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Sunlight on a Broken Column: [Re]Visions of Classical Antiquity

Broken white columns have become an icon for the ancient world, representing not only the present ruins of ancient temples but also classical antiquity itself. On the covers of elementary language texts, surveys of the achievements of ancient societies, and departmental brochures and web sites, we repeatedly confront stark white ruins. In this vision of antiquity, columns support no entablature of colored friezes, enclose no ornate statues of the gods. The classical world is austere, pure, and devoid of life. This visual counterpart to "dead white European males" owes more to tastes formed in the 16th century and reinforced by the formal ideals of neo-Classicism and the "melancholy pleasure or ruins" of Romanticism than to the actual practices of ancient architects and sculptors or to the current scholarly awareness of the prevalence of ancient polychromy. Recent historians of Greek sculpture and architecture emphasize the use of color and remind us of what we cannot expect to recover. Most general works, however, make only passing references to "traces of paint" and let the images of whiteness stand.

Medieval artists unselfconsciously depicted imaginary castles from Troy to Athens to Rome, but the rediscovery of classical sculptures and whole sites brought new attention to the physical artifacts of antiquity--and led to some misconceptions. The lack of color caused by the fading and abrading of pigments became a virtue, and the plaster casts and copies proliferating throughout Europe and America helped to reinforce the notion of pure white marble. Even those who knew of the original existence colors rejected them.

The forces that have shaped our taste in ancient architecture and sculpture remain strong, and few of us would prefer the vision that scholarship recommends: a Parthenon gaudy with red and blue and gilt. On the other hand, if we want our students to believe that the Greeks and the Romans were not "dead" when they wrote the works we study, we should perhaps supplement the familiar emblem of broken white columns with images that help us to create a "revision" of a classical antiquity vibrant with the color and movement of life.