

CONNECTING ART HISTORIES IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

Art history becomes a stronger and more robust discipline when scholars from around the world cross borders in the pursuit of the productive exchange of ideas. Recognizing this, the Getty Foundation launched its Connecting Art Histories initiative in 2009, increasing opportunities for sustained intellectual conversation. The initiative's goal is not to disseminate the practices of Western art history internationally. Rather, it is to recognize the historiographical and methodological diversity that informs the discipline as it is practiced around the world. Simply put, Connecting Art Histories is designed to foster dialogue about these differences, actively bringing into the conversation meaningful voices that have not always been heard for economic or political reasons.



A priority region for Connecting Art Histories has been the extended Mediterranean Basin, where the Getty has had long relationships and ongoing interests. One series of grants focused on art and architecture in the Basin during the Medieval and Early Modern periods and supported projects that brought together distinguished international experts and younger scholars from different cultural traditions. The projects broke down the traditional division between the study of the Western and Eastern Mediterranean, and also revealed how the arts of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic worlds greatly influenced one another. By examining how various cultures interrelated, and allowing a rising generation of scholars to produce a more integrated history of Mediterranean art—one that crosses national, linguistic, religious, and ethnic borders—these Connecting Art Histories projects are redefining scholarship of the Medieval and Early Modern periods.

“We designed Connecting Art Histories to move art history forward as a more global, more interdisciplinary field,” says Deborah Marrow, director of the Getty Foundation. “Our grants focusing on the cultural heritage of the greater Mediterranean region illustrate how collaboration among scholars from different countries and diverse backgrounds can challenge existing models of art history and encourage new approaches.”

A recent set of grants looks back at earlier artistic production in the Mediterranean Basin, with researchers concentrating on the ancient period. These three projects have taken interdisciplinary approaches to art history to produce a more nuanced understanding of artworks from the ancient Near Eastern world, territories surrounding the Aegean Sea, and even the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire—as far north as the United Kingdom. In each case, organizers have deliberately involved specialists from different disciplines, especially art historians and archaeologists. Closer collaboration among these scholarly communities is particularly important for cultural heritage of the ancient world since the surviving material record of objects and monuments from this era is extremely incomplete.

Publication about Art and Archaeology in the Roman Provinces

The first Connecting Art Histories project to address the ancient world was a grant to Brown University for the research seminars *The Arts of*



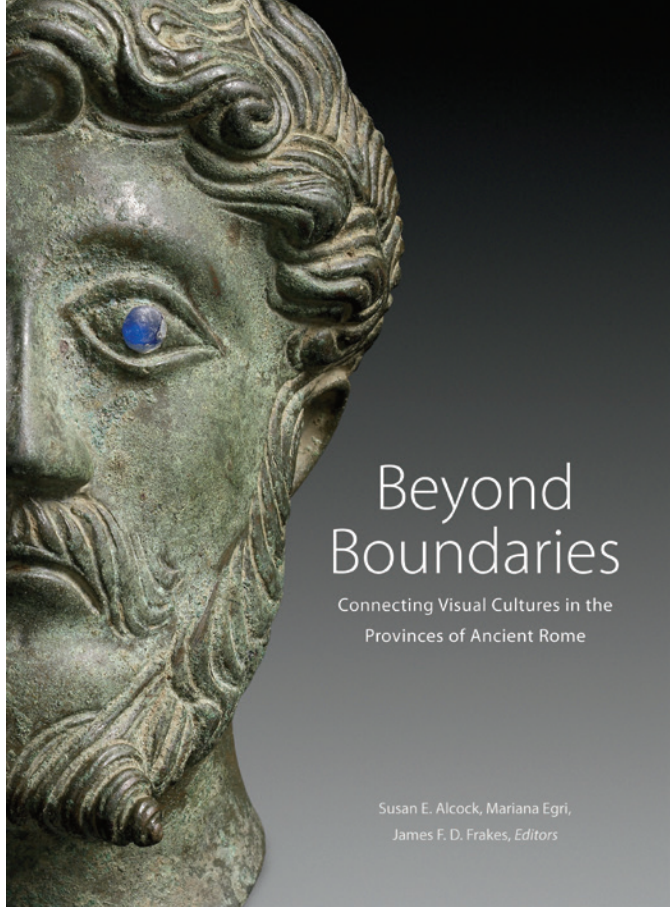
Left: *The Arts of Rome's Provinces* team crosses a marshy area at the site of Dion in northern Greece as part of an on-site tour. Image courtesy the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World, Brown University

Opposite: *The Arts of Rome's Provinces* team visits Fishbourne Roman Palace in the United Kingdom. On-site tours, led by local experts, were an important part of the seminar activities. Image courtesy the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World, Brown University

Rome's Provinces. Over the course of three years, twenty art historians and archaeologists from the Middle East, North Africa, the republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and Western, Central, and Eastern Europe came together to study how the reception of Roman culture by different peoples affected cultural production in some of the empire's furthest reaches. Through site visits to historical monuments and important collections in Greece and Great Britain, the seminars encouraged collaboration between art historians and archaeologists, creating a model for future interdisciplinary exchange.

“We wanted to break down what is still too often this barrier between art and archaeology,” says Susan E. Alcock, co-organizer of the program and professor of classical archaeology and classics at the University of Michigan. “The seminars were designed to disrupt in every possible way, shape, and form. The whole point of the exercise was for participants to have enough time to disagree, put things back together, and move forward.”

One object of study became the project team's unofficial mascot: a small copper alloy bust of Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. The sculpture's design reflects a conflicting blend of cultures and



influences: Though clearly a Roman emperor, the man’s stylized beard and curvilinear, non-naturalistic patterns suggest Celtic influence. By offering opportunities to explore these clues through art historical analysis, and not assuming that the provinces merely imitated art produced in the empire’s capital, the seminar allowed participants to reexamine traditional notions of Roman influence.

When the group held a final meeting at the Getty Villa in 2013, the resulting conversations led to the publication *Beyond Boundaries: Connecting Visual Cultures in the Provinces of Ancient Rome*, a compendium of scholarly essays written by participants and born from the vigorous discussions held throughout the seminars. The book was produced by Getty Publications in 2016 and stands as a posthumous tribute to the late Natalie Kampen, co-organizer of the program and prodigious art historian, whose commitment to the field and to innovative research made the entire seminar possible.

“The experience of this project allowed us to immerse ourselves, individually and in groups, in the vast, diverse, and intriguing world of Roman provincial art,” says Mariana Egri, senior researcher at the Institute of Archaeology and Art History in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, who participated in the seminar and coedited the resulting book. “The essays in *Beyond Boundaries* are concrete examples of how the program generated new approaches to scholarship. Other influences are still being digested, but it is clear that additional avenues of debate will continue to emerge.”

Two New Research Grants

In 2017 the Foundation awarded two new Connecting Art Histories grants focused on the art and architecture of the ancient Mediterranean.

The first project is *Material Entanglements in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond*, a collaboration between Johns Hopkins University and the National Hellenic Research Foundation in Athens, Greece. A group of younger art historians and archaeologists, working with several distinguished senior specialists, is looking at the mobility of objects from the Eastern Mediterranean to Central Asia and from the Caucasus to the Arabian Peninsula from 200 BCE to 650 CE. With this broad geographic area and time span, they can trace the movement of portable objects, styles, materials, and motifs, all of which often outlasted the cultures that produced them.

Project organizers chose a long timeline that stretches across specialized subfields of study so that participants would have the opportunity to consider broader cultural interconnections and how these informed the meanings of artworks that traveled across different populations. So-called “Phoenician bowls,” for instance, were portable, decorated with a wide array of intricate designs, and found in many cultural contexts throughout the Near East. The bowls remained in circulation for centuries, meeting diverse aesthetic or ritual needs as their owners changed. The project team will apply this methodology during research seminars in Greece, where access to relevant sites will give them first-hand exposure to the archaeological and museological contexts of a wide range of significant artifacts.

“Regional collaboration is essential for the study of ancient art,” says Marian Feldman, professor of art history and ancient Near Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins University and co-organizer of the project along with Antigoni Zournatzi, director of research at the National Hellenic Research Foundation in Athens. “Given the range of cultures engaged in the creation and dissemination of ancient Mediterranean objects, no single art historian can possess the breadth of expertise needed to decode these aesthetic conversations. The Foundation’s Connecting Art Histories initiative is allowing us to overcome this barrier and take a comparative approach to material culture that involves scholars from different countries and backgrounds who stand to expand their intellectual networks greatly.”

The second new Connecting Art Histories grant was awarded to the University of California, Berkeley, for the research seminar *The Many Lives of Ancient Monuments*. Based in Turkey at the ancient Greek city of Aphrodisias, a newly inscribed UNESCO World Heritage Site, the seminar brings together younger art historians and archaeologists, mainly from Turkey, and other international colleagues to examine the long and multifaceted histories of ancient sites in the area.



The project aims to expand the study of ancient monuments and buildings beyond looking at the context of their initial construction to considering, more broadly, how their “lives” changed over time with different functions and meanings across various points in history. Surrounded by other significant ancient sites, Aphrodisias is a fitting home base from which regional scholars can explore monuments that have survived across periods of shifting cultural influences, and document how these remains have been maintained, repaired, and sometimes adapted over time. Organizers are deliberately including both archaeological and art historical approaches as a means of encouraging participants to give as much attention to questions of social context and aesthetic significance as they do to chronology and formal analysis.

“Even though interdisciplinary modes of analysis have gained ground over the past few decades, archaeology as practiced in the Eastern Mediterranean remains a relatively conservative field,” says Christopher Hallett, professor of the history of art and classics at Berkeley, who is

spearheading the project. “This seminar holds great potential for enriching the perspectives of a rising generation of regional scholars and producing new, innovative research that deepens our understanding of ancient cities.”

As these projects demonstrate, the Foundation’s Connecting Art Histories grants are providing opportunities for scholars from various countries in the region to form partnerships, exchange ideas, and reframe the conversation of art in the ancient Mediterranean. The results of these projects will be shared with the field as research progresses and the teams carry forward their important work to produce a more integrated interpretation of art that crosses borders and challenges boundaries.



Above: Aphrodisias. Photo: Maxlevoyou

Opposite: *Beyond Boundaries: Connecting Visual Cultures in the Provinces of Ancient Rome*, 2016, Getty Publications. Cover Image: *Head of Marcus Aurelius*, from Steane, Northamptonshire, AD 161–180. Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, AN2011.46