel Secure*, Felt (in their imperial phase, perhaps appropriately), John Cage, particularly the works directly influenced by Erik Satie, Satie himself of course, and works like Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach's *Straight Ahead*, Chic's *At Last I Am Free,* and John Coltrane's *Ascension.*

There is no single narrative by which to explain the Roman system of slavery. It is in the past and has already happened. We therefore cannot change it, so in a way there is nothing now to dread. But in hauntological terms the past has not already happened: it has to be continually renarrated, renarratised (indeed renarrativised), and potentialities still await the outcome of this process, ready to be awakened, to happen. The past will probably turn out to have been (to be) stranger than it has ever been before. What shapes the discourses about and around Roman slavery are surely larger currents than simply economic factors: that slavery was not a self-contained fragment on the edge of things, but rather could have been right at the centre where so many things met, intersected.

Somewhat ironically, in terms of visual sources we know so much about Roman slaves' or former slaves' lives by reason of their deaths, these events often being commemorated with specially-commissioned artworks marrying images and inscriptions,

Figure 4. *Victimarii*, all probably slaves, executing an animal sacrifice, Verona. Second century AD. *Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano,* Verona. (Photo: Author).

these epigraphic testimonies often revealing names and origins of individuals, and their social positions and trajectories. In the case of many of the images discussed, analysed, and dissected in this book it really is a case of what you see is what you see. The domesticity of their darkness belied their power to shock. I will use the term darkness here and throughout the book to both denote the umbral negativity of the Roman slave system and to represent the depth of the cultural shadow into which the enslaved were cast: a darkness, a blackness seemingly only exacerbated by time. Just as on a Munsell Colour Chart (so beloved by field archaeologists) or a Pantone Chart it will be demonstrated that there were many distinct shades or tones of black. I am reminded of the American artist Frank Stella's *Black Paintings*, which were powerful in part due to their very essence of a kind of (falsely) unchallenging domesticity. Rather, they most certainly seem to me to generate a rhythm that suggests a rhombus in the middle of them, a buried shape and structure beneath the umbral sheen of the black painted surfaces.

Masters or mistresses allowing for themselves to be depicted in the same frame as a slave, and the semantics of the difference between framing and openness to this subservient role, will be discussed

elsewhere in this study, but this was in fact quite truly remarkable in so many different ways. When portrayed together they seem to us to be in orbit around each other, although which exerted gravitational pull on which is sometimes impossible for us now to surmise, though in most cases the power differential was such that the enslaved most often lost out. In a few cases it is impossible to read the image of the one without reference to that of the other. Yet the frame of reference was left entirely up to the viewers to decide- before/after, older/newer, stronger/weaker and so on. Every inch of space in the most resonant of these works, such as the silver Warren Cup, was somehow enriched with morphographs, an ontology, a total isocracy.

Thoughts must have emerged out of the empty luminosity of the viewers' minds and disappeared into them again, in a mental space where meaning originated and then fell apart. Just like figures in fading sepia photographs some images must have left a silver trail behind them, and ultimately have encapsulated themselves in a representation that may have had a morphic resonance, that is generated an invisible but truly potent afterimage. Just as there are nodes in the human networks we all inhabit, so certain people assume a narrative significance beyond that which they could possibly have envisioned themselves, far beyond the conventional idea of historical or historicised figures representing recognisable events. Such people are more than themselves, more than people, somehow multiple signifiers.

While the dataset on which this study focuses is not sufficiently large or chronologically nuanced to allow discussion of the temporal development of visual referencing of the enslaved in Roman art, it can certainly be suggested that we can see a move from early stasis to later dynamics. Certain works present features of a planar transcription of visual scenes with a temporal dimension, while others adopted a perspectival deepening to bring out an illusion of physical movement and human drama for the viewer. When the static mode of representation was combined with techniques that eventually allowed for both the viewers' reflection on, and identification with, the subjects, as one-frame representation changed to a dual-perspective representation, the physical distance between the viewer and subject/object was increasingly shortened. There is a distinct feeling that the enslaved of the Roman era now constitute a multiple entity spread out in time, covering not only their own present but also a broader future, as well as the past: by looking at future manifestations we might know our own place in time.

Present-day concerns of social justice mean that these past figures represented as images as a synecdoche of real people in vast numbers are now located within a global history of guilt, exploitation, manipulation, violence, the death of desire (in the French structuralist sense), and the creation of both a geography and history of human enslavement. Indeed, my own enquiry was triggered by certain synchronicities that compelled me to trace narrative threads in multiple directions, but like ore running through rock all the different aspects seemed to occupy a single geo-temporal vein: the history of Roman oppression, coincidence, and change is reflected in the ensuing narrative. If images such as these can be said to form part of an eidetic memory system, then their very fluidity acts to become a surface of both text and images: entering a fiction of this kind, in this way, was surely to enter another dimension of the real sullied by the hate, greed, and anger generated by the system of slavery itself in Roman times.

As to the enslaved individuals represented as didactic or representational images they were only human individuals, and therefore

it is uncertain why the minute details of their lives were presented here through their images as being important in the sense of a fractal mirroring of larger social, ideological, political, and historical processes. Nostalgia was here seemingly abandoned for the immediacy of the ornamental present (as an image or images). Such permanent distraction served to prevent an information overload which ironically appeared as a kind of unintended coherence in the artworks being considered here.

Larger narratives somehow seem to eliminate any individual significance, and the smaller ones only apply to limited systems of cause and effect. If we view these group images as assemblies of figures, then clarity emerges: they have ceased to be Roman works of reportage, about one place at one time, but rather now stress composition and structure over incident and narrative potential, as if the fact that slaves are here is now incidental. Object and image become and remain irreconcilably estranged, but in certain situations like this, when the object is departed and forgotten, the finished image itself sometimes has a certain objectivity which otherwise it would perhaps have lacked.

These are human beings caught up in a historical moment due to Roman ideological positions with regard to the morality (rather, immorality) of slavery developed during the era of the Roman Republic and accelerated as Rome gained an empire and expanded its size exponentially. It is the tragic universality of the experiences shown in the images discussed in this book which gives them a special quality, a resonance and meaning across time. Many of them certainly express a certain tension, if not quite a geometry of fear. A few are disturbing, with a sense of menace in hollowed-out spaces and rooms. Tension sometimes seems to have sucked all the air out of the rooms in which actions take place, as protagonists interact. A sense of foreboding can be read into many of them as well, of things about to happen. Many exude an uncomfortable atmosphere of death and decay, like entombed inhabitants of a buried city awaiting discovery by archaeologists. But most are depictions of the experience, a strange kind of shared experience, of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people, which in itself was a kind of catharsis, testament of a survival of evidence.

Consideration has needed to be given in the study to the occurrence of single individuals as images, pairs of such figures, and multiple figures in images. Some kind of process of transformation is going on here. Obviously when groups of enslaved figures are depicted it acted almost immediately to gradually depersonalise them in the viewers' eyes. Merging into an amorphous mass, like some form of rock-formation. A representation of lives held in suspension, static, without breath, yet still unprotected from the violence across the empire. Here the combination of vast space with a simultaneous sense of claustrophobia is disturbing. A quiet strength, a feeling of optimism. Far from signing a Faustian pact, with constant oversight and control a deep ingrained reticence rose to the surface.

So much of the discourse around the presentation of the history of the early modern British slave trade relates to issues around the declaration of empathy for the unbelievable suffering of the enslaved and traded, around guilt and culpability quite rightly, but also around financial reparations for historic wealth gained from the trade, around urban expansion and aggrandisement at major centres of the trade in Britain, especially Liverpool, Bristol, and Manchester, and around the remodelling of large parts of the English and Scottish countryside and its estates and stately homes with tainted monies. To approach

the study of Roman slavery in this way is not possible. However, such strategies of tension, such geometries of fear, can perhaps be detected in certain Roman artworks, and such spectacular promise of testament was revealed by the divinatory power and the subconscious in the art: these are like conversations among the ruins, shadows cast by unknown, incomplete sculptural figures as in works by Giorgio de Chirico or Carlo Carrà, archaeologies of dismembering and disremembering.

This perspectival deepening was accompanied by a kind of energy flash, and internalised visual thinking from the ekphrastic to the dynamic. Nothing that has once taken shape can ever really be lost: indeed, everything is preserved and can be retrieved under the right circumstances, and by the employment of the right kind of strategic reviewing. No degree of psychic obstruction or the unspeakable can altogether derail such a plan and strategy of recovery, though the deep roots of fear and historic trauma are cypress-black and undoubtedly deep. Psychic time can so easily corrupt pictorial space and haze the visual field. A thematic of lost or obscured origins, of memory and forgetting is played out here, converting much of the imagery into an iconographic and narrative resource. Clairvoyance and prophetic vision render the gaze of the subject inaccessible to the viewer, but not their presence.

The implications of an eroticised scenario of instruction or discipleship shapes, indeed taints, many of the images: the oracular is so often threatened with failed or blocked transmission, an oppressive sense of obstructed communication. As with so much Roman art, a sense of an obscure loss is here kept alive through a kind of compulsive repetition. The centrality of absent bodies in the built spaces of so much Roman art signals the occluded status of the enslaved body within the spaces of the classical city. Yet when they do appear, their presence can unsettle the viewer and enlist him or her in a project of endless, inexplicable mourning, this rhetoric of mourning and objectification now being governed by anachronism rather than first-hand knowledge. Thus is created a visuality of high tension through an accelerated motion of images. But only we can experience these works as a series more powerful than works on their own, because we can bring them together in an analytical gallery and context in ways that they could not be viewed in their contemporary world. There are often too intimations of a forgotten or obscured violence that we can only imagine in a kind of dream writing governed by a tropology of spatial enclosure and mortification, tied to an imaginary construct of lost time. However, this does not necessarily mean that we cannot try to return to origins. If we seek to capture an image first, then we can gradually bring in the peripheral views, suffused as they so often are with further information and insider knowledge.

These emblematic images construct a mythical world not so far removed from brutal reality, performing the dual functions of representation and interpretation. So very often incidental images of the enslaved complete a work, give it evident credence and a kind of gravitas that presence/absence can so often bestow on ideological formulations, enriching the meaning of the overall image by intertextuality. In such cases they act as semi-decontextualised vehicles or units of meaning, and may have functioned as nodal links to recreate a new context for the represented images in the artworks, and to put a third dimension into the thematic planarity of them.

Just as the Italian poet Maria Grazia Calandrone in her book *Your Little Matter* created a work of resurrection through

language, so academics can attempt to do the same, to tear the stories of the Roman enslaved from the earth.[6] They have lost their origins and their bodies need reviving, revivifying, to make them as hot as the world in summer and as firm as the earth. Looking at them from the future, academic enquiry seeks to leave them free again, as subjects not objects: to stage a powerful kind of homecoming. Many of these images are of people so young, and yet now seemingly also so very old. The works discussed in this study allow for the discovery or revelation of the strange or numinous within the seemingly familiar or everyday. This theatre of repressed memory, this casting of shadows, creates a potent source of estrangement effects, in that they constitute a network of conflicting spatial tensions that psychologically-speaking undermine any initial impression of quietude or stability. A kind of Jungian psychoanalysis of the Roman slave system would reveal a fever dream of sorts built upon greed and self-delusion.

House slaves appear so commonly in certain genres of Roman art as to represent a genuine phenomenon, even though their appearances are as incidental characters, in walk-on parts intended to enhance the presence and status of a master or mistress. These incidental figures, both men and women, adults and very often young children, are almost hauntological, even hallucinatory, spirits in other lives, in other times. The tasks they carry out, such as carrying in jugs of wine and pouring from them, proffering trays of food, holding up mirrors, titivating hair, or reading out loud or taking dictation actually become recognisable tropes through their repetition. There is a reassurance built in to their familiarity, but we must not let this false *feeling* of reassurance dictate any part of the narrative of this study.

The relationships established in the artworks between masters/mistresses and slaves were presented and handled with a decontextualised intensity, not as a logical project but as one engaged with the very embodiment of power and status. Each image certainly possessed and displayed definite values, but these values were not equal or indeed stable, some more perniciously so than others. Verbal violence was in some cases involving *graffiti* scratched by the enslaved into the image, the work literally cut in to the plaster, as in the case of finds in a building on Rome's Palatine Hill. Conversely, the enslaved themselves if working in creative or artisanal jobs or roles produced things that acquired presence rather than prestige. Identity as a sense of self is carried too, like a material possession: it comes out of cultural heritage, origins, and the effort expended to make a heritage live in the present rather than remain dead in the past. There was surely an unacknowledged debt here, a redressing of silence, a making of bold statements. It seems almost contradictory to write about affluent slaves, businesswomen, and legal fictions, but the great complexity of the contemporary laws underwriting and to some extent justifying Roman slavery mean that these are topics that need to be considered.

Some of the images, these snapshots, these evocations of a kind, have the reach and salience of prophecy. Because the Roman system of slavery consisted of contradictions, related objects and their situations very often appear to us now as being at odds with each other. There is a slippage here between a documentary attitude, or rather documentation, a statement of position, and a singularly prophetic resonance that has become attached to these works subsequently. I found myself lurching between two attitudes that for a long while I felt could at no time be reconciled in my mind. Then they were.

[6] Calandrone 2024.

What was foundational here was a set of confusions, a conflict between circumstance and rhetoric which privileged fine prospects rather than back-breaking labour, not even as scale. Like the stark, bleak topography of a *terra nummius*, Roman estates existed because of slavery, because of the ruptures associated with pastoral expansion. The physical absence of human figures in most Roman landscape art evokes histories of dispossession, but also raises a wider question about the space and time of art then, about shifting practices and categories such as identity or hybridity. A technology of fear in such localities of desire led to the creation of a fictive environment. Landscape wall paintings, like De Stijl grids, created several layers, with elements and motifs disposed (exposed?) below, within, and above the cage-like grids. These elements did not exist or subsist in isolation: rather, they are caught in networks of abstractions, included and excluded forms at multiple levels. As noted elsewhere in the book grids of surveillance existed superimposed over many towns and vast swathes of countryside.

Like many books this study is about beginnings, spaces (urban and rural), artworks, presences, hierarchies, situations, identities, endings, retrospection, and prospects. The structure of the book will allow for the detailed description and discussion of a number of individual artworks in each of the first five chapters to introduce themes that will be further explored and elaborated on in the rest of each chapter. The concluding two chapters will consider broader topics, and act as contextualising overviews of the study's principal thesis. The book is therefore structured as follows: Chapter One considers the silver vessel known as the Warren Cup which allows for a broader discussion of master/servant relationships, psycho-sexual inter-relationships, the exercise of male power in Roman society, and the place of enslaved children in the Roman system; Chapter Two presents an account of the visual presentation of the enslaved in terms of their buying and selling at slave markets and images relating to the trade and its normalisation as part of Roman society, in other words the domestication and objectification of the slave; Chapter Three examines the slave as agricultural labourer in the Roman countryside and its systems of surveillance and control, and considers the human image in so-called colonial landscapes, principally wall paintings and mosaic pavements in the form of Nilotic landscapes, with control/surveillance at Pompeii highlighted as a final case study; Chapter Four considers interiority and the enslaved in Roman society, and explores the potential evidence for considering the religiosity of slaves; Chapter Five represents an analysis of the process of slave manumission and its ceremonies and legal implications, along with an analysis of how and why the freedmen and freedwomen of the Roman world came to use art to represent themselves as a valid social group within Roman society, perhaps holding up a mirror to the historical process and practice in which they were protagonists; Chapter Six turns towards more theoretical issues relating to the presence and absence of certain types of images of the enslaved in Roman art, and whether the idea of the fictional slave became a figure whose anodyne presentation was intended to ameliorate reality and uncomfortable truths, with comparative reference to the presentation of images of the enslaved and images of freed and emancipated peoples from other chronological periods and contexts; and in Chapter Seven the ways in which art was used to place the enslaved in the shadows in the Roman world can also be seen to have been a process that we can today untangle to the benefit of the study of the iniquities of the practice of slaving.

Throughout the study uncomfortable questions will have to be asked about the nature of certain aspects of the operation of the Roman system of enslavement at both its broadest cultural/societal level and at the level of the *domus* and interpersonal interactions there. The study of images of the enslaved would seem to be crucial evidence here. There was certainly a foetid underbelly in both contexts, public and private. Was there overt or covert racial prejudice with regard to Black African slaves in Roman times, or prejudice against other racial or ethnic groups? Was there prejudice in terms of different experiences for the enslaved based upon their gender or sexual orientation? Was the sexual domination and/or exploitation of enslaved individuals-men, women, and children-as widespread and pernicious as some strands of evidence suggest? Was the violence and violation inherent in all and any system of enslavement part of the more broad violence at the very heart of Roman culture? Questions about the reception of Roman slavery in later artistic contexts will focus upon issues raised by a number of modern and contemporary artists and film-makers.

In 2009 Natalie Boymel Kampen published her intriguing book *Family Fictions in Roman Art*, comprising a number of case studies forensically examining the presence and absence of certain individuals and family members in a few well-chosen case studies of group portraits of imperial and elite figures.[7] The presence/absence dichotomy is suggested as a useful way to look at the subjective/objective construction of other types of Roman art, and indeed I have found its application in certain situations both helpful and instructive as a guiding methodological approach. Indeed, though the imperial houses would have been teeming with slaves of all kinds, from learned specialists and trusted advisors, to clerks and scribes, musicians, cooks, cleaners, porters, gardeners, labourers, and others, virtually none ever appears in Roman imperial art, even as an incidental character. Yet for many of the Roman elite their appearance on reliefs and so on in tandem with their retinues of slaves was a way to project their status and riches.

For the emperors and their families, as for the elite families, contemporary ideas of privacy as understood today were absolutely meaningless. One could isolate oneself socially, or be put into a position of social isolation, but this did not mean that you were necessarily *alone*. One could find a curious kind of solitude in the country or on a private estate, enjoying nature and reading like Cicero, but again this would have been for the emperors and the elite in the presence of multitudes of attendants and workers, the majority of them doubtless slaves. While Natalie Kampen designated these staff and retinue members as being invisible, she also perceptively noted that the Roman definition of the *familia* was sometimes, and indeed quite often, broadened to take in not just the biological family in its widest definition but also 'the people, free and enslaved, the animals and the land....'. The Romans also used the term *familia* to define in an anodyne way a retinue or group of slaves, all of whom worked under the roof of, or on the land of, a single master and mistress.

If it were not for the academic notes and bibliography accompanying this study it could perhaps be classified as a polemical essay, but it is in fact less essayistic than aphoristic, but not disconnected or incoherent I hope. The study is a way of bringing the background to the foreground, almost a matter of mood and tone. If there is a certain languor, a radically depersonalised serenity on loan from dreams here, then that

[7] Kampen 2009.

reflects the recorded dreaming of the Roman enslaved and then is surely no bad thing. The picture of Roman slavery that emerges from this study is very expressionistic in terms of the moods and ideas generated by the examination of the archive of images left to us by serendipity and the motions of the past. This archive also presents a sense of drift, of senseless violence, of brutally-cancelled futures.

Even with curiosity as a lodestar and the sometimes transformative power of the investigative and compassionate gaze it has not always been possible to establish an engagement with the enslaved other. History and its contemporary ramifications is often in the way, blocking movement from the factual to the subjective and intimate, the border between them being continually contested. At least this study can act as an invitation to meditate and to contemplate: like an interactive installation readers can walk through the book instead of standing before it as they would do with a picture. The figures in the images can thus become attitudes, gestures, and ideas given physical presence in the space of an instance. Empathetic reciprocity hopefully will underpin every reading presented here, the recognition of a common network so often severed by historical drift. A commitment to remember, to reconnect, to rediscover, to uncover, to understand, to interpret, and to explain works against this motion towards incipient drift.

If these images were sounds they would be marked by an abrasive metallic texture, signalling a clangorous din, their immediacy, urgency, and viscerality being predominant, but also with a sense of their being controlled, detached, complex. An obliqueness gave them traction and durability, otherwise we would not be talking about them today, making the overall archive a largely opaque, inexhaustible single work that never quite fully reveals itself even now.

Terms like project, piece, work, and object place the images of the enslaved in a broader aesthetic venture than simply 'Roman art'. Events portrayed seem arbitrary, but resonate in other works, each with autonomous value. Time allows me/us to intervene in pieces of art, to isolate, excise, and manipulate individual elements, with as much of an emphasis on process as on product. In this way we can undertake an exploration of what was possible in pictorialising social values and ideologies, and how far that could be pursued before it became invisible. In each work there is not a wasted motion, though strictly there is no motion at all, movement being inessential and extraneous. Presentation here seems to be about persistence and intuitive orienteering, meaning that there can be discerned an overlying intellectual grid, the works looking outwards but not turning in on themselves. Of course, they do not convey actual reality so much as the complexity of reality, with all its ambiguity and slippage. The viewer today can now be part of the process, not bogged down or distracted with expectations of meaning, message, and closure. These images were never intended to travel far beyond their immediate contexts, to do anything other than create a resistant, controlled space. A model with associations of continuity and certainty was anathema. Interest lay not in the illusory stability of the *self* but in the discontinuous, uncertain realm and reality of the *other*. In looking back they rarely paused to contemplate the present, being otherwise engaged in an ongoing state of becoming other and encountering otherness.

Much of the pictorial evidence gathered here might defy the readers' expectations, that the enslaved were not subjects in Roman art because of their status as objects. These

images go from the personal to the universal, and from the political to the institutional. For some this might be an unsettling experience because of the myriad of images (and thus voices) they are exposed to. The kaleidoscopic and polyphonic nature of the images exemplifies the works as being more a series of encounters rather than a historical narrative. In presenting the here and now of those encounters the works lay emphasis on the fleeting nature of being itself and on the question of time more generally. They therefore have a certain transient quality, with the privileging of ordinary people to illustrate the idea of time. They invite us to revisit a Roman world that we often think we know. This depiction of the margins requires specific attention: by analysing specific examples one can realise how the creation and placement of the images defines their praxis. The whole archive is not about pure knowledge, but about the exploration of multiple versions of a single event, and about the passing of time. An almost experimental layering of emotions and sensations not only help tell an elusive set of stories, but they seem to shock us, the spectators, into reflection. These works so often evince qualities one might more associate with a Noh play, many achieving a certain spare, austere aesthetic incorporating charged and dynamic immobilities.

Studies of the social, ideological, and political history of Roman slavery generally suggest the presence of evidence for the system as being purely economic, and related to concepts of property and ownership, or in cultural and social terms related to what Orlando Patterson has called 'social death' for the enslaved, or indeed both.[8] Once more, arguments still rage about the distinction first suggested by Moses Finley between a slave society and a society *with* slaves, and how this might have applied in Roman times. Much of the academic literature on Roman slavery is now more concerned with what has been called 'slaving strategies', the investigation of how slaves might have been employed, coerced, and controlled, and indeed how they might have been exploited or abused. Questions of agency, normally discussed with regard to evidence of resistance and revolt, again now are common in academia.

Sometimes in order to go forward one has to go back to a time when art had not renounced the desire to give form to the world: indeed, far from it in the case of the Roman era. The artworks which form the subject of this study speak of difference within the heart of an empire of indifference and violence. But it is not simply a question of retrieving a past specific to the demands of the present, dedicated to the practice that is critique and the critique that is practice. The differences between historical moment and contemporary resonance can be marked and stark: today all can be thought to have been safely consigned to an archive, enclosed in a time one can visit like a tourist before returning home to dripping taps and the workaday world. The insomnia of present reason can breed falsities and misconceptions. Such a fake past just seems to offer spectacle or disintegration: another world was not possible for the enslaved of Roman times, even though we might want to will it into being. Roman slavery was a situation we can now see was simply temporary, a singular unity of space and time which calls for a different kind of remembering. At worst theories of remembering, like the art that informs us here, might turn in on themselves, living on through commentary, investing in their own death. Both idea and practice can be shocking.

Images such as those of the Roman enslaved inevitably move from a stage of amplification,

[8] Patterson 1982.

where the form grows to incorporate whole aspects of existence making life meaningful, to one of decomposition into spent forms, when forms turn in on themselves and become self-referential. Such forms fall from grace and history: they die and become unreal.

Some of these imagistic snapshots of enslaved persons in the Roman world are characterised by a feeling of violent struggle just beyond the frame, intensity, drama, sadness, heavily-accentuated opposing rhythms, and a real sense of movement, and the general effect is apt to be overwhelming. One senses souls in torment, harsh and dramatic, in sombre tonality. Some though, it has to be said, are calmer, lighter, and less melancholy, almost tranquil and static, intangible even. Ambiguity exists as to the identities of those captured in images which were intended to be of non-specific places. Yet in other intermediary realms where the real mingles with the visionary, the images evoke a range of widely-differing moods and sensations, from suffering and gloom, violence and serenity, to fear and exultation. Not one seems to me superficial, and they all have elements that appear meaningful, even spontaneous. I keep returning to the idea of shadow and darkness, that liminal state in which the enslaved had to live their lives, between others' lives. As images they therefore do not attract all the light to themselves somehow, as do some free voracious bodies which thereby drain their surroundings. They establish a constant, perhaps sometimes bland and unrestrained clarity, producing a transparency which is not deliberate but fortuitous, but which is certainly cumulative, full of possibilities for reclamation.

The defined state of an enslaved person in Roman times as an object, a possession of someone, and not an active subject is complex to grasp. I hope it does not appear banal or facile to be now exploring this dichotomy through comparison. Many contemporary artists either seek to be the subject of their own work and artistic practice or have already achieved such a state. Few seek to be the object of their art, and in the few examples that can be talked of in this way it is probably Marina Abramovic who most successfully operates at the interface between artist/subject and artist/object. What might be learned from this of relevance to the present study that perhaps cannot be learned by comparative analysis with systems of slavery in other eras and geographical locations?

Abramovic's well-known piece of performance art *Rhythm 0* of 1974, performed first in Naples in that year, owed something to Yoko Ono's earlier, pioneering performance of her own *Cut Piece*. Abramovic stood next to a table on which had been laid out seventy two items, many of them tools or weapons, such as a gun, a whip, an axe, and a fork, but also including a number of seemingly anodyne objects-grapes, a rose, water, a bottle of perfume, and matches for instance. The audience and spectators were invited to 'use [the objects on the table] on me as desired. I am the object.' As with Ono's performance of *Cut Piece* most of the audience members responded with gentle and loving interventions, or with symbolic gestures: however, a small number of others seized the opportunity to inflict pain and hurt on the artist, often in the most gratuitous manner imaginable, so that limits of social and socialised behaviour were tested to breaking point, generating confrontation.

Reports of instances of violence meted out to the enslaved of the Roman era by their legal masters, and the Roman laws that sanctioned violent punishment within certain bounds, will be considered in a number of places in this study where this line of discussion

centred around the question of the subject/object dichotomy will be continued.

The Roman images of the enslaved brought together and discussed in this book represent social comment of their time, infused with both fantasy and reality, with hybridity, and with ornament. We are looking at a gallery of explorations of inherited and cultural trauma: the art was never intended to be interpreted in this way, but history has dictated that this is simply now the only lens through which to view it. We cannot ignore the tragic, horrific, or hyper-melancholic aspects, but simply stress their importance, and empathise with the feeling of constant longing which emanates from them. There is no place for a stance of denial. Like the British metal sculpture movement of the 1950s they evoke *a geometry of fear*, in a quest to map out and organise a symbolic space for domination, control, and surveillance. Yet their gestural territory far exceeds the immediate dimensions of the static bodies portrayed: they were placed in the scenes as signifying objects to articulate the spaces in which they appeared, but now here are being read as subjects helping us to explore that space, this anxiety void. These were like sounds that gave meaning to silence.

Those born into slavery in the Roman period were not 'socially dead' or 'socially alienated' because they had never belonged to society in any other guise than as a slave. The emergence of kinship ties among Roman slave groups, forming communities based on different aspects of their shared experiences, again questions the idea of 'social death' as a unifying signature of Roman slavery in all contexts. A new Materialist turn in Roman archaeology has not been reflected in research areas right across the board in the discipline in the last two decades, though studies of Roman slavery have most certainly embraced the study of the material culture and objects associated with the slavery system, and through objects 'social death' can be explored as a concept. There is still quite a notable discrepancy between artefact studies and studies of art which this present book hopes to offer a partial solution to. That the enslaved can be studied as a distinct sub-group of the broader subaltern and marginalised classes of Roman society does though fail to fully respond to the certified historical situation that saw these people actually classified as objects (rather than subjects), as economic goods, as belongings.

We do not hear their native tongues or their oral stories, or see their dances: these would have been particularly numerous and extraordinarily varied in the Roman period due to the diverse ethnic origins of the slaves, yet not necessarily more diverse than the peoples caught up in the later transatlantic trade. Yet many material items relating to Roman slavery fall into the category of 'speaking objects', objects which are inscribed with text in the first person or which directly address a viewer in some manner. This allowed for objects to be animate, to 'speak' for themselves or for others in other words. Slaves had a legal position as human beings, and it was recognised that they had certain rights. The most obvious item of Roman material culture linked to slavery that can be defined as a talking object is, of course, the inscribed slave collar which will be discussed in detail elsewhere in this book. But in the case of these collars it is not the slave talking through the text but the master of that slave, the collar being an active messenger for the master and his class of slave owners. Did slaves have personal possessions? If so, did they ever follow the common Roman practice of marking them with their name or with some other kind of identifying mark?

The idea has been put forward by Noel Lenski that many representations of slaves

in Roman art were in the form of decorated/decorative functional artefacts such as lampholders, serving trays, pepper pots, and so on.[9] Here the subject really has become an object, and objects of a kind which would have belonged to the elite who owned slaves themselves. To a great extent I agree with this, but I do not feel that Lenski's interpretation is quite nuanced enough. Eva Mol has categorised the objects in this class as either being in the form of images of young, pretty Greek boys or young Black African males, just the kind of slaves serving food and drink at *domus* banquets and, in the case of the latter, commonly acting as attendants at the baths. Mol asserts that if slaves were tools then tools could be made to look like slaves.[10] The cruelty of much Roman humour, reflecting perhaps its host violent and mendaciously-cruel society, is reflected in the existence of such items.

The waiting slave as an artistic trope must have reflected to some extent much of the existence and time of a household or domestic slave, probably more so in those grand houses where numbers of slaves were large. The 400 slaves of Pedanius Secundus cannot all have been busy scurrying around all the time, everywhere.

The fly in the ointment of Mol's otherwise incisive, persuasive, and inspiring deconstruction of academic narratives of Roman slavery is that not all images of the Roman enslaved are cruel in this way or act as representations of slaves as gilded human goods on display to enhance the status of their owner/master. 'The waiting slave' and 'the slave as embodied practical object' are distinct categories of representations of slaves in Roman art, but they are just that: categories, and two among many, as this book will seek to demonstrate. Her argument, and part of the argument of Noel Lenski, tends to perhaps downplay at best the context of use and display of each category of image. Enslaved men and women did not *become* actual objects, even if they were thought of as being owned by or belonging to someone like an actual object, item, or artefact did. Varro's use of the phrase 'talking tool' is both a blessing for the rare and real insight it provides on the elite Roman man's view on his world and milieu, and at the same time a curse in that by taking up the phrase and running with it this insight can be imbued with a universality of meaning that it was never intended to convey perhaps. This was linguistic and mental gymnastics, not magical transformation of some kind. It is not helpful academically to use arguments that might be thought of as dehumanising, when humanising the marginal was the original aim. There were not Roman cyborgs after all.

The concept and idea of transformations, of metamorphoses, in Greco-Roman myth and Roman literary writings was pervasive, but probably was not something that was actually believed possible.

Religious concepts of mutation, even of transmutation, complicate the picture somewhat. Change was real however, and change could be engineered, or managed, or mitigated, or fought against.

The body as a site of pain and suffering in Roman culture reached a kind of peak in the Antonine period. Anatomical or medical *ex votos* represented real human bodies, they did not replace them, but faith in the gods or in some unseen power in general (or even just old-fashioned hope and optimism in adversity) animated them.

It has been suggested that the image of a slave with a lamp might have been imbued with more significance than might at first

[9] Lenski 2013.
[10] Mol 2023: 721-724.

appear to us. Lighting the way for the master or mistress was an important role, ensuring safety in transit either inside the *domus* or outside when travelling at night along the city streets or out in the countryside. The role could even be thought to have possessed sometimes an almost divinatory power. According to Suetonius, one of Augustus' lamp bearers died having been struck by lightning on a journey in Cantabria, thus saving the emperor from that fate himself: in thanks to the gods the emperor dedicated the construction of the Temple of *Jupiter Tonans* (Thundering) in Rome.[11]

In this context what are we to make of the recorded weird omen of a female slave in Rome giving birth to 'a monster', a boy child with 'four hands, four feet, four eyes, double the usual number of ears, and two sets of sexual organs'.[12] This sounds to us today like the rare phenomenon of the birth of Siamese or, more properly, conjoined twins. It is probably not altogether a coincidence that the abnormal or rather uncommon birth was attributed to a slave mother, as if she had been gestating a monster inside her at the same time that the Roman authorities on Sicily had been gestating a monster in their own midst in the form of the rebel slave leader Eunus (Figure 5). This event, and the eruption of Mount Etna, presaged and foretold the terrible events that would be triggered by the slave revolt of Eunus on Sicily, some six decades or so before the revolt of slaves under the more famous Spartacus. This event is now known as the First Servile War of 135-132 BC.

One-time slave of Antigenes, Eunus had been a free man captured by slave traders and sold by them into slavery. He became decried as a prophet who uttered predictions as if in a trance, and a devotee of the Syrian goddess Atargatis. Some coins were issued by the rebel slaves, suggesting that they saw themselves now as a society, as a regime, and no longer as a collection of the marginalised. The religious imagery on the coins, the figure of Demeter (protective goddess of the Sicilan city of Enna) and a sheaf of grain, recalling Ceres, again usurped the protective power of certain Roman goddesses to act on behalf of the rebel slaves. Second only to bloodshed and the killing of citizens and legal masters of slaves, the most alarming thing that the slaves could have done was to turn the island's economy on its head. They wrecked the agricultural economy through the violent withdrawal of the labour of the slaves on whom it depended, and seized the means by which the economy could function through the production and minting of coinage, and controlled its circulation for the buying of goods and services and wages in the island economy. The propaganda value of coin issues was also seized upon and usurped, while the Greco-Roman imagery of kings and associated gods and goddesses was weaponised, and also turned back upon itself, in a manner of speaking.

While the spark for the rebellion was set off according to the historian Diodorus by the brutality of slave owner Damophilus and his wife Megallis, this was presented to his readers as an explanation rather than an acceptable excuse for the actions of Eunus and the other slaves. It was perhaps an ex-governor of Sicily who set up an inscribed commemorative stone, the so-called *Polla Elogium*, at Basilicata in the central Apennines of mainland Italy in the mid-second century BC, recording his role in recapturing 917 escaped slaves on the mainland and returning them to Sicily.[13] If the question remains how the Romans might have wished posterity and

[11] Suetonius *Divus Augustus* 29.91.
[12] *Diodorus Siculus* 34/5.2.10.
[13] *CIL* XII.638. On the Polla *Elogium* see, for example: Verbrugghe 1973.

Figure 5. Bronze coin issue, Enna mint, of the rebellious slave leader Eunus, linked to the First Servile War of 135-132 BC and centred on a slave uprising in Sicily. Minting and issuing coins reclaimed agency and authority for the enslaved in this case. 135-132 BC. British Museum, London.
(Photo: Copyright Trustees of the British Museum).

history to remember the system of slavery then our problem is how to remember that remembrance, how to turn reception on to monuments like that at Polla. Images of the enslaved in their extremity embody the system of slavery, and are embodied in the extremes of the situation itself. Looking at these images and parsing them represent classic forms of connecting past to present, here to there, and this to that.

The consistent lesson of history is to expect surprises: amid the churn and ache of history passing much is revealed to us by looking at painful archives such as this. Images of the Roman enslaved were created to be ephemeral, no more than the routine spasms of an age out of love with itself, immune to its own inherent propensity towards cruelty and violence, but now they reveal the gap between this world and its promises of empire without end, a void between what had been done and what was then being done. This could be said to work as a spectacle of negation rather than as negation of the spectacle, this difference being the thing, in that the enslaved and their representation as images constituted a community of difference. The composition of some of the images to be discussed sets up a delicate balance and tension between what we see and what we are told by Roman writers, and between formal restraint and the increasingly imprecise material. With patient viewing we can unravel the submerged tensions between the protagonists in any scene in which the enslaved appear alongside a member or members of the Roman elite. All we imagine as darkness is simply space out of the light.

The countryside seen in Roman landscape painting is weird and totally unreal: it so often seems uninhabited, and empty of all human life which the viewer has to accept as happening somewhere else. We are more likely to see a rural god or goddess, a satyr or maenad than we are an enslaved agricultural worker. These hand-painted landscapes and skies are rapturous vistas of luminous colour

mixes and evanescent lighting. At once static creations like cinematic exploratory colour-keys for a sequence to be filmed: our brains can animate them into movement, creating an environment, like in Fellini's 1957 *Nights of Cabiria*, Pasolini's *Accattone* of 1961 and *Mamma Roma* of 1962. In a way art is now their home: art about the absence and the aftermath of violence, in a time and place peopled by ghosts, hauntological, where the absence is almost deafening. The only way for the enslaved to *be* present was to *stay* present in this chronicle of absence and ghosts. There the past was text and the present was now. Art became a place where those without power could be presented as images in which we now can place our trust. These images of the bodies of the enslaved in Roman society became the sites of their vulnerability, but also literally instruments of escape into the future. When the battleground was the individual human body the struggle can be seen to have been taking place on the smallest possible scale. As images they were silent, but it was an active silence, a porous silence, in which viewers could be filled with everything that the enslaved person's image was telling them. This realisation, this revisionism, this revelation in a Joycean sense, fell faintly through the contemporary universe and faintly fell like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and all the dead. When an occurrence like this is an act of vitality it makes sense.

A number of academics such as Sian Lewis, Kelly Wrenhaven, and William Thalmann have already discussed the semiotics and semantics of the representation of slaves in ancient art more broadly, including earlier Greek art, and their work is important for setting out the groundrules for analysing such images on their own terms.[14] While the art of Roman freedmen/freedwomen represented part of the reality of that class, the reality of the slave is trickier to find in art, though indeed not impossible as might be thought, given that the enslaved had no agency in the commissioning of artworks, even if in many cases they were the very artists and craftspeople who physically created them. Another aspect to be considered in this book is to what extent slaves were themselves sometimes the viewers of images of slaves, and how this viewing might have been conducted, and, of course, in which contexts. The potential intertextuality of a slave's viewing needs to be considered.

There was a vast range of methods of depiction of the enslaved in both Greek and Roman art, from occasional but common images of grotesque, ugly, or deformed individual slaves, from supposedly humorous or comic slave figures in contrived situations, to the idealised beautiful slave, the latter usually being in the form of images of androgynous but sexualised young men or boys. This wild variability in image creation represented a radical instability in the visualisation of social and societal relationships in Roman culture. Strategies of depiction included the common manipulation of the physical reality of the slave body, by often miniaturising the figure of the slave to denote his or her relative lack of importance in relation to a normal-sized master or mistress, and the depiction of slave bodies in subservient positions or poses, or indicated as servile by the formalised gestures of the master or mistress. The placing or positioning of slaves in compositional terms often located them at the margins or corners of scenes, almost quite literally melting into the shadowy dark at the fringes of the action. Yet there are many scenes where slaves are depicted as active protagonists, though not ones with agency, their bodies not singled out in any way or subjected to poses of subservience.

[14] Lewis 1998/1999; Wrenhaven 2011, 2012, and 2021; and Thalmann 2011.

Figure 6. Nymphs as slave nurses tending to the infant Bacchus/Dionysus on sarcophagus front, Rome. Mid to late second century AD. *Musei Capitolini*, Rome. (Photo: Author).

There are also humanising and personalising strategies apparent in some artworks, as opposed to the more common dehumanising ones, where images of individual slaves are marked out by being accompanied by their name.

A number of funerary monuments dedicated by their masters or mistresses (their owners) to individual, named deceased slaves constitute another very distinct group that needs to be considered in the broad context of imageries of enslavement, and not somehow as outliers as they sometimes have been considered or treated. Finally, there are the numerous funeral monuments of Roman freedmen and freedwomen whose identity and agency as freed slaves were displayed in both private and public spaces. Given all of this I cannot altogether agree that there is any crisis of representation here or that the lived reality of the slave had no place in art of any kind, when it quite clearly did on occasions, at least in terms of the reality of the existence of the slave. It can therefore be seen that as the use of such images spread, so they metastasised. It will be evident therefore that I am very much in agreement with the assertion that 'the perspective of the slave offers us a radical position from which we can understand and critique ancient societies'.[15]

[15] Alston 2011: 2.

Quite remarkably, as Edith Hall has demonstrated, the writer Artemidorus in his *Oneirocritica*, a compendium of dream interpretations, gives quite a prominent voice to the enslaved in terms of presenting and analysing the meaning of dreams of a number of slaves alongside those of citizens and the free, without prejudice or favour.[16] Hall's analysis of Artemidorus' strategies of interpretation of the dreams of slaves bears a heavy gloss of Freud, but it might be of equal value to consider the imagistic nature of these presented dreams from the standpoint of the theories behind Surrealist art, even if the Surrealists themselves also heavily leaned on Freudian analysis in many respects. One of the more obvious dreams that so many people have had, and will doubtless continue to have for ever, is to fly with wings like a bird. We are told by Artemidorus that for a slave such a dream represented fantasies of freedom.

Literate elite Roman readers all would have presumably been familiar with Homer's *Odyssey*-it would indeed be very surprising if they had not been. As such, men and women readers of the work who were more than likely to be owners of large contingents of household slaves must surely have been taken aback by the astonishing and powerful forces of violence unleashed upon a large number of his female household slaves by Odysseus as part of his homecoming. Having already despatched all one hundred and eight of Penelope's suitors, the bloodlust of Odysseus raged on as he turned his attention to dishonour (as *he* saw it) in his home during his absence.[17] In brief, informed by his former wet-nurse Eurycleia of the untoward behaviour of twelve of the fifty female slaves in the household, some of whom were accused of sleeping with some of Penelope's suitors, because of what he saw as disloyalty among the female household slaves exacerbated by their subterfuges and lies Odysseus ordered his son Telemachus to slay all twelve by the sword, though in the end they were all in fact hung. The weeping and distress of the girls is gratuitously described, as are their twitching feet as they hang in mid-air off the ground, each gasping for a last breath. Throughout the *Odyssey,* and indeed in the *Illiad* too, we find long lists of names of people and places, but, significantly, not one of the twelve hanged girls is named. Fatal punishment is also meted out to the slave steward Melanthius for his poor, not to say deliberately neglectful, management of Odysseus' estate during his absence. First his nose and ears are cut off, then his genitals to feed the pigs, and then his hands and feet. These uncontrollable eruptions of violence react with feelings of relief, delight, grief, despair, and suppressed guilt. These traumatic slaughters in a way represented, *in extremis*, the male violence inherent in any system of slavery. It is violence dressed up as paternalism, as concern about honour and status, belonging, responsibility, and shame. Command, control, surveil, manage, dominate, punish, harm, abuse, hurt, rape, assault, brand, mark, mutilate, whip, hit, thrash, torture, crucify, hang, kill. Yet Homer's text implies that punishment in these cases was deserved, and only to be expected when a strong master has to deal with bad slaves.

But public and spectacular violence represented a specifically Greek method of cowing and controlling a large body of slaves rather than necessarily simply relying on the punishment of individual slaves whenever such was deemed necessary as a corrective or warning. There is only one such mass punishment known to us from Roman times, and this is discussed elsewhere in the book. A lot also can be read in to the story of Cupid and Psyche as narrated by Apuleius in the *Metamorphoses* (*the Golden Ass)*. After fleeing

[16] Hall 2011.
[17] Homer *Odyssey* 22.468-474.

Figure 7. Detail of a slave messenger delivering a scroll to the seated *dominus*, from the so-called *Dominus Julius* mosaic from Carthage, Tunisia. Late fourth century AD. *Musée National du Bardo*, Tunis. (Photo: Copyright *Agence de Patrimonie Tunisie et la Musée National du Bardo).*

with her lover Cupid/Eros from her mistress Venus, for whom Psyche was an attendant slave, five times Psyche tries to commit suicide by different means. These suicide attempts were thwarted by ridiculous occurrences on each occasion, suggesting that as a slave to Venus Psyche's agency over her own body no longer existed.

The history of Roman slavery is also a history of not only viewing, but also control and surveillance. The engineered placement of the viewer of many of the scenes discussed in this study is often unexpected and defamiliarising, especially in indoor spaces. We are surveilling too sometimes. They set up genre expectations that they then proceed to thwart. Any semblance of narrative logic is obliterated in favour of movement by intuition and association. What is left, the residue rather than the lees, speaks of an enduring estrangement over many multiple generations-from the past, from the self-but there exists a haunting. A heavy ambivalence marks almost lyrical interludes that give a textured, intimate shape to otherwise observational images as engagements. Moments of emotion spill from the margins. This is a dialogue that announces the communion between the ghosts of the past and the bodies that still persist in their fight.

Quite tellingly, some of the 'framed' scenes resemble nothing so much as dramatic action on a stage, the protagonists being characters rather then imagistic ciphers. The archive of images of the Roman enslaved is peopled with alternating narrators, creating a dispersed narrative that perhaps comes together only now that we can see the archive in totality. Allegories, superimpositions, and visual transitions seem again drawn from the theatre, as if staged to throw into relief tensions and relationships in the surrounding outside society. The works'

attentiveness to narratives of authenticity and vindication jostle with the requirements to stress status and power differentials, and with ever-present strains of mute despair. Pictorialisation here creates a bulwark against a detectable incipient sadness which might engulf each scene otherwise.

An aura of expressive authenticity hangs over the images, inviting us to see the enslaved as the Romans saw them, even if we choose to decline because today we have a moral stake in doing so. But we need to be aware of reading antagonism as resistance, and indeed vice versa, and attrition as progress. As Roman society moved towards a promised future of empire without end, an agreed actuality was replaced with a more complex world of information. And yet there is history here in these images, a history through which culture changed, constantly mutating within and against the contextual frames of beliefs and practices. We can investigate the archaeology of such images thoroughly imbued with a sense of not only the perpetual present but also the prescient future. Many of the images of the enslaved presented in this study are iconic for us today: a small number have a polyiconic position within the hierarchy of such images, in that they select, they produce, and indeed reproduce value. The iconic ones represent a dispersal away from an originary moment as they moved into the networks of exchange and relay, influence and rediscovery that lends them a certain mystique and significance. Indeed, they only exist today through their dispersal and fragmentation.

The simple (dis)continuity of a shared experience of viewing must have rendered the individual images which make up today's accumulated archive as crucial to the formation and circulation of some sense of tradition constituted according to processes of repetition. The images as history though can be untethered from any notion of unlinearity and progress, and can now be thought of in terms of subsequence and consequence, retrospection and introspection, and of prophecy, in a French theoretical sense. A paradoxical phenomenon such as this depended ultimately on the images' rupturing force, creating a hideous form of contemporary beauty out of abjection. Vibrating in precise patterns, the archive of images of the Roman enslaved offers a mode of experience that moved outside, beyond, between, beneath the limitations of elite Roman culture. Viewed with the remove afforded us today, we can consider the processes behind the presentation of the rearticulation of someone else's body, explained by a peculiar aptitude for reiteration and dissemination, causing a break with the moment of their inscription or delineation by subcultural forces of rupture which fostered this play of shadows.

Now that we can see the archive as one, there appear some elements of confusion, expressive of uncertainty, or at least an indefinable ambiguity, not necessarily purveying the sense of order in their making which the Roman elite must have wished to promulgate. They perpetrate a sense of semiotic ambiguity, caught within a symbolic vortex of the moment, with both oblique and knowing references to a desentimentalising purge which the ideology of slavery promised. The prospect we have today of the replacement of something instead of images that looked like nothing inserts us into the text, privileging our position through the very fact of our remove, replacing separation with interaction in a ferment of discourse as rules dissolve. They have immersed themselves in the shadows and in time, as each viewer has added their own experiences to the act of viewing and interpretation.

Surprisingly, some academics still try to look for *some good* in the history of Roman

slavery. However, a mild sense for them that all was not right with the Roman system of slavery does not constitute a critique of the role of slavers and enslavers in Roman society. That things were not as bad as they could have been, or that instances of compassionate behaviour negate the violence and exploitation of a whole system, are unsustainable positions to take today. Many Romans were not fully invested in the system because they could gain no economic or social benefit through participation: this does not constitute active resistance on their part. Indifference is seldom positive. A normative academic position that applauds the mere act of description sometimes, indeed quite regularly, needs tempering with a good dose of negativity: treating human beings in the past just as an object of study rather than subjects of address is too generalising, particularly with regard to the patterns of tensions and resolutions that gave images of the enslaved in Roman times their significance. I am not endorsing identification as a replacement for description, but empathetic engagement in the form of a Situationist-style intervention, now seems a key to unlocking ambiguity. Categorical judgements on inert objects cannot replace dialectical challenges to once-living subjects. Sidelining viewing to privilege consumption further complicates matters, particularly when consumption is so closely linked to alienation and powerlessness. Economic analysis cannot replace or replicate sensuous human activity, even when tempered with the materials of mediation. A tradition of parsing the origins of slaves in Roman society as uni-geographical has meant that the dominant impulse in defining and rationalising the meaning of slavery at this time is in terms of academic enquiry into 'Roman' culture and society. The experiences of Roman slavery did not generate its ideologies. There are many alternative interpretative stances, including viewing the relationship of the enslaved to space. Experiences of urban space by the enslaved, both in terms of life within the *domus,* or in the workplace, or out on the city's streets or at its markets, were very different to those of the enslaved agricultural workers in barrack-style accommodation, often far from anywhere and under regular surveillance: the possibilities to create, even very fleetingly, a temporary autonomous zone, an idea promulgated by Hakim Bey in another context, were high for the first group and low for the second.

Images of the enslaved represent a sub-genre of representation that in their divorce from more orthodox themes in Roman art were at the edge of Roman culture's engagement with the routinely 'real', of everyday life, going beyond that art's concern with the politics and erotics of mythology, ancestry, historicism, and time, and towards an engagement with the potentialities of encounter and consciousness, new constituencies that departed from, but crystallised, the basic paradigms of the art. Indeed, as we start to discuss images of the enslaved in Roman art, look back at what was an art with built-in historicism, the very art's dynamic inverts and obliterates the traces of its origins. The narrative possibilities of the works remain under-explored: they are not realism. The images represented modes of response to their contemporary world that eventually became stultified. More defining in a way was the process behind them which really was the content, more or less.

The subject of this book, like most of my books I have recently come to realise, is belonging and not belonging, possession, and calculated transgression: it is both a collision and collusion of utterances, with a swell of shadow at its heart, and a realisation that trauma can create opportunity too and not simply stifle it, while at the same time refusing any notion that any account of

Roman art and its intentions can, or should, be authoritative in any way.

The idea that every element of an image has equal value in the eyes and minds of its viewers is obviously untrue and untenable. When elite Romans appeared in images of interior scenes with their household slaves the viewer was expected to look at the images of the elite persons and understand and appreciate their power and status. If they gave the images of the slaves a second glance it would probably only have been to consider them as expensive possessions of the master or mistress of this particular house, like a silver vessel or a piece of furniture, that is as a luxury object. Recently, a reanalysis and reappraisal of an oil painting portrait of the mid-eighteenth century Black astronomer Francis Williams, a portrait whose significance will be discussed fully later in the book, led to some remarkable conclusions about this one-time slave. One particular aspect of the potted history of the painting's lineage of ownership after its commissioning in 1760 that immediately leapt out at me, as reported in a newspaper story,[18] was that its last owner was a curator of furniture at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and that they had bought the picture in 1928 *only* because of the images of the fine mahogany furniture in the room setting in which Francis Williams stands.

Analysing the Roman images of the enslaved as an archive for this book has yielded no easy resolutions: perhaps there are none to be had, other than in looking beyond the confines of the bounds of the Roman era. Easily the most interesting exhibition at the Venice *Biennale* of 2017 was a retrospective show in the inaugural Antigua and Barbuda National Pavilion, in reality a small gallery, devoted to the outsider artist and writer Frank Walter (1926-2009), billed as 'the last universal man', an inventor of his own universe. Walter was both a figurative and abstract painter, a maker of marks and images of all kinds, a collector and hoarder, and a recontextualiser of found objects and everyday items. He was prolific, working outside a gallery context, and there was often no boundary between his life and his art. His works were all highly personal and linked to a conscious and sometimes subconscious exploration of identity. Their relevance in the context of this present study will be immediately apparent.

In his childhood Frank Walter was told by relatives that he was descended from both enslaved workers and slave owners, something that would come to trouble and torment him in later life. His working life, for he was not a professional artist reliant on gallerists, collectors, or grant-giving bodies, was spent in the country's still-important sugar industry. Eight years spent in Europe made him question his Black identity and to create fantastical family lineages linking him to European aristocracy, accounting for the many heraldic works in his oeuvre. His later years back in Antigua saw him become more focused on his art, and more reclusive. It is perhaps then no surprise to find that Walter's art practice represents an exploration of points of origin, the presentation of ideas about destination and destiny, about arrival and departure, and, of course, about belonging and not belonging. He keenly felt excluded, and his art became for him an act of resistance. Proud Black figures stare out from his portrait canvasses, actually mainly painted directly onto card, such as the anonymous *Red Capped Woman*, while Antigua's lush landscape invades his abstract pieces like images of a lost and recovered home.

Within his home he created tableaus of massed wooden figures, some purchased

[18] *Guardian* 17th October 2024.

factory-made items, but most roughly-carved and sculpted by Walters himself, which were set out on tables in the exhibition space. He left behind over six hundred of these enigmatic figures, and over five hundred handmade wooden toys, many of great intricacy. These talismanic, amuletic sculptures were of indigenous Arawak people, contemporary and mythical Black people, European royalty, and Black men from outer space. Together, these were like his household gods, his *Lares*, his protectors.

I find many common threads and echoes of themes in the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat as in the overall archive of Frank Walter's work, though the two artists could not be more different in most respects and, of course, had no personal connection. Basquiat too struggled with his dual-heritage identity, but found a fitting accommodation in recontextualising signs and symbols and other objective elements from Haitian and Puerto Rican cultures in a number of his paintings. The idea of the protective talismanic figure was important for him too, as in his painting *Water Worshipper* of 1984. At this period Basquiat was heavily influenced by the writings of Robert Farris Thompson on Black African spirituality and religion, leading to the incorporation of West African symbolism, Christian signs and symbols, Vodou symbols, and Creole symbols in his art, in what has been called a 'polyvocal aesthetic'. The wooden panels attached to the *Water Worshipper* constitute an important and significant part of the work in, and of, themselves. They represent the material of ship-building, and the materiality of the ships that plied the transatlantic route carrying slaves.

Basquiat's best work is complex, both symbolically and narratively. His referencing of lives informed by spirituality demonstrates that formal religious structures-holy books, priests and the like, churches and other religious buildings-are an overlay to individual belief and faith, and often just in fact an armature supporting it.

The points being made in a similar manner by both Frank Walter and Jean-Michel Basquiat are that enslaved lives should not be seen as having been diminished lives, and that both artists believed that art-even image making in its simplest form- represented a powerful tool for reclaiming agency, and for sanctifying the present moment and the future.

Just as I am not writing a history of the system of Roman slavery I am also not focusing this study on evidence for, references to, or intimations of slave resistance in the Roman era. Since Keith Bradley's seminal work on Roman slave rebellions and resistance it has become common in academia for researchers to seek out, and regularly find, attested or suspected instances of slave agency to further bolster the argument that action and re-action often coexisted in society at the time, in certain contexts.[19] Nevertheless, even as recently as 2012, surprise was still being expressed as to the high degree of autonomy some slaves possessed at the time.[20]

It is important to remember that there has been available as a database for this study the whole of Roman art as we know it today: every individual artwork featuring a figure or figures of the enslaved now available to consider together as a single archive. This luxury of 360 degrees backsight provides a totally-different perspective of viewing to that of a Roman contemporary viewer of one artwork only, but who might have been aware of others, thereby constituting a series or genre in their mind. The archive of today allows us to talk about chronological

[19] Bradley 1989 and 1998.
[20] McKeown 2012: 280.

development, in terms of innovations, copying, replication, and retroactions, and geographical patterning, to talk about stylistic matters if we so wish (I do not), and to treat the archive as a sort of collage, but a collage in the sense espoused by the artist Kurt Schwitters of juxtapositions creating new and different meanings by association, or proximity, by distillation of knowledge or its compression.[21] A collage is a new artwork, not just a collection of 'things' together. Mutually incompatible and seemingly blind to the refined complexity of the experiencing of the world through images and texts Schwitter's collages were beguilingly assembled. The combination of tones and styles, that is almost timeless genre conventions side by side with a new looseness, introduced a new urgency. Making and maintaining emotional connections came to the fore in his art, creating an ambiguity over whether something is illustration (of something) or art (about something), affectless to the point of mundanity or revealing the truthfulness of artificiality.

Looking at many of these Roman images there is a sense that for the Roman elite there was a palpable feeling that no pleasure was uncomplicated, and that all art of the period when seen by us with hindsight therefore comes loaded with ethical questions that assert the importance of bearing witness and documenting. What emerges into our contemporary light is a panorama of shimmering strangeness, an art of intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction, both at the same time open and stifling. Slavery infused Roman society at the highest levels. Augustus had a slave *pedagogus* named Sphaerus who he eventually manumitted. He gave him a public funeral. The emperor Julian was educated in part by the eunuch slave Mardonius, thought worthy of note even in Late Antiquity.

So many of the images in our archive placed certain protagonists, the enslaved, in metaphorical shadow, and yet as time has passed to reach the present they have acted to foreshadow the illumination of these works. Kazimir Malevich's painting *Black Square* of 1915 is open to all kinds of interpretation or alternatively none: it is either the beginning of art or its end. If, as can be argued, Malevich's picture sends its message, its vibrations, back into the past, so the Roman works under discussion here seem to have the force to do the same by calling to us and the future beyond us, anticipating themselves by the alteration of object (the enslaved) to subject. The passage of time (and history) has raised the practical human relationships of master/slave or mistress/slave defined and exhibited here to a contemplative level, almost an existential condition beyond mere wordly functions and actions. What started out as acts of exclusion have proved themselves rather to be inclusionary, revelatory even. The meaning of the artworks as originally envisaged has now become unsustainable, given the presentation here of the attempted obliteration of sight through suggested unknowing. The world both within and outside the frames of the art has been obliterated by the passing of time, leaving us with just the art itself, in a space between the seeming non-existence of things and our privileged knowledge of them. Transition such as this provides opportunity and intervention, maximising the effect of similarity and difference that gave them their original meaning. What were once intended to be efficacious in illustrating and maintaining ideological social relationships now simply exist, and that is all that matters about them: the charged absence of a justification for their original meaning now constitutes that meaning. By failing to

[21] On the art of Kurt Schwitters see, for example: Elderfield 1985.

incorporate references to the past they now inadvertently transcend their own historical context, yet consummate history more broadly in terms of schism and the history of violence. They can never be brought back into the conditional world of references and associations out of which they were birthed. The *Black Square* serves to facilitate clarity, and posits the notion that in contemplation of its surface can be found revelation, liberation even. It must have come as no surprise that Malevich went on to pursue the same conceptual reasoning by following *Black Square* with painted explorations in the form of painted all-white canvases such as *White on White* of 1918, not a work in opposition to *Black Square* but rather one in harmony with it, one elaborating on it.

While each Roman work exists within its own framing, our ability to examine each work as part of a larger archive strengthens the impression of space unfolding in every direction, of a system of slavery existing out of sight of the viewer. Each scene, each image, reflects the fundamental and objective condition mediated by that system and by its frameworks of surveillance, of looking, of darkness pervading light. Today, we do not just view these ancient images as we *see* them, but we also visualise them as we *know* they really are, suffused with violence, charging them with transformative potential. Viewing these artworks today has also now been turned into a collective art of spectatorship.

In June 2020 a black square posted online became a shared symbol of support and empathy for the *Black Lives Matter* movement, as both a defiant sign and as a freighted signifier outside of history. Like an elemental unit or indivisible building block in a QR (Quick Response) code, almost like a mystical theology, this square transferred knowledge and information, making a statement and depolarising the oppositions of fullness and emptiness, presence and absence, shadow and light.

In the process of unspooling the evidence and arguments in this book it might be possible to understand how some Roman artworks very deliberately sought to visualise hierarchies within the enslaved class, both by the presence/absence dichotomy, and by strategies of representation. In larger households with numerous slaves the specialised roles played by many individuals and their titles immediately marked out just such a hierarchy. A situation like this might have contributed towards a feeling of separation and hopelessness: one can become constantly aware of the walls dividing people, of what is beyond their reach, what they cannot change.

There is a fine distinction here between being the faces of Roman slavery and being the people facing subservience within the system. The intertextuality apparent in Laurent Deroy's print of 1835 *Marché aux Nègres*, part of his portfolio of lithographs *Voyage Pittoresque dans le Brésil*, based on paintings by Johann Moritz Rugendas, is worth describing in short summary. Deroy's lithographs in the portfolio would have been worked up from sketches made by Rugendas during his travels in Brazil in the 1820s, and we can therefore assume that much of the detail in each finished artwork reflected a certain degree of documentarian recording through his art, particularly as Rugendas was well known for his abolitionist sympathies.[22] We the viewers stand in the position of the artist as he records the scene of African slaves brought together in an open-fronted market hall for display and sale, with a white slaver sat at a table bureaucratically and faithfully recording sales and details of his human goods, while a well-dressed white gentleman in fine attire and a stovepipe hat

[22] On Deroy's art see: Van Horn 2022: 5-6.

inspects some of the African slaves available for sale. Some Africans are fully clothed, others naked or partially naked, some stand, others sit, and in the foreground two women cook food in a large pot over an open logwood fire. A lush landscape sweeping down to the sea is visible through the open, arcaded front of the building: the steeple of a church is visible beyond, testifying to the terrible role of the Catholic church in the repression of the region, while a sailing ship sits at anchor in the still blue-watered bay, perhaps the very ship that transported some of the slaves here, dead and dying slave bodies jettisoned overboard into the sea during the umbral passage. In the right-hand corner of the scene can clearly be made out a group of four boys looking away from the melée of the slave market, three of them intent on the other making a *graffito* drawing of a masted ship on the whitewashed wall at one side of the market hall. Other scratched or incised drawings can be seen on the wall surface to their right, including a number of caricature heads of white Europeans, and a human figure with arms raised in supplication, surprise, or surrender. As Jennifer Van Horn has acutely pointed out, in this painting/lithograph Deroy probably has very deliberately included this vignette scene in order to make a point about agency and the enslaved, the enslaved youth making drawings 'to assert subjectivity'.[23] It could perhaps be further added that the two women overseeing the cooking of a meal might also have been engaged in an activity- the preparation and cooking of food- that involved the use of familiar ingredients to their original culture, utilising or at least adapting a traditional recipe from home as a statement about origin and direction. Stating and restating traditional foodways of cooking and eating mark powerful ways to claim space. That many of the African figures are sat on the ground or squat down accurately reflects specific cultural gestures and movements that assert authority rather than denote subservience.

The creation of images of slaves in Roman art might have occurred in many cases to advertise the status of their masters to others, but at a distance we can also see that while the figures of the enslaved often seem curiously inactive in these works, they are in fact witnesses to some transaction of power, some socialised ideological exchange, somehow involved, the images then collapsing all into one time as all protagonists participate in an encounter, a turbulence.

The enslaved person thus became a document, embodied in a deed of sale, becoming that deed which had become a dark transcription of them, of the agony, tears, and blood inherent in the violence and dehumanisation of the system. Roman still life paintings too consistently rely on the conjunctures of objects and absence of figures. Who placed the bowl there on the table and artfully arranged fruit in it? Who stands in attendance outside the frame ready to clear away bruised and rotting fruit exposed to the full heat of the day? Pessimistic works rather than in any way utopian, Roman still life pictures existed in the same transactional space as empty landscapes and images of well-ordered dining room service, all in that zone that is marked out by unequal exchange. To take things further, who built the *domus* wall and plastered it? Who prepared and cleaned the surface ready to receive paint? Who collected together and ground the pigments for the paint (and indeed who mined or unearthed some of the rarer pigments used)? Who painted the picture? This was a painted art now revealed as being of earth and (slave) body. There is a kind of third text to be written about the labour in Roman art, in addition to the labour of art at that time, its

[23] Van Horn 2022.

definitions and projections, its affirmations, pausing only at points of irresolution. There is no part of the art that can be free of flesh and blood, of enslaved labour. It cannot simply be politely captioned and gallerised or museumified without further comment. It is the business of those who study ancient slavery to criticise the system at every turn, to hold up ideals, but not to imagine desirable futures for those passed (past). Efforts towards resolution and incorporation seem to reveal their own impossibility. Old tensions can though find new expression. What we are distanced from, what we are stepping away from, is quite clear, but what we are stepping toward is anything but, the future carrying as it so often does a taint, a debt, or a complication. Sometimes it almost feels as if the past is the only thing driving change.

It is hoped that out of the shadows of this darkness of Roman domesticity into which so many enslaved individuals were cast by both Roman malice and expediency, and by the great churning forces of history, some of these people can step forward into the light, freed and illuminated by examination of their striking images.

Iain Ferris Pembrey March 2024-February 2025