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In Search of the Patron: Late Antique Styles in Context

Abstract

The people who commissioned artworks and monumental decorations in late antiquity are for the most part unknown. Even when names are recorded, it is often difficult to tell to what extent the demands of the patron determined the visual characteristics of a given work. Since styles were tied to workshop traditions and conventions, it can be argued that in most instances, the patron had but limited influence on stylistic properties. Evidence actually suggests that the style of a work often came about independently of the one who commissioned or purchased it. Style was conditioned by function and context. The article therefore proposes a functional paradigm for evaluating visual expressions, defining three main domains of representation: *public monuments*, *religious programmes* and *artworks*. In search of the late antique patron, the conclusion reached is that the patron had most impact in the religious domain.

Patronage and religion

One might imagine a given style to suit a given type of customer, for instance, that traditional mythological motifs made in a traditional style were fashioned mainly for a pagan clientele. Still, in late antiquity, expensive artworks belonged to a culture shared by all who could afford them, religious affiliation notwithstanding. Thus, silver plate with mythological themes could turn up in the house of a Christian as well as in that of a pagan. The main piece of the Mildenhall treasure from East Anglia is the large Oceanus dish. It displays conventional marine and Dionysiac *thiasoi* fashioned in a similarly conventional classicistic style. However, the hoard also contained spoons stamped with the Chi-Rho monogram flanked by A and Ω.¹ The place of manufacture is unknown and the precise date of the silver plate is equally uncertain. It is possible that the more than thirty objects stem from various contexts and originally belonged to more than one owner. In any event, private patronage is more convincing than the former unfortunate tendency among scholars to ascribe most mythological silver plate to the patronage of the briefly reigning emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363).²

¹ London, British Museum. Painter 1977, 13-23.

² The Mildenhall treasure, the Corbridge lanx, the Kaiseraugst treasure and the Pietroassa treasure have all been associated with Julian the Apostate, see Kiilerich 1993, 199, with references.

For the Esquiline treasure, the inscription on Proiecta's casket gives the names of the owners. If it had not been for the words exhorting Secundus and Projecta to 'live in Christ': A XP Ω SECVNDE ET PROIECTA VIVATIS IN CHRISTO, one might have interpreted this silver casket as an exponent of a so-called 'pagan renaissance', associating its style with the pagan milieu of mid- to late fourth-century Rome (FIG. 1).³ The fragmentary and partly restored inscription is engraved on the rim of the lid; it is plausible that gilding originally emphasized the letters. Nevertheless, considering the exuberant decoration of this large box (56 x 43 x 28 cm) with gilded figures and ornaments set off in high relief against the silver surface, the letters are rather feebly engraved. To a certain extent, the inscription seems extraneous to the work. It could, theoretically, have been added at a later stage.⁴ It is quite possible that the casket was manufactured around the mid-fourth century and presented – perhaps as an heirloom – to Proiecta and Secundus a generation later.⁵ Whether or not the casket had prior owners, it is reasonable to assume that certain workshops specialized in 'wedding caskets' and that those who purchased them had little to say in the presentation of standard themes related to the female sphere.

Each leaf of the Symmachorum-Nicomachorum diptych depicts a priestess at an altar (FIG. 2). Quintus Aurelius Symmachus and Virius Nichomachus Flavianus were prominent pagan aristocrats in late fourth-century Rome, and one or several members of the Symmachi or Nichomachi families may have purchased the diptych to honour a relative, friend or business acquaintance. However, they were not necessarily instrumental in the shaping of the ivory's classicistic style or its traditional iconographic theme. In fact, this may be the reason why no consensus with regard to the interpretation of the imagery has been reached: Do the down-turned torches on the Nicomachorum leaf refer to a wedding or, perhaps more likely, to a funeral?⁶ It is reasonable to assume that the design was predetermined, the ivory carvers having already fashioned the motif and only subsequently entered the names in the *tabulae* at the top; in effect, they might just as well have entered the names of Proiecta and Secundus. This warns us to be wary of the pitfalls of assuming a close association between religious affiliation, patron and artwork.

Epigraphical evidence dates Junius Bassus' sarcophagus to the year 359.⁷ The inscription along the upper edge of the sarcophagus confirms that the city prefect Bassus was newly baptized: IVN BASSVS V C QVI VIXIT ANNIS XLII MEN II IN IPSA PRAEFECTVRA VRBI NEOFITVS IIT AD DEUM VIII KAL SEPT EVSEBIO ET YPATIO COSS. ('Junius Bassus, *vir clarissimus*, who lived 42 years and two month, as city prefect as neophyte went to God on the 25 August while Eusebius and Hypatius were consuls'). The sarcophagus, one

³ London, British Museum. Shelton 1981, thoroughly describes and discusses Projecta's casket and the about thirty other items from the Esquiline Hill. Later bibliography includes Elsner 2003; James 2013. For silver plate, texts and inscriptions, see Leatherbury 2017, with the casket on p. 44. For the so-called renaissances of the fourth century, see Kiilerich 1993.

⁴ As noted by Elsner 2003, 22.

⁵ Shelton 1981 argued for a date between 340 and 370, rather than the early 380s chronology based on the so-called Damasian epitaph. Stylistic criteria hardly allow a close dating.

⁶ London, Victoria & Albert Museum. The Nicomachorum panel is in Paris, Musée de Cluny. Kiilerich 1991, proposed that the diptych may have been carved at the occasion of their friend Praetextatus' death in 385. See Kinney 2008 for other issues.

⁷ Vatican tesoro; photo from plaster cast in the Vatican Museums; Malbon 1990.

of the largest of its kind, has Old and New Testament scenes sculpted in high relief in two zones on the front (FIG. 3), and harvesting putti in low relief on the short sides. The disparate styles or modes of front and short sides make it likely that had the two parts been found separately, one might not have associated them with the same sarcophagus. Nevertheless, since it was customary to put emphasis on the front of sarcophagi, the patron probably had little influence on this matter. As for Bassus' involvement with other aspects of this particularly fine work, it may be speculated whether it was made to the neophyte's specifications, or whether the sarcophagus had been finished in the workshop before the relevant data were inscribed upon it at Bassus' death in 359. As with Proiecta's casket, the inscription *per se* is not an integral part of the work, and it could have been added several years after the sculpting of the reliefs.⁸ Partly finished sarcophagi, awaiting the carving of portrait heads, indicate that those who acquired them might customize finishing features, but for the rest had to choose from whatever designs the workshops offered.

As the inscription and the sarcophagus' iconography prove, Junius Bassus was a Christian. As far as is known, his namesake father, the consul of 331, was not. Junius Bassus senior was the patron of a basilica on the Esquiline Hill in Rome, the walls of which displayed figural and ornamental panels in *opus sectile*.⁹ The no-longer-extant dedicatory inscription boasted that the consul had financed the building or the decoration alone at his own expense: IUNIUS BASSUS V C CONSUL ORDINARIUS PROPRIA IMPENSA A SOLO FECIT ET DEDICAVIT FELICITER (*CIL* VI 1737). Of this extravagant decoration only four panels survive. One portrays the patron himself in a two-horse chariot (FIG. 4). Two panels show tigers with prey. With respect to the question of patronage, it is of interest that closely similar tiger panels, dated on numismatic evidence to around 385/390, decorated the walls of the edifice from outside Porta Marina at Ostia.¹⁰ How can one explain the similarity between panels separated by half a century? There seem to be two possibilities: it was either due to a workshop tradition of animal panels being made in much the same style for several generations, or, at Ostia, it could be due to the reuse of older panels.¹¹

Giovanni Becatti interpreted the Porta Marina hall as the seat of a Christian guild, associating it with the *praefectus annonae* of 385-388, Ragonius Vincentius Celsus, tentatively identified with the tondo portrait of a youth on the east wall of the hall (FIG. 5).¹² Today there is general consensus that the Porta Marina edifice was a private domus. Still, the religious affiliation of the patron hinges on the interpretation of the second image inserted into the east wall: depending on whether one interprets the bearded nimbed figure as Christ or as a philosopher, the patron is perceived as either Christian or pagan. At any rate, the *style* of the sectilia at Ostia does not give any clue as to the identity of the commissioner. Again, this shows the difficulty of actually drawing any inferences about a patron – and his or her religious beliefs – from the visual characteristics of a given work.

⁸ Riegl 1901 (1980) 176-78, found it difficult to accept the classicistic style of the sarcophagus in mid fourth-century Rome and suggested that Bassus reused a third-century sarcophagus. This, of course, is unlikely; cf. Kiilerich forthcoming.

⁹ Rome, Museo Capitolino (animal panels); Museo Massimo alle Terme. Becatti 1969, 181-215. For the basilica, see Kalas 2013.

¹⁰ The aula is reconstructed at the Museo dell'alto medioevo, Roma-EUR. Becatti 1969, 188-191.

¹¹ I have suggested that the panels at Ostia may have been older reused works, Kiilerich 2014, 178; Kiilerich 2016b, 39.

¹² Becatti 1969, 71.

The peopled scroll motif, popular in sixth-century mosaic pavements in Palestine and Jordan, affirms that patrons did not necessarily define style. Such pavements in a largely identical style, and perhaps made by the same workshops, decorate both churches and synagogues. Inscriptions change the meaning of the imagery. In an Orthodox church at Shellal, the inscription is in Greek, in an Armenian church in Jerusalem, the inscription is in Armenian, while in a synagogue at Gaza, the words are Aramaic.¹³ Were it not for the inscriptions, and the insertion of religiously specific motifs such as the menorah, it would have been impossible to determine which religious institutions had commissioned the mosaics.

These examples ranging from portable luxury objects to mosaics prove that patrons' religious affiliation had little bearing on the *style* of the works commissioned. In some instances, the work was ready-made, in others it could have been made *ad hoc* according to the patron's specification. Still, the lack of contracts, such as those preserved from Renaissance Italy, precludes us from gaining an idea of the precise involvement of the patron with a given artwork or decoration.¹⁴

Imperial or non-imperial patron

The mosaic pavements from the Villa Casale near Piazza Armerina provide a well-known example of highly disputed patronage. In spite of the fact that the villa is a storehouse of figural images from the first part of the fourth century (FIG. 6), the visual evidence has failed to disclose the identity of the patron. Do the monumental triple-arched entrance, the military standard (*vexillum*) with tondo portraits painted at the entrance wall and the apsidal aula with a porphyry rota in the floor imply that the villa belonged to an emperor? In recent decades, many rich villas have come to light in various parts of the late antique world, and it is obvious that one did not have to be of imperial rank to commission and own an impressive estate and furnish it with mosaics, paintings and sculpture. The identification of the Villa Casale's owner – supposedly represented with Pannonian pill-box hat on the Great Hunt frieze (FIG. 7) – with the emperor Maximian (as proposed by H.P. L'Orange) or his son Maxentius (as suggested by H. Kähler, based on the images of children, which to him pointed to a younger owner) can therefore possibly be disregarded.¹⁵ It seems likely that the owner of the Villa Casale was a (former?) high-ranking imperial official as well as a member of the landowning aristocracy. Still, it is difficult to associate the mosaics and fragmentary paintings with a specific person, be he – as has also been proposed – a former provincial governor, or whatever.¹⁶

Patronage is equally uncertain for the lesser-known villa at Tellaro, ca 350–400, situated south of Noto in southeast Sicily.¹⁷ This villa displays mosaics in a somewhat different style from those at Piazza Armerina. It is reasonable to assume that the patrons of mosaics gave some indications about desired themes, say, horse races, hunting scenes or marine panoramas.

¹³ Avi-Yonah 1975; Biermann 1998, 37–43 with figs. 11–14.

¹⁴ For Renaissance contracts, see Baxandall 1988, 2–14. The contracts often specify the subject, without, however, going into detail. The quality of the material to be used is also a stable ingredient.

¹⁵ L'Orange 1952; Kähler 1973.

¹⁶ See the studies by Pensabene 2010 and Pensabene, Gallochio 2011. Wilson 2011 discusses some of the various propositions with regard to ownership.

¹⁷ Voza 2003. In a recent study, Roger Wilson, 2016, 130, concludes quite generally that the patron probably was 'a member of the Sicilian aristocratic élite'. Numismatic evidence provides a *terminus post quem* 349, Wilson 2016, 34; idem, 124 proposes a date ca 350–395, possibly (p. 35), after 370.

In some instances, the choice of motifs could be caused by personal interest, but it might also be owing to the circumstance that certain themes – such as hunting – were conventional expressions of the owner's *virtus*. Since mosaics in related styles to those at Piazza Armerina and Tello are extant in Tunisia, it appears that North-African workshops catered to a varied clientele within a large geographical area. The style, therefore, discloses little, if anything, about the patron.¹⁸

Itinerant workshops may also have been involved in one of the most problematic instances of late antique patronage: the villa at Centcelles near Tarragona in Spain. Of particular interest is the *Kuppelraum*. The cupola is decorated with a mostly lost painted frieze and three mosaic zones, depicting hunting scenes, Biblical subjects and ceremonial scenes with seated figures set off by personifications of the Seasons (FIG. 8). Other mosaics were set in the fragmentarily preserved central medallion. In spite of the research presented in a recent multi-authored volume of some 500 pages, which discusses the building's decorations and practically all aspects of its complex archaeology and history, uncertainty still reigns with regard to the function of this room, its date and the question of who commissioned its decorations.¹⁹ No close stylistic parallels exist, but details in the setting technique suggest an 'international' workgroup, where mosaicists from the east joined forces with local artisans.²⁰

The difficulty in dating the mosaics with precision allows for various possibilities with regard to patronage. The building complex at Centcelles was long thought to have been the burial place of the emperor Constans, who in 350 came to a violent end while fleeing towards Hispania. However, as in the case of the villa at Piazza Armerina, rather than an emperor, it is probably more likely that we should search for a high-ranking official within the imperial bureaucracy. The patron or rather the one in whose honour the mosaics were made (if the *Kuppelraum* was intended as a mausoleum) can perhaps be identified with the protagonist of the Hunting frieze. In one fragmentary scene in the hunt, he is depicted *en face* flanked by men in three-quarter and profile view (FIG. 9); in another section of the hunt, the same person is shown on horseback. A possible clue to his identity is the 'LC' branded on his horse. Since horses were usually given names of good luck, such as Victor, the letters are unlikely to refer to the animal.²¹ Among the few late antique high officials with these initials is Lucilius Constantius, a late fourth-century provincial governor of Mauretania and Tingitana, at that time part of Hispania.²² While it is tempting to associate the mosaics with Lucilius Constantius, one must be wary of jumping to conclusions based on meagre evidence. But there are other possibilities; the Centcelles complex has also been proposed as the residence and military camp of the *comes Hispaniarum* Asterius, ca 420.²³ At any rate, as in most of the examples adduced, a connection between style, patron and context cannot be established.

¹⁸ See Dunbabin 1999, 317-326, for general problems of patrons and mosaics.

¹⁹ Arbeiter, Korol (eds.) 2016.

²⁰ Torp 2016.

²¹ Lopez Monteagudo 1991.

²² Very tentatively suggested by Kiilerich 2016a, 331. For various interpretations, see Furlas 2016, who associates the sign with aristocratic self-expression.

²³ Remola and Pérez 2013.

Imperial patronage

Around 300, the Tetrarchic Emperor Galerius erected two sculpted monuments in Thessaloniki: the Triumphal Arch and the Small Arch.²⁴ Although roughly contemporary, the reliefs of the two monuments differ in style. The triumphal quadrigifrons was strategically situated at the intersection of the *cardo maximus* and the *decumanus maximus* on the processional way that linked the palace and the Rotunda, a structure perhaps intended for imperial cult. The Arch celebrated Galerius and Diocletian's successful campaigns against the Persians, which culminated in Galerius' victory in 298. Disposed in four superposed registers, the reliefs display the political message of the Tetrarchy. The narratives, depicting standard themes of the emperor on horseback, the enemy on the ground, and emperors making offerings, follow a conventional visual rhetoric that underscores imperial *virtus*, *concordia*, *clementia* and *pietas* and stresses imperial power and presence (FIG. 10-11).

The Small Arch is a sculpted marble block, originally raised on two pilasters attached to a niche in the eastern wall of the south peristyle of the palace. It contains a visual commentary on a more personal level – today one is tempted to call it Galerius' *selfie*. The reliefs are a shorthand representation of Galerius as a new Dionysus, conqueror of the East.²⁵ On the front, two Persian prisoners support medallions of the emperor and empress. The intrados shows a central medallion with the head of Dionysus inscribed in a lustrous vine scroll. On one short side is Pan, on the other a dancing maenad; both are presented on bases like statues. The Small Arch's few and isolated figures are fashioned in a classical style: the maenad's see-through drapery and soft outlines contrast with the style of the close-set and deeply undercut figures on the large quadrigifrons (FIG. 12). While the patron might dictate the subject matter to be included (*in casu* imagery that staged Galerius as a new Dionysus, the conqueror of the East), he was unlikely to prescribe in what 'style' these images were to be represented.²⁶ A certain imagery comes with a certain style, thus, on the Small Arch, the mythological themes are fashioned in the classical tradition, while the portrait of Galerius is made in the harder Tetrarchic portrait style, proving again that subject matter to a large degree dictates style.

Galerius' Rotunda remained part of the imperial palace complex at least until the sixth century. It is therefore most likely an emperor who turned the building into a church and decorated it with mosaics (FIG. 13). Unfortunately, no written sources provide information on this matter. The question of patronage is therefore subject to heavy dispute with the mosaics dated variously from the early fourth to the early sixth century. In the ongoing debate, some scholars ascribe the mosaics to Constantine, ca 324, proposing that the Rotunda was meant to serve as his third mausoleum.²⁷ One scholar has argued for Theodosius' daughter Galla Placidia, who was in exile in Thessaloniki around 420.²⁸ A main problem with this thesis is that the princess had no juridical power in the East, nor was she in a financial position to realize such a large commission. Others date the decoration to the mid-fifth, the later fifth or the

²⁴ Laubscher 1975; The Small Arch is now in Thessaloniki, Archaeological Museum: Stephanidou-Tiberiou 1995. For topography, see Athanassiou et al 2013.

²⁵ Torp 1976-78/1978-80.

²⁶ Kiilerich 2015, 165-167.

²⁷ Bakirtzis et al. 2012, 115-116.

²⁸ Mentzos 2001-2002.

early sixth century.²⁹ Still others follow the ‘Scandinavian school’ and attribute the mosaics to Theodosius I, ca 380/90, the last emperor to reside in Thessaloniki for longer periods.³⁰

The highly expensive building project and the carefully thought-out mosaic programme of the Rotunda required vast resources. But the scholars in favour of a late chronology are at a loss to name a patron who had the motive, means and opportunity to finance this grandiose venture. The Rotunda mosaics are thus an eloquent example of the problems of establishing a connection between a given style and a potential patron. For these extraordinary mosaics, it is not the style but the iconography that provides some information about the patron. It has been proposed that the decoration is a monument to the emperor Theodosius the Great’s Trinitarian faith, as defined in the *Cunctos populos* edict, which the emperor promulgated from the palace of Thessaloniki in 380. The law was directed against the Arian *pneumatomachoi* who denied the godhead of the Holy Ghost. In two mosaics in the martyr zone, the orthodox dogma of the Trinity is represented by the baptismal image of the dove, cross and water, flanked by two martyrs (FIG. 14 a-b).³¹ The style in which the artists expressed the Credo does not in itself provide a precise chronology for the mosaics, but it is in keeping with the classicistic tendencies that were prevalent in fourth-century mosaics as well as in silver plate, ivory and, to a certain extent, in sculpture.³²

The same Theodosius raised an Egyptian obelisk on a two-tiered sculpted base in the Constantinopolitan hippodrome.³³ Inscriptions in Greek and Latin on the lower block proudly record that the emperor managed to erect the ‘four-sided column’ in an impressively short time. As the Latin version states: “... everything yields to Theodosius and his everlasting offspring. So conquered and vanquished in three times ten days I was raised to the lofty sky, while Proculus was prefect.” (*CIL* III, no. 737). In this endeavour the emperor succeeded where his predecessors of the Constantinian dynasty had failed. Not only do the inscriptions refer to the obelisk twice, as a visual documentation of the proceedings of 390, the monument even includes a picture of it on the northeast side of the lower block. The Egyptian obelisk was certainly the primary focus of the monument. In comparison with the monolith, the sculpted reliefs were of secondary importance, and probably done in haste in order to be finished by the time the emperor was to return to Constantinople from his sojourn in Thessaloniki. Due to weathering, it is difficult to apprehend the original appearance of the reliefs, but it is still possible to discern traces of the delicate features of some of the young guards and magistrates on the upper base (FIG. 15). In their original state, probably painted and perhaps gilded, the reliefs would certainly have appeared much more appealing than they do now.

Although the same emperor presumably commissioned both the obelisk base and the Rotunda mosaics, they nevertheless are rather unlike in style. This is partly because of the material differences between stone relief and mosaics but especially the result of their different functions. The mosaics belong to the ecclesiastical realm and underscore imperial piety, while the obelisk monument advertises physical bravura. It is unsurprising that a public work

²⁹ Fourlas 2012 argues for a late date. For an overview: Kiilerich, Torp 2016, 19-20; Torp 2018, 76-83.

³⁰ Torp 2017, presents arguments for the chronology of the mosaics.

³¹ Torp 2002; Torp 2003; Torp 2018, 233-237, 255-259.

³² Kiilerich 1993.

³³ Kiilerich 1998; Omissi 2016, 178-186.

of propaganda and church mosaics intended to visualize heavenly beauty were expressed in different styles: that they adhered to different visual paradigms.

A functional paradigm of visual images

In order to elucidate the problems of patronage, I therefore turn to the question of the function of images in late antiquity. In accordance with their main function, I tentatively group the visual material into three main categories or domains, defined roughly as *the public monument*, *the religious programme* and *the artwork*.³⁴ The triumphal Arch of Galerius and the Obelisk base belong to the first category, the Rotunda mosaics to the second and the Mildenhall and Esquiline treasures to the third. Some works may participate in more than one domain. An ivory diptych, for instance, could be a vehicle for a political statement, but the statement is made in the format of the artwork and uses an aesthetically based formal language. Moreover, it is not a work in the public domain, but an artefact viewed by a specific targeted audience. Other works defy strict categorization. The Small Arch of Galerius has a political content, but since it was located within the palace, its function differed from that of the triumphal arch. Its message, rendered in mythological guise, therefore displays other stylistic characteristics. A main point is that to the ancient viewer, the experience of facing a triumphal arch must have been altogether different from experiencing the splendour of golden mosaics, or viewing the intricate carving of an ivory leaf.

Neuroscientists have shown that different parts of the brain are activated when different types of images are viewed. For instance, viewing a portrait painting activates a different area of the brain than does the viewing of a landscape painting; similarly, the neural response to a non-figurative image differs from the neural response to a figurative representation.³⁵ When images that only differ in degree, such as a portrait painting and a landscape painting, elicit different responses, it is reasonable to assume that images that differ in kind, such as silver caskets and triumphal arches, would have been likely to elicit different responses in the ancient viewer. Similarly, the emotions involved in the ‘religious’ viewing of church mosaics are not the same as those involved when seeing and reading the political headlines of an imposing propaganda monument. I argue that whereas the works in the religious and the artistic domains would have triggered beauty-related responses, the public monument was a political tool intended to trigger responses relating to awe and fear.

The *public monument* is a distinct category that falls outside the domain of works intended to be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities.³⁶ Indeed, one could refer to this as ‘non-art’. Official monuments, such as triumphal arches and columns, in outdoor settings served public, political and propagandistic functions.³⁷ The visual expression was conditioned by the images’ usefulness for communication and for propagating certain ideals and qualities associated with the ruler and the state. The aesthetic aspects of the Arch of Galerius and the Obelisk base of Theodosius were therefore of limited importance in comparison with the dynastic and political messages to be conveyed. These monuments should physically manifest imperial

³⁴ Kiilerich 2013, 98-99.

³⁵ Kawabata and Zeki 2004.

³⁶ Cf. Hallett 2015, 18-19, who notes that the Romans did not refer to public monuments as “artworks”.

³⁷ Stewart 2008, 112-117, argues that the concept propaganda does not apply to Roman antiquity. Still, I fail to find a better word for the promoting of specific political or dynastic points of view by use of carefully thought-out visual staging.

power. The aim of the imagery was to communicate with viewers, not to make them interact aesthetically with the monument as if it were an artwork. An eloquent example is the Arch of Constantine.³⁸

One may propose that besides honouring the victor – in casu of a civil war – the main function of the Arch of Constantine was to evoke sentiments of respect and even to induce fear. The message being paramount, it can be sustained that the carving style of the historical frieze, which over the years has been subject to endless debate, should not be regarded as an exemplification of ‘arte popolare’, in the sense of a style chosen expressly to appeal to the uneducated masses.³⁹ The particular visual characteristics of the narrative frieze were a means to an end: simplification, symmetry, repetition and exaggeration were compositional tools. They were ‘super-stimuli’ and cues for attention used to make it easier to grasp the message. Exaggerating the size of a figure, as in the man falling headlong from the city-wall in the Siege of Verona, activated neural response more powerfully, than if the figure had been rendered on a proper scale.⁴⁰ Although the fourth-century reliefs on the Arch of Constantine to a limited extent allow aesthetic evaluation, and the sculptors obviously did not go out of their way to make the reliefs as ungainly as possible, the main purpose of the monument was certainly not to appeal to the viewer aesthetically.⁴¹

By contrast, in the vast and heterogeneous domain of *artworks*, to which the notion of ‘art appreciation’ applies, expensive material and exquisite decoration were primarily intended for aesthetic enjoyment and status display. The domain comprises the luxury arts, silver plate, *Idealskulptur*, private portraits, wall paintings and floor mosaics in addition to various other art forms. Some of these products, such as Proiecta’s casket, had a practical function; many, such as finger-rings, were personal belongings, admired close up by a restricted number of people. Given that aesthetics and status display were the main factors in the *opus sectile* decorations of Junius Bassus’ basilica and the Porta Marina aula, they should be included in this category.

Religious programmes commissioned for churches and baptisteries can be assigned to yet another domain. The interiors of Constantine’s basilicas in Rome were gleaming with marbles, silver and gold, precious materials that brought aesthetic enjoyment while putting the viewer in the proper devotional frame of mind. They were not totally devoid of a political message, as the very expense and grand scale helped sustain the notion of the earthly ruler as a reflection of the heavenly one.⁴² Similarly, as noted above, the iconography of the Rotunda mosaics appears to include an anti-Arian message and can to some extent be understood not only as a religious, but also as a dynastic and political manifesto. The style of large-scale decorations in churches and baptisteries served to visualize heavenly splendour and give visual form to the invisible and divine. Golden and silver mosaics symbolized heavenly light and the glimmering and shimmering glass tesserae expressed otherworldly beauty. The aesthetics of religious art was definitely the most important domain of representation in late antiquity (FIG. 16).

³⁸ Popkin 2016, with bibliography, 78–88, to which may be added Sande 2012; Kiilerich 2013.

³⁹ For the terms *arte popolare* and *arte plebea*, see most recently Petersen 2015.

⁴⁰ Kiilerich 2013. For the importance of exaggeration, visual ‘super-stimulus’, see, e.g., Ramachandran, Hirstein 1999, 17–20. It is worth speculating whether the ancient sculptors intuitively made use of such visual cues.

⁴¹ For the marked contrast between the style of the Arch of Constantine and other late antique images, see Kiilerich 2007.

⁴² De Blaauw 2001; Brandt, Castiglia (eds.) 2016, discuss various aspects of Constantinian art and culture.

In search of the patron, one may speculate in which of the three domains the patron was most likely to have had impact on the visual properties of the work. While a customer could often choose between various iconographical motifs, it seems more doubtful that he or she could influence the *style* in which these motifs were executed. The style of artworks in the private realm was generally tied to material and artistic conventions. Mosaic pavements and portable luxury objects followed workshop traditions that sometimes reached back several centuries. Due to the conservatism of the medium, it is notoriously difficult to date silver plate and *Idealplastik*.⁴³ Therefore, in spite of its at times close association with the owner, the artwork proper is not the domain where the patron is most likely to have made his or her mark. It can also be held that the official political monument was largely designed according to fixed formulas and a set pictorial language. For instance, in their truncated proportions and ungainly carving style, the soldiers in the Constantinian frieze are strangely reminiscent of their counterparts in the small frieze on the Arch of Septimius Severus. Also the hovering victories in the spandrels and the victories and prisoners on the pedestals of Constantine's arch follow the *schemata* employed a century earlier on Septimius' monument, just less plastically carved (FIG. 17).⁴⁴ Only the narrative frieze, which includes specific events, gives the monument a seemingly personal address. Yet, if Maxentius rather than Constantine had won the battle at Pons Milvius, it would have been unnecessary to make any substantial changes to the frieze. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that it is in the monumental religious sphere that a patron, imperial and/or episcopal, is most likely to have been instrumental in deciding visual features.

The large-scale church programme constituted a 'new' Christian art form, inasmuch as the basic imagery of salvation rendered in shorthand form in the catacombs was ill-suited for large-scale monumentality. It soon fell out of favour to be replaced by more complex religious imagery. Unfortunately, the nature and appearance of the original mosaic decoration of Constantine's churches is unclear and hotly debated. Among extant works, the mosaic decoration of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki is the most exquisite example of the triumph of a new Christian aesthetic. While individual motifs – the *orans* posture of the saints, the fantastic architecture based on Roman wall-painting and mosaic, the rainbow and the imagery of abundance in the medallion's floral wreath (FIG. 18) – derive from an ancient repertoire and are fashioned in a conservative style, the motifs have been reformulated in order to serve their new purpose. The manner of combining the imagery into a full-blown programme with a complex set of connotations suggests that in this case, the imperial patron and his ecclesiastical advisors had very specific ideas of what they wanted represented and perhaps in which style it was to be represented.⁴⁵

Conclusion: In search of the patron

The late antique patron remains an elusive figure. It is telling that some of the most important visual ensembles preserved from late antiquity – such as the floor mosaics at Piazza Armerina and the cupola mosaics at Centelles – cannot with certainty be associated with a specific patron. Even when the patron is epigraphically attested, his or her precise role in the shaping

⁴³ For a recent overview of luxury goods, see Stirling 2014; for *Idealplastik*, see, e.g., Bergmann 1999.

⁴⁴ Brilliant 1967.

⁴⁵ Kiilerich, Torp 2016; Torp 2018, 467–489.

of a given art work or monument is often hard to define. Workshops catered to a varied clientele, and itinerant ateliers meant that the same styles could turn up in various social contexts and in various parts of the empire. When not made under imperial control, portable objects were probably most often finished by the artist or workshop and offered for sale rather than being custom-made to suit the demands of a particular customer. Since style depended on factors such as material and technique, with the various media adhering to each their proper artistic tradition, it is generally difficult to establish a link between patronage and style. Given that the production of art objects and public monuments was grounded in tradition, it is in the ecclesiastical iconography that the presence of the patron is most likely to be seen. For mosaics in churches and baptisteries, the imperial or episcopal patron could have been instrumental in ordering the execution of specific motifs. But for the most part the style was an inherent part of the motif. To some extent one may even claim that the patron did not choose the style – the style chose the patron.

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FIG. 1 – Projecta's casket. London, British Museum (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 2 – Symmachorum ivory panel. London Victoria and Albert Museum (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 3 – Junius Bassus sarcophagus (reproduction), Vatican Museums (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 4 – Junius Bassus' basilica. Opus sectile panel showing the patron (?) in a biga. Rome, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 5 – Porta Marina, Ostia. Opus sectile panel depicting a youth (the patron?). Rome, Museo Nazionale dell'Alto Medioevo, Roma-EUR (after Becatti 1969, Tav. LV.1).

FIG. 6 – Villa Casale, Piazza Armerina. Detail of floor mosaic with fishing putti (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 7 – Villa Casale, Piazza Armerina. Detail of the Great Hunt floor mosaic: the patron (?) (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 8 – Centelles mausoleum, cupola mosaic, part of ceremonial scene and personification of Autumn (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 9 – Centelles mausoleum, cupola mosaic, detail of hunting scene: the patron (?) (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 10 – Thessaloniki, Arch of Galerius, Galerius on horseback (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 11 – Thessaloniki, Arch of Galerius, Galerius sacrificing (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 12 – Thessaloniki, Small Arch of Galerius, dancing maenad. Thessaloniki, Archaeological Museum (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 13 – Thessaloniki, Rotunda, cupola mosaic, detail of architectural zone with head of Kosmas (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 14 a-b – Thessaloniki, Rotunda, cupola mosaic, Trinitarian theme of baptism: dove and cross (water basin not preserved) (photo: B. Kiilerich; drawing: M. Brochmann after reconstruction by H. Torp).

FIG. 15 – Istanbul, Obelisk base of Theodosius. Detail of southeast side showing magistrates and guards (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 16 – Thessaloniki, Rotunda, cupola mosaic, Leon, who was probably martyred by the Arian emperor Constans II around 350 (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 17 – Rome, Arch of Constantine. Victoria in spandrel (photo: B. Kiilerich).

FIG. 18 – Thessaloniki, Rotunda, cupola mosaic, detail of rainbow and floral wreath encircling the medallion (photo: B. Kiilerich).