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 ***Art of the Classical World in the Metropolitan Museum of Art:
Greece, Cyprus, Etruria, Rome (review)***

Kenneth Lapatin

Classical World

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Elizabeth J. Milleker. *Art of the Classical World in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Greece, Cyprus, Etruria, Rome*. Published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; distributed by Yale University Press: New Haven, 2007. Pp. xi, 508. \$75.00 (hb.). ISBN 978-0-300-12031-8 (Yale), 978-158839-217-6 (MMA); \$40.00 (pb.) ISBN 978-158839-219-0 (MMA).

This hefty tome “celebrates the fulfillment of a major goal,” according to Metropolitan Museum of Art director Philippe de Montebello: the inauguration of the entire suite of galleries for Greek and Roman art, completed in Spring 2007, after almost fifteen years of reinstallation. The book’s glory, like that of the Met’s collections themselves, lies in the high quality objects therein and the elegance with which they are presented. Here 476 artifacts—marbles, bronzes, coins, gems, jewellery, gold and silver plate, ivories, ambers, glass, frescoes, weaponry, vases, terracottas, etc.—are lavishly illustrated in large color photographs. Included are well known masterpieces and less familiar recent acquisitions (over ninety from the past two decades), as well as some works that have long languished in the Museum’s basement.

Following a brief foreword by Montebello, curator-in-charge Picón presents a twenty-page illustrated history of the classical collections, tracing their growth from the Museum’s first acquisition in 1870—a Roman garland sarcophagus donated by Abdulla Debbas, the American vice-consul in Tarsus—to the 2006 agreement to return the Euphronios krater and a hoard of Hellenistic silver to the Republic of Italy. Picón rightly singles out the key players who built the finest collection of ancient art in the United States: Edward Robinson, John Marshall, and Gisela M.A. Richter. He also describes the expansion and loss of display space within the Museum: how under Robinson’s direction the architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White constructed two wings culminating in a sky-lit Roman court that, in Robinson’s words, “is composed of homogeneous elements from different sources, the colors being copied from originals in Pompeii and neighboring towns . . . to show Greek and Roman works of art in something like the setting and atmosphere in which they were seen in antiquity . . . [and] to illustrate the important part that color played in classical architecture . . .” Historical photographs of the old galleries are illuminating for the spaciousness as

well as the arrangement of the displays. (The new installations are considerably more crowded—with now “well over half of the total collection of over seventeen thousand” pieces on exhibition—which, of course, is a boon to the specialist intent on viewing more artifacts, but can be overwhelming to the novice.) The Roman court was transformed in 1940 into a dining room and then into a cafeteria. Now restored to two stories (as planned by McKim, Mead and White but never executed), it lacks much of the color mentioned by Robinson, but natural light certainly shows the objects to advantage. Picón’s essay also describes the notable acquisitions by various curators, acknowledges benefactors at considerable length, mentions the contributions of other staff, and lists past temporary exhibitions.

The meat of the book is in the seven chapters, or rather sections, of photographs of individual artifacts. These are arranged chronologically, from “Neolithic and Aegean Bronze Age” through “Art of the Roman Empire,” and each opens with an attractive gallery view and a concise one- to two-page double-columned account of the history, art, and archaeology of the period. The high quality photographs of objects are accompanied by brief “tombstone”-style captions (i.e., catalogue number, short title, culture, period, date, material, credit line, and accession number). Unsigned “Notes on the **[End Page 199]** Works of Art” follow the nearly four-hundred pages of photos. For each object, the tombstone information is repeated with the addition of dimensions and a paragraph or two describing the work and its significance. Attractive maps are included in each chronological section of the “Notes,” and additional illustrations (details, alternate views, impressions of gems, comparanda) or line drawings further illuminate some entries. Thus the volume is essentially a coffee-table book with apparatus. It concludes with a chart...

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