

CHAPTER ONE

Ancient Art in Crisis

The stylistic developments with which we are concerned were set in motion by the collapse of the classical Greek canon of forms during the late Roman period. To gain an understanding of this breakdown must be our first task. The process, which for obvious reasons has held great fascination for twentieth-century observers, was as complex as it was momentous. For our purposes it must suffice to view it globally, focusing on certain key questions.

No monument embodies the demise of classical art more dramatically than the great triumphal arch in Rome dedicated to the Emperor Constantine by the Roman Senate in A.D.315 and commemorating Constantine's victory over his rival Maxentius in A.D.312 (fig. 1).¹ The sumptuous sculptural decoration of this structure comprises a large number of reliefs taken from imperial buildings of the second century, specifically from monuments honouring the Emperors Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius. These reliefs appear here cheek by jowl with others expressly made for the arch, notably the long frieze band which encircles all four of its sides and which depicts in a succession of episodes the story of Constantine's victorious campaigns, essentially in the same way as the *res gestae* of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius had been illustrated (albeit with a far greater wealth of descriptive detail) on the spiral bands of their respective triumphal columns.

The contrast in style between the second- and the fourth-century reliefs on the arch is violent (figs. 2-4). The sculptor of a roundel of the period of Hadrian, representing that emperor's exploits as a lion hunter, was still rooted firmly in the tradition of late Hellenistic art. He creates an illusion of open, airy space in which figures move freely and with relaxed self-assurance. By contrast, the figures of the Constantinian reliefs are pressed, trapped, as it were, between two imaginary planes and so tightly packed within the frame as to lack all freedom of movement in any direction. While in the earlier work actions and gestures are restrained but organically generated by the body as a whole, in the later one they are jerky, overemphatic and uncoordinated with the rest of the body. (Suffice it to compare the manner in which the two sculptors represent the raising of an arm or the upturn of a head.) Accordingly, what holds the group together is no longer a rhythmic interplay of stances and movements

freely adopted by the individual figures, but an abstract geometric pattern imposed from outside and based on repetition of nearly identical units on either side of a central axis. Clearly, this pattern is designed with a view to a direct impact on the beholder. The earlier group is turned in onto itself. No one looks out towards us; the figures move and act in a self-contained, stable world. The scene of Constantine's distribution of largesse, on the other hand, which features as the grand finale of his triumphal progress, is spread out before us. Its unmistakable focus is the figure of the enthroned emperor who occupies the centre of the panel and who, though engaged in an action that involves the bystanders on either side, addresses himself first and foremost to the beholder and faces him in strict frontality. The group does not cohere intrinsically. The geometric pattern which holds it together makes sense only in relation to the spectator. Gone too is the classical canon of proportions. Heads are disproportionately large, trunks square, legs stubby. Nor is there consistency of scale. Differences in the physical size of figures drastically underline differences of rank and importance which the second-century artist had indicated by subtle compositional means within a seemingly casual grouping. Gone, finally, are elaboration of detail and differentiation of surface texture. Faces are cut rather than modelled, hair takes the form of a cap with some superficial stippling, drapery folds are summarily indicated by deeply drilled lines.

No doubt should arise concerning the legitimacy of the comparison between the two reliefs. They are fully commensurate in terms of their standing. We are not comparing a high-class work of art with a backwoods product. Both are official commissions honouring the ruler of the day. What is more, this is not a juxtaposition contrived by a twentieth-century art historian enjoying the freedom of Malraux's Museum Without Walls. These reliefs were placed side by side in the early fourth century under the eyes of the Roman Senate and the emperor himself.

This fact lends the Arch of Constantine special significance within the history of late Roman art. It compels us to face the question of awareness on the part of artists, patron and public vis-à-vis the radical reversal of aesthetic values reflected in its reliefs. The contrast between the contemporary work and the earlier pieces that were re-employed must have been obvious to all. Alas, no contemporary comment or explanation is on record. We are left to speculate, and I shall offer some thoughts on the subject in due course.

Attempts have been made at times to seek in accidental circumstances surrounding the creation of the arch the cause for the jarring juxtaposition of sculptures so utterly discrepant in style. There may have been a need to complete it in a hurry and this could explain the rifling of earlier imperial monu-

ments to provide part of the decoration.² An exodus of skilled craftsmen from Rome during the troubled years preceding Constantine's victory may account for the crudity of the reliefs expressly made for the monument.³ But whatever special factors may have played a part in this particular instance, the primitivism of the friezes on Constantine's arch was more than just a local phenomenon during the period in question. A well-known group portrait in porphyry of four emperors of the Tetrarchy now affixed to the exterior of the church of S.Marco in Venice exhibits essentially similar formal characteristics (fig. 5).⁴ Here again we find stubby proportions, angular movements, an ordering of parts through symmetry and repetition and a rendering of features and drapery folds through incisions rather than modelling. Ten or fifteen years earlier than the Arch of Constantine, this too is obviously a work of official art. Porphyry was a material reserved for imperial use. The only quarry which produced the stone was in Egypt, and the S.Marco group, which came to Venice as crusader loot from Constantinople,⁵ undoubtedly was made in the Eastern parts of the empire. The style, then, was not confined to Rome. It had, in fact, wide currency in official high-class art during the Tetrarchy and the early Constantinian period and may be found in a variety of media. A portrait of Maximinus Daza (A.D.305-13) on a gold coin minted at Antioch (fig. 9)⁶ or a detail from one of the sumptuous floor mosaics of the same period in the great villa complex at Piazza Armerina in Sicily (fig. 6)⁷ will serve to illustrate the point. The hallmark of the style wherever it appears consists of an emphatic hardness, heaviness and angularity – in short, an almost complete rejection of the classical tradition.

It is possible to consider this phenomenon essentially as a decline. This was the view taken, for instance, by Bernard Berenson.⁸ To treat a figure as a single block is easier than to articulate it. To achieve compositional unity through repetition or axial symmetry is simpler than to do so through an interplay of postures and of movements. Less effort is needed to engrave features on a face or folds on a drapery than to model such elements. There was clearly a loss of craftsmanship. But the causes of this can be manifold (as Berenson recognized), and they can be aesthetic as well as material. Traditional forms might be abandoned not simply because they were difficult to execute but because they had ceased to be meaningful or – to use a favourite word of our time – relevant. They could be abandoned also because they carried mental associations that were no longer desirable.

Another approach to the problem – and this has played a large part in scholarship – is in terms of outside influences. At the beginning of this century Josef Strzygowski, having become convinced of the crucial importance of the

countries of the Eastern Mediterranean littoral and their Asiatic and African hinterlands in the process of transition from ancient to medieval art, coined the phrase 'Hellas suffocating in the embrace of the Orient'.⁹ The anti-classical tendencies, the taste for the abstract and the two-dimensional, for hieratic rigidity and geometric order, were thought of as re-emerging traditions of the ancient Near East which gained ascendancy as the classical world went into decline. Actually, in all the regions primarily concerned – the Anatolian highlands, the Syrian desert, Parthian Mesopotamia and Iran, Arabia and the valley of the Nile – art had been quite thoroughly permeated with Greek forms. What is important is not so much a survival and subsequent revival of ancient regional traditions in contrast or opposition to the Graeco-Roman *koine* – although such cases are known, for instance in Egypt – as the fact that, in the hands of local craftsmen in these fringe areas of the classical world, the Graeco-Roman *koine* itself had assumed a different accent. We may take as a characteristic example a tomb relief from Palmyra (fig. 11)¹⁰ which displays the vocabulary of Roman statuary – the pose, the drapery, the facial type – but lacks the overall quality of a living, self-governing organism which this vocabulary is meant to convey. Instead, what mattered to the artist were a clear, simplified pattern, a timeless existence, a hieratic solemnity. There is, as a matter of fact, no great difference in principle between such hybrid art from the Eastern borderlands and some of the art produced in the Western and Northern border regions of the Roman world, regions such as the Rhineland (fig. 12)¹¹ or Britain or the banks of the Danube. In those areas, too, the Graeco-Roman repertory of forms was handled by artists who lacked comprehension of or interest in the basic concepts and urges from which these forms had arisen. A reassessment of classical values, then, had already taken place in the fringe areas of the Roman world, West as well as East, and influences or stimuli from these regions could well have become important for the late antique development in Rome itself.

Nor is this all. During the centuries when classical taste ruled supreme in imperial art, there was even in Italy a substratum of what has been variously called popular or plebeian art.¹² Indeed, it can be – and has been – argued that in imperial Rome Greek standards and values were never more than a veneer overlying an indigenous Italic aesthetic which was wholly different and which continued to assert itself in various ways throughout the centuries. Accordingly, the late antique development in Rome can be – and has been – viewed essentially as a massive re-emergence of this local plebeian tradition to the virtual exclusion of all external influences. For example, in the first half of the second century A.D., which was one of the most strongly classicizing periods

in Roman art, it was possible for a Roman worthy and his wife to have themselves commemorated in a funerary relief (fig. 10)¹³ replete with features that one normally thinks of as late antique: irrational spatial relationships; scale and proportions determined by symbolic importance rather than laws of nature; frontality; jerky and abrupt movements; hard, sharp-edged forms brought out by deep undercutting. From this it certainly becomes clear that there were forerunners in Rome itself of the stylistic revolution which we are considering.

The term 'sub-antique' may serve as a generic heading under which to bring together the various artistic manifestations both at the fringe of the ancient world and within the Roman empire, which these examples illustrate.¹⁴ Although each regional style has distinctive characteristics of its own, they all have a great deal in common, not so much as a result of actual contacts or connections – indeed, in many cases there clearly was no contact whatever – but because they all arose in similar circumstances. In relation to the genesis of late antique art particularly, it is important to be aware of these sub-antique styles in their totality. I do not think that any one of them, to the exclusion of all others, can be claimed as a chief source of the radically new elements introduced into the mainstream of Roman art between the late second and the early fourth century. At any rate, we are not as yet in a position to make sufficiently fine distinctions. For instance, a tendency to present figures in an *en face* view directly confronting the beholder – one of the characteristic and important late antique innovations – was common in all areas of sub-antique art. It is useful and illuminating here to draw a parallel between late antique art and that of our own time by reminding ourselves of the wide range of exotic and primitive styles which exerted an influence on the nascent art of the twentieth century. At that critical point artists drew inspiration from a variety of sources outside their own culture – from the art of Japan, Africa, Polynesia and pre-Columbian America – as well as from primitive works immediately around them (*images d'Epinal*, Rousseau le Douanier, children's drawings); and some of the formal devices and principles in which they were interested they could find in more than one of these sources.

A question, however, arises as to the nature of the influence in the period which concerns us. Did Hellas in fact die embraced by the Orient, overwhelmed by an influx of artists from the provinces, engulfed in an upsurge of plebeians, as the case may be? In other words, was there some physical movement of peoples or classes which more or less automatically brought to the fore a style or styles that had previously been peripheral? Or can we make further use of the late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century analogy by saying that at the core of the development was an internal reorientation of Roman art itself? Were

leading or pioneering artists attracted by provincial or primitive styles? Did they become aware of new possibilities of expression, new aesthetic stimuli thus offered? And did they, therefore, absorb these elements on their own terms?

Here we find ourselves face to face with a crucial problem in the interpretation of the entire late antique development. To me it seems quite impossible to account for this development simply through a physical dislocation of people. Influence from the sphere of sub-antique art on the massive scale on which it occurred implies a free and willing adoption of sub-antique forms. But adoption by whom and for what reasons and purposes?

Let us return once more to the porphyry group of the Tetrarchs (fig. 5), of which another version, smaller in scale and even more primitivistic in style, exists, adorning the tops of two column shafts in the Vatican (fig. 8).¹⁵ As a rendering of human presences – to say nothing of imperial presences – these figures are ludicrous. With their block-like, repetitive forms riveted together by outsized arms they express one thing only, namely, the solidity of the compact between the persons portrayed, their absolute unity and inseparability, their unshakable amity and equilibrium. This, of course, was the theoretical premise on which the Tetrarchic system of government rested. It is proclaimed here with a brutal visual directness which a rendering of the four emperors in classical style could not possibly have achieved. Indeed, the classical apparatus of form with its varied rhythms and its elaboration of detail would have distracted from the basic point. In sub-antique art, on the other hand, one finds stripped down to essentials the imaging of relationships such as these groups were meant to proclaim. A small terracotta group representing a couple in loving embrace – one of a series of such objects which were deposited as votive gifts in a Gallo-Roman temple at Trier – bears witness to this (fig. 7).¹⁶ It was a message of overriding urgency which in the portrayal of the four emperors led to the total rejection of the classical canon. Perhaps we can go further and say that the very radicality of the rejection implies that this canon was presumed to be still in the beholder's mind. In other words, the rendering of these figures may have a polemical aspect as well, which, given the context, would have been politically motivated. The idea may have been to link the rejected form to an era, an ideology, a social class that is itself implicitly being rejected. And there would be the further implication that the powers of the day have adopted the artistic language of another class hitherto submerged or peripheral and wish to proclaim their sympathy and solidarity with that class.

Twentieth-century experience has made us familiar with this kind of manipu-

lation of artistic styles for political ends. An element of this nature may well be present in this instance. It is fully in keeping with the character and purposes of a ruler such as Diocletian, whose concept and method of government were totalitarian in the sense that he claimed control over every department of life; whose background and power base were military and thus placed him in opposition to the senatorial class and the tradition of aristocratic refinement and phil-Hellenism associated with that class; and who consciously and explicitly espoused and proclaimed the sturdy values and ideals of the Roman past.¹⁷

It follows that sculptures such as the porphyry Tetrarchs are not the work of third-century forerunners of a Picasso or a Klee who on their own discovered the aesthetic potential of certain exotic or primitive art forms. These sculptures must have been executed by artists who actually came from the sub-antique sphere and were deliberately chosen because of their ability to communicate a particular message in a language that was extremely forceful and direct and which common men all over the empire could recognize as their own. Thus the patron emerges as an important factor – not, to be sure, in creating an artistic form, but in promoting it, in setting it up as a norm and charging it with new content. By making a choice of one style over another and using it for his own ends, the patron in effect influences the stylistic development. Such development, therefore, is not always solely of the artist's own making. As I have put it in an earlier essay, borrowing David Riesman's terms, it can at a given stage be 'other-directed' as well as 'inner-directed'; that is to say, it can be affected by persons outside the realm of art and in that case certainly must be fully conscious and deliberate.¹⁸

I have already touched on the question of consciousness in connection with the Arch of Constantine, pointing out that people at the time must have been aware of the stylistic contrast between the contemporary and the earlier reliefs. In this case we cannot assume that the employment of artists practising an emphatically popular style of sub-antique origin involved a protest against aristocratic, phil-Hellenic traditions, since so many works embodying precisely these traditions were also incorporated in the monument. It is conceivable, on the other hand, that an excessively primitivistic workshop was purposely selected in a spirit of compromise, or at least that such reasoning served to justify a choice that may, after all, have been dictated by circumstances. One thing is certain: here, too, the sub-antique style became the vehicle of a message which the traditional classical vocabulary could not have conveyed with anything like the same directness and palpability. Once more I refer to the ceremonial scenes with which the Constantinian frieze closes and in which the

primitive devices of axial symmetry, repetition, frontality and variable scale produce a simple, readily intelligible formula proclaiming with great force the concept of absolute rule and timeless superhuman authority (figs. 2, 4). Henceforth and throughout the Middle Ages this same basic formula was to be used many times not only in secular but also, and above all, in religious contexts to express this same idea.¹⁹

No doubt, then, the success of sub-antique forms in official art at the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth century was due in part to the fact that these forms provided a suitable means of expression for messages which important and influential patrons wished to communicate. To return to portraiture on coins, the hardness and simplified angularity characteristic of the imperial profile in many issues of this period minted in different parts of the empire cannot mean that artists capable of making dies in a 'better' style could no longer be found anywhere. It can only signify an official preference for the sub-antique manner with its ability to project an image of indomitable strength and toughness (fig. 9).

Important as the role of patrons and their conscious choices may be, however, this factor obviously cannot provide more than a partial explanation of a very complex phenomenon. The subversion of the classical canon was not a matter of a sudden assault by some powerful individuals during the Tetrarchy. It was a slow and gradual process which had begun more than a century earlier. The seeds of the late antique development were, in fact, sown in the late second century, in the era of the Antonines. The spiral band of the triumphal column of Marcus Aurelius, carved between A.D. 180 and 193 in obvious emulation of the Column of Trajan made two generations earlier, affords excellent opportunities to observe this development in its incipient state.²⁰ For instance, the recurrent and more or less stereotyped motif of the emperor addressing his troops (figs. 13, 14) is here subtly transformed in such a way that the imperial person, rather than turning to his listeners, is in effect presented ceremonially to us, the beholders, anticipating in this sense the compositions on the Arch of Constantine. Raised to an upper register and entirely clear of the crowd gathered around him, Marcus Aurelius appears in an *en face* view and is flanked in near symmetry by two dignitaries and two groups of standards. Soldiers on the march, another recurrent motif in these war 'documentaries', are no longer shown in a variety of natural poses, but fall into a lockstep with postures, shields and spears creating a schematic, repetitive pattern.²¹ We are faced here with relatively subtle and inconspicuous changes within what is clearly a continuous tradition, and it would seem unlikely that these changes were dictated by those who commissioned the work. On the contrary, we may

presume that these modifications were introduced by the artist himself in an act of freely copying the model imposed on him. There is, indeed, a good chance that they were arrived at intuitively and perhaps not altogether consciously. In other words, here, at a point much closer to the beginnings of the decisive and fateful style change that spelled the end of classical art, we must reckon with an artist's 'inner-directed' action, whatever the deeper motivation of that action may have been.

Certainly, in the instances I have cited, the sculptors of Marcus Aurelius' Column seem to promote, or at least to be groping towards, a new exaltation of the emperor on the one hand and a new standard of regimentation of his subjects on the other. But it is with the benefit of hindsight (namely in the perspective of subsequent official art and especially that of the Tetrarchy and of Constantine) that the significance of these early steps becomes apparent. It would be difficult to prove a programmatic intent here. In any case, the changes and innovations in Roman art during the last decades of the second century involved much more than a shift in political concepts. What took place was an assault on tradition on a much broader front.

A comparison of two sculptured sarcophagi of this period may help us to enlarge our view of the process under discussion (figs. 15, 16).²² Both reliefs represent battles against barbarians. One was carved about A.D. 160-70, the other twenty or thirty years later. Crowded as the earlier relief is, it is still essentially a Hellenistic frieze in the tradition of the Pergamon Altar. Individual bodies are fully developed as organic entities; they strike dramatic poses which find an organic response in the pose of some adjoining figure. What looks like a *melée* consists, in fact, of a series of intricately interwoven duels. Deep shadows plough up the surface, but they coincide with the outlines of individual bodies and set off each one as an element in a fugue-like composition. In the later relief these contrasts of light and shadow no longer serve to define corporeal entities. They are so ubiquitous as to cut across all natural boundaries and themselves become a principal means of conveying a sense of chaotic, rapidly changing action. The whole surface consists of fragments of human figures, horses, weapons and other paraphernalia. Here, in principle, the Greek concept of a man-centred humanistic art is abandoned. The contrast of light and shadow, an element separate from and imposed upon the actors in the drama, becomes a major means of expression (as, incidentally, it does also on the Column of Marcus Aurelius). It has long been recognized that with the introduction of this 'optical' effect classical art is already at an end.²³ An element which is not generated by natural forms in their natural interplay but is abstracted from them and essentially independent of them becomes a vehicle

of an intense aesthetic and emotional appeal. Thus the way is open to the more radical abstraction that was to follow.

A certain disinterest in the sculptural elaboration of individual forms is a logical corollary. The rendering of anatomy, of drapery, of a face or a horse's mane is relatively summary, and much use is made of the drill to produce deep shadows that indicate rather than define such detail. No doubt this involves a loss of careful craftsmanship. But here, if anywhere, this appears as a jettisoning of ballast, a breaking through of new concerns. A close-up view of one of the vanquished barbarians is enough to bear this out (fig. 17). The simplified outline uniting throat, chin and jaw in a single curve powerfully dramatizes the last desperate upward thrust of the doomed man's face, just as the few bold shadow lines that mark his drooping hair and the fold of his tunic spell the impending death-fall. Indisputably, simplification here serves to enhance expression.

Thus we are led to discern something of the inner forces behind the formal innovations of this period. This is a generation that revels in the representation of suffering. In the war scenes it is the defeated, the prisoners, the dying who seem most to engage the artist's attention – not in a spirit of compassion but because of the opportunity to represent great emotional stress. As the decades went by, these expressions became ever more extreme, as witness the heads of dying barbarians on the great mid-third-century battle sarcophagus in the Ludovisi collection (fig. 18).²⁴

Scholars have spoken of an 'age of anxiety'.²⁵ The danger of an anachronistic diagnosis in terms of purely modern problems and experiences clearly lurks here. But one need only look at a representative series of third-century portraits to agree that we are indeed dealing with deeply troubled people. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that it came to be considered appropriate in this period for the portrayal of any personage, however prominent or official, to convey a sense of anguish, though the expression may vary from worried concern to total absorption in a far-off vision, from defiant toughness to stoic resignation (figs. 19–22).²⁶

The reasons, of course, are not far to seek. The Roman world was undergoing a profound material and spiritual crisis. I need mention only the rapid succession and violent overthrow of rulers; the military catastrophes; the mounting taxation and inflation; the abandonment of traditional religion in favour of Oriental cults with their emphasis on the mysterious, the ecstatic and the irrational; and the emergence of new trends in philosophy that offered an escape from the realities of this world. To decide which of these factors are primary and which secondary – what is cause and what is effect – cannot be

our task. Their cumulative significance is not in doubt and, with contemporary portraits to guide us, we have no difficulty in recognizing in the massive assault on traditional aesthetic norms, in the mounting emotionalism and abstraction, a visual corollary to what was happening in other spheres of life.

Thus, in tracing the anti-classical development in late Roman art back to its earlier stages, we have arrived at a much broader, if less sharply focused, view of its scope and meaning. The messages are not as specific as those of the Tetrarchic and early Constantinian works with which we started; nor is there the same obvious correlation between messages and the visual devices conveying them. Also, in these earlier stages references to sub-antique style forms are less evident and tangible, and it would be hard to maintain that mental associations with the sub-antique sphere were being evoked deliberately. By the same token, it would be difficult to attribute an active role to the patron. Indeed, we cannot pinpoint with any accuracy the patronage behind many of the works in which the break with the classical past first becomes apparent.

But what we have lost in precision we have gained in depth. Going back in time, as we have done, we can no longer operate with the simple notion of a ruler manipulating artistic form to suit his purposes. The stylistic innovations that began in the late second century are rather in the nature of a broad irresistible stream engulfing everybody and everything and – so we have seen – springing from the whole human situation of the period, the hopes and fears, the preoccupations and sufferings of an entire society. We have penetrated to a far deeper level of contemporary life.

What emerges here is a dilemma which confronts the stylistically oriented art historian whenever he tries to go beyond the description, classification and interrelating of forms and undertakes to interpret their meaning in cultural terms. He can be specific in certain cases, particularly when the patron, his wishes and his programmes are tangibly involved. But such cases are like the tips of icebergs. They rest on a mass of widely diffused phenomena that can only be interpreted intuitively by invoking the mood of the age or, in other words, a *Zeitgeist*. The use of the term, it seems to me, is legitimate so long as we bear in mind that a *Zeitgeist*, in turn, is compounded of many elements, material and spiritual. In the present instance we are fortunate in knowing a great deal about the concerns which dominated people's lives, and the correlation between these concerns and the new stylistic forms which emerge is compelling. (At subsequent stages of our story the evidence will be far more meagre.) What is not susceptible to analysis in this remote and anonymous age is the actual linkage between the experiences of society as a whole and the workings of the aesthetic imagination. I have spoken of the innovations

introduced by artists at the end of the second century as essentially intuitive and 'inner-directed'. By this I obviously do not mean that artists were not affected by events, movements and ideas in the society around them. What I do mean is that the translation of social experience into visual terms was their own creative act.

I said at the outset that I would take a global view of the great stylistic upheaval in late Roman art. The broad outlines of this process have, I hope, emerged, but much of the detail has perforce been omitted. No account has been taken of the ebb and flow of stylistic change from decade to decade. The assault on the classical canon took different forms at different times, and there were reactions, countermoves and retarding moments such as the 'Renaissance' under the Emperor Gallienus (A.D.253-68).²⁷ Nor, in the present framework, have I been able to do justice to regional differences. While the sculptors of sarcophagi in Rome experimented with new formal devices that would heighten the emotional impact of figures and scenes, their counterparts in Greece and Asia Minor worked in a more conservative vein, producing reliefs that continued to be based on the concept of the primacy, integrity and autonomy of the individual human form (figs. 24, 25).²⁸ Finally – and this is of great importance – a conservative and a progressive manner may appear side by side in the same area, in the same workshop or even on the same monument. Certain subject categories invited and encouraged the quest for the expressive or the abstract, while others were felt to call for a more traditional treatment. The somewhat studied 'classicism' I have just mentioned as being characteristic of Greek and Asiatic sarcophagus reliefs is associated on these reliefs with mythological figures and scenes. Now in Rome, too, a sculptor of the early third century might persist in the loving elaboration of figures and, indeed, go out of his way to achieve extremes of grace and surface polish when presenting a subject not pertaining to the here and now. Thus on a Roman sarcophagus of this period in New York (fig. 23)²⁹ the god Dionysus, his entourage of satyrs, maenads and cupids and the four genii on either side personifying the four seasons are rendered with an extraordinary if somewhat vacuous refinement and smoothness. The delicate *sfumato* effect which envelops these figures seems to remove them from our world altogether into a kind of never-never land.

Form, then, may be modulated depending on content. In a different way this is illustrated by the Attic sarcophagus in the Capitoline Museum in Rome, also of the first half of the third century, which bears on its front the story of Achilles (fig. 25). The cool academic classicism which informs the mythological scene (fig. 26) does not extend to the portrayal of the deceased who, with his

wife, is represented reclining on the lid of the tomb (fig. 27).³⁰ His is one of those mask-like, frozen, hard-edged faces which we found typical of third-century portraiture generally. Thus two different styles appear side by side on one and the same monument, one for contemporary mortal men, the other for figures from mythology. This is the phenomenon of the so-called 'modes' – the conventional use of different stylistic manners to denote different kinds of subject matter or different levels of existence. It is an extremely important factor which cuts across and to some extent negates the temporal succession of stylistic phases in Roman art. And, as we shall see, some of these conventions continue into subsequent centuries when such stylistic differentiation according to content will tend to be carried even further. This phenomenon, more than any other, adds to the complexity of the process we are studying.

But when all is said and done – and after making allowance for retarding elements, regional factors and the coexistence of different styles depending on subject content – the history of art in the period we have surveyed is still dominated by one central and crucial process, namely, the disintegration of the classical canon and the emergence of radically conceptual forms either abstracted from that canon or imposed upon it. It was the first and most decisive step on the road from classical to medieval art.

Finally, a few remarks must be added about Christian art, whose role in the third century was as yet marginal. Classical art transformed itself; it was not transformed by Christianity. There is only an indirect connection in the sense that the same material and spiritual crisis which underlies the aesthetic revolution of the period also caused a rapid expansion of the Christian religion, a development which in turn led to the rise of Christian art. But Christian art did not from the outset spearhead new forms.

There is no evidence of any art with a Christian content earlier than the year A.D.200.³¹ In all likelihood this is not merely due to accidental losses. The surviving monuments of Christian pictorial art which can be attributed to the first half of the third century bear the marks of a true beginning.³² Moreover, one can find in Christian literature of the period reflections of a changing attitude towards images and their role in religious life.³³

That attitude was undoubtedly negative prior to this period. The root cause was not, as is often claimed, the Old Testament commandment against graven images but rather a state of mind which equated image-making with pagan cult practices and the entire pagan way of life. By the same token, the emergence in the third century of religiously meaningful images in Christian contexts was part of a process of coming to terms with that way of life. Naturally

Christians adopted artistic forms that were current in the society in which they lived.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the early fresco decorations in the Roman catacombs. Wall painting, a medium we have not so far considered, had undergone a striking development in Rome during the late second and early third centuries. Simulated architecture, traditionally a favourite theme in painted mural decorations, had become increasingly attenuated and dematerialized until only a network of thin lines remained, covering ceilings as well as walls. Within this ethereal web isolated figures float on large expanses of plain white ground. Roman domestic interiors of the first half of the third century were painted in this characteristic style which in its own way bears witness to the anti-classical tendencies of the period (fig. 28), and the same system of decoration appears in the earliest of the painted chambers in the Christian catacombs (fig. 29).³⁴

Yet there is a difference. There are, of course, new subjects expressive of Christian concerns and based mainly on the Old and New Testaments.³⁵ But there is also a difference in the way these images were intended to function. This no doubt has to do with the fact that they constituted in effect an infringement of a taboo. They point beyond themselves to a quite extraordinary degree. Biblical themes are represented for the most part in drastically abridged form, usually reduced to the minimum of figures and props necessary to call to mind a given text. It is not intended that the beholder should linger in contemplation of physical appearances. He is only meant to receive a signal. Furthermore, the texts to which the images refer are not invoked for their own sakes. There is no factual thread linking the various subjects together. What unites them is a common message which is of urgent concern to the beholder, a message of deliverance and security through divine intervention. Images are thus twice removed from an actual portrayal of sacred subject matter. They are ciphers conveying an idea. This method, which has been aptly described as 'signitive',³⁶ was not entirely new. It had previously been used in certain pagan contexts.³⁷ What was new was the intensity with which it was often applied in Christian contexts, the accumulation of 'signs' in a given space. The wall paintings in the catacombs are apt to be overcharged with content, for in this content lay the justification of the visual image.

Even this difference, however, tended to recede in the second half of the third century. There are Christian images of this period which were clearly meant to function more normally as representations in the classical sense and not merely as ciphers or pictographs. A remarkable group of small-scale marble sculptures of Eastern Mediterranean origin, acquired some years ago by the

Cleveland Museum of Art, is a particularly striking example (fig. 30).³⁸ Four of the pieces represent in sequence the sea adventure of Jonah, a 'deliverance' story familiar from the Roman catacombs. It is one subject which even in the earliest of the Roman paintings already appears elaborated to the extent of being shown as a story in successive stages. But here it is in the round – in the medium most closely identified with the idolatrous world of the pagans. The sculptor, steeped in the tradition of Hellenistic baroque, has dramatized the episode with a boldness and directness which almost foreshadow the art of Bernini; and to do this he has used the smooth, soft manner, the *sfumato* effects which, we have seen, were still favoured nostalgically in third-century pagan art for mythological and idyllic subjects. The Cleveland statuettes must have been intended for a well-to-do Christian who wanted an equivalent of a special kind of pretty decorative fountain sculpture fashionable among pagans at the time and featuring such subjects as Orpheus taming the animals with his music (fig. 31). The process of Christian assimilation to pagan usage has gone far here; and clearly it has not made for stylistic innovation – quite the contrary. Let us note incidentally that the same workshop in which the Jonah statuettes were carved also produced portraits of contemporary individuals which, while unmistakably related, show a more precise definition of forms (fig. 32). It is a good example of a style being modulated and attuned to different kinds of subjects.

The interest in representation for its own sake which the Cleveland marbles so clearly bespeak is evident also in certain Christian monuments of roughly the same period in Rome. Again the best examples are sculptures representing Jonah's ordeal and rescue, although the monuments in question bear no direct relationship, either iconographic or stylistic, to those Eastern statuettes. On the fronts of a number of sarcophagi made for affluent Christians in the late third century the story of the biblical prophet was spread out in sequence in much the same way as themes from mythology had been displayed on pagan tombs (fig. 33).³⁹ Indeed, stereotyped motifs that had served in the depiction of classical myths, pastoral idylls or the marine dream world inhabited by Nereids and Tritons, were drawn upon to pictorialize the Jonah story in loving detail. The most remarkable of these borrowings was the figure used to depict the prophet's rest under the gourd tree at the end of his ordeal. It is no other than Endymion, the beautiful shepherd boy whose awakening by Selene, the goddess of the moon, had long been a favourite subject of pagan sarcophagus reliefs (fig. 34). Christian interest and taste in this period clearly inclined to tradition rather than to the radical innovations which the third century had produced.