8. PAR OPERI SEDES: MRS ARTHUR STRONG AND FLAVIAN STYLE, THE ARCH OF TITUS AND THE CANCELLERIA RELIEFS

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...like a leaf down a drain...

(Lindsey Davis [2000] 15)

[1.1] Art has been studied under the banner of ‘The History of Art’ since Winckelmann’s mid Eighteenth Century. The sharply defined ascendancy of the Flavian Caesars conveniently occupies what easily passes for ‘the generation’ between the Julio-Claudian and Ulpian dynasties: the shock of Nero’s debacle and the trauma of the rolling civil conflicts that ensued underwrite the expectation of an emphatic cultural break to mark Vespasian’s restoration: a combination of willed direct affiliation to a prelapsarian Augustus and the celebration of a new peace on Nero’s grave. Halfway through the Flavian years the eruption of Vesuvius entombed the cities which preserve in cross-section our most promising diachronous sequence of styles across the range of buildings and artefacts; and Vesuvius was the death, too, of Pliny the Elder—but not before he had completed his Naturalis Historia, with its review of the various media of art production brought down from classical Greece to an apogee in contemporary Rome:¹

uerum et ad urbis nostrae miracula transire conueniat DCCCque anno- rum dociles scrutari uires et sic quoque terrarum orbem uictorum ostendere, quod accidisse totiens paene, quot referentur miracula, apparebit, uniuersitate uero aceruata et in quendam unum cumulum coiecta non alia magnitudo exurget quam si mundus alius quidam in uno loco nar- retur . . . forum . . . diui Augusti et templum Pacis Vespasiani Imp. Aug. pulcherrima operum quae umquam uident orbis . . .

(Pliny, HN 36.101–2)

¹ Had Pliny compiled an account of Flavian holdings of art for his History of Rome, which covered ‘the period from the accession of Nero to the Judaic triumph of Vespasian and Titus’? (HN praef. 20. Sellers [1896] xcii)
Every time one of the wonders of Rome is put into words it will encapsulate the eight hundred year conquest of the planet—and, suppose the entirety is piled up and gathered into a single heap, then the enormity that will arise in the telling will be nothing short of some alternative universe compressed in a single spot. The culmination is Vespasian’s Temple of Peace itself.

Add to this the obliteration of the Flavians in a righteously acclaimed assassination, followed by eternal damnation of Domitian, and the conditions are perfect for expecting a distinctive ‘epoch’, one with a simple, and circumscribed, evolution, and, if possible, one with a special salience at the heart of ancient Art History.²

[1.2] In the late 1890s, Eugenie Sellers got married, initiated her own transformation into the doyenne of Romanità and announced to the world of classical studies, with the coming of the Twentieth Century, that it was time for ‘Roman Art’ to arrive. It was always likely that books on art in Antiquity would find ‘The Flavian Age’, or similar, an irresistibly handy chapter heading; but the particular critical pulsation which inspired Mrs Arthur Strong to leave her Hellenocentric focus behind, moving beyond Pliny’s retrospect on Greek production to commit herself confidently to Roman art, and especially Roman sculpture, and gleeful in the certainty that Oxbridge would have to fall into line and follow her lead, was a bizarre brew of heady theorising hot off the press from two scholars working in Vienna.³ As Sellers/Strong quit Hellenophile Munich to join her husband in keeping the classical collections at Chatsworth, she kept in with Furtwängler who had already visited and would publish the pick of the Dukes of Devonshire’s Greek (i.e., Roman ‘copies’ of Greek) acquisitions,⁴ but turned from translating his canonical Masterpieces of Greek Sculpture⁵ to bring the feisty iconoclasm of Franz Wickhoff to a wider public. Roman Art. Some of Its Principles and Their Application to Early Christian Painting was translated and edited by Mrs Strong for Heinemann and MacMillan (London) in 1900.⁶

⁵ Furtwängler (1895).
⁶ On Sellers/Strong: Beard (2000a) esp. 21–4 (her interests happen to elide entirely