

# MuseumsForward

## Addressing white supremacy in exhibitions of Greek and Roman antiquities at two United States museums

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### Abstract

The United States has witnessed a resurgence in white supremacy and white nationalism in mainstream politics. In addition to the foundational belief in a racial hierarchy, white supremacy is ideologically reliant on notions of gender/sex essentialism, national identity and xenophobia. White supremacists routinely appropriate Greek and Roman art and history in support of their ideology and these appropriations are made possible by an academic tradition, and public perception, of Greek and Roman antiquities as white, both literally and figuratively, with all of its associations with racial superiority, civilization, beauty and purity. The purpose of this study was to better understand how United States art and archaeology museums, in their exhibitions, interpret Greek and Roman antiquities especially in relation to issues of imperialism, slavery, race, gender and sexuality, both historically and contemporarily. The Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology served as case studies for the exhibition of ancient Greek and Roman art in the United States. The results of this study indicate that imperialism, race, slavery, gender and sexuality are topics which are addressed, to greater and lesser extents, in exhibitions of ancient Greek and Roman art. The museums often differed in the language they used to address these topics and in the content they chose to emphasize; this is likely due to the different curatorial strategies of the museums, and the time at which the exhibitions were installed. More than anything this study has demonstrated that it is possible to create exhibitions of Greek and Roman art which challenge white supremacist myths, but that this work is not complete nor universal.

### Keywords

White supremacy; classical art; Greek and Roman antiquities; curation; exhibitions; art museum; archaeology museum

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## Introduction

The United States has witnessed a resurgence in white supremacy and white nationalism in mainstream politics (Clark, 2020). In addition to the foundational belief in a racial hierarchy, white supremacy is ideologically reliant on notions of gender/sex essentialism,<sup>1</sup> national identity and xenophobia.<sup>2</sup> White supremacists routinely appropriate Greek and Roman art and history in support of their ideology, according to *Pharos: Doing Justice to the Classics*.<sup>3</sup> However, these appropriations are made possible by an academic tradition, and public perception, of Greek and Roman antiquities as white, both literally and figuratively, with all of its associations with racial superiority, civilization, beauty and purity (Ikhumen, 2019; Stager, 2022).

Art museums in the United States function as white sanctuaries which perpetuate white supremacy and “provide [white patrons] safe space from which to observe White art as high art and reaffirm Whites’ social position at the top of the racial order” (Domínguez et al., 2020). White supremacy is perpetuated in art museums in myriad ways: by privileging European cultures over Asian, African, Latino or Indigenous cultures in terms of location and space within the museum;<sup>4</sup> by reinforcing distinctions between fine art and folk art; through the policing of Black and brown visitors by museum security (Domínguez et al., 2020); and through the practice of token exhibits for people of color to name just a few (Berger, 1990).

Nor is this a modern phenomenon; the history of the modern museum is inextricably linked to European colonialism and white supremacy. While humans across cultures and times have collected, preserved and displayed objects of particular value or significance, it is in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with the resurgence of interest in ancient Greece and Rome and the development of European scientific practices, that the cataloguing, collecting and taxonomies that characterize contemporary museums came into being. Before the formal establishment of public museums, collections were owned and housed by the wealthy and the royal. They functioned as “status symbols and instruments of

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Dictionary defines gender essentialism as: “the belief that males and females are born with distinctively different natures, determined biologically rather than culturally. This involves an equation of gender and sex” (Chandler, et al. 2011). Rubin (2011, pp. 146) defines sex essentialism as: “the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions. Sexual essentialism is embedded in the folk wisdoms of Western societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical.” For more information see: Schmidt, et al. 2000.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the construction and history of white nationalism/white supremacy see: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2025, *White nationalist*; Caffrey, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> A website founded in 2017 by Curtis Dozier of Vassar College to document and challenge the use of Graeco-Roman antiquity by white supremacy.

<sup>4</sup> Per Domínguez et al. (2020), exhibitions of non-European art are often placed in galleries which are smaller, more difficult to access or which function as pass-throughs to other areas of the museum.

propaganda,” filled with treasures, art, specimens and even people taken from colonial outposts (Abt, 2006; Walhimer, 2015). Many of these early, private collections also contained classical or classicizing art, especially after the rediscovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, these antiquities were foundational to museum collections as they transitioned from private to public institutions. In the United States, emphasis was placed on the creation of art museums in particular because of concerns about “the youth and inferiority of American culture” (Abt, 2006) which led to the formation of many of the encyclopedic art museums still in operation today, including the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago. In these institutions, art and artifacts from the past, including Graeco-Roman antiquity, were “marshaled into visual narratives of the saga of human development” (Abt, 2006).

Today, the four most visited art museums in the world are all encyclopedic – Musée du Louvre, the Vatican Museums, the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art – and all hold extensive collections of ancient Greek and Roman art. Of the most visited art museums in the United States, nearly half contain dedicated collections of Greek and Roman antiquities (Cheshire & da Silva, 2024). Thus, art museum visitors are routinely in contact with, or have the potential to be in contact with, exhibitions of Greek and Roman art. Studies suggest that visitors who are inclined to visit exhibitions of ancient art, as opposed to Modern or Contemporary art, are more likely to “put into action visitor behaviors dictated by motivations, expectations, and interests intent on the acquisition of understanding and learning” such as consulting museum guides or art history texts in preparation for their visit, using audio guides during their visit, or being accompanied by an expert or museum staff member (Mastandrea et al., 2007; Mastandrea et al., 2009). Additionally, in the United States, museums including art museums, remain one of the most trusted institutions, ahead of researchers and scientists, nonprofits and NGOs, news organizations and the government (*Museums and trust 2021*, 2021). Therefore, exhibitions of Greek and Roman antiquities are impactful sites for communicating with the public and, potentially, addressing issues of white supremacy within the museum.

The purpose of this study was to better understand how United States art and archaeology museums, in their exhibitions, interpret Greek and Roman antiquities especially in relation to issues of imperialism, slavery, race, gender and sexuality, both historically and contemporarily. Across two case study sites, the Museum of Fine Arts

Boston and the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, the data collected indicate that these topics are addressed, to greater and lesser extents, in exhibitions of ancient Greek and Roman art, but that the museums often differed in the language they used to address these topics and in the content they chose to emphasize.

## Literature Review

The literature concerning Graeco-Roman antiquity, white supremacy and museums reveals two separate threads of inquiry and scholarly attention: one thread which addresses museum history and practice, but focuses almost exclusively on contemporary art, or the modern history of racism, colonialism, slavery and Indigenous dispossession and genocide; the other thread addresses the field of Classics and takes broader aim at white supremacy, including addressing the rise of white supremacist groups and their appropriations of Graeco-Roman antiquity, as well as issues of imperialism, slavery, race, gender and sexuality, but is tailored to the classics classroom and to other professionals in the field.

Beyond their histories as colonial institutions, art museums have been, and continue to be, spaces which are embedded with and reaffirm white supremacy (Morgan, 2020). The vast majority of artists represented in American art museums are white and male (Topaz et al., 2019). Although BIPOC professionals make up a small percentage of museum employees (36% of museum staff are POC, with only 27% of intellectual leadership positions held by POC) (Sweeney et al., 2022), art museums rely heavily on their free labor to create accurate and representative exhibits, while also treating them with erasure and hostility (Morgan, 2020). For example, curator Kelli Morgan has described working with BIPOC colleagues to create flyers for an exhibition of a Black artist's work, when the museum marketing department refused to do so (Morgan, 2020). Within exhibitions and education, white supremacy culture is perpetuated by the use of euphemistic language to maintain the comfort of white patrons and by eliding productive, but potentially tense, conversations due to fear of confrontation (Fifi & Heller, 2019). Art museums also function as white sanctuaries which "provide [white patrons] safe space from which to observe White art as high art and reaffirm Whites' social position at the top of the racial order" (Domínguez et al., 2020). This is enacted in myriad ways: by privileging European cultures over Asian, African, Latino, or Indigenous cultures in terms of location and space within the museum; by reinforcing distinctions between fine art and folk art;

through the policing of Black and brown visitors by museum security (Domínguez et al., 2020); and through the practice of token exhibits for people of color (Berger, 1990).

The response and proposed solutions to white supremacy in museums generally fall into four categories. The first category deals with addressing diversity in the workplace, and includes hiring more diverse staff and embracing anti-racist practices behind the scenes (Anderson & Mileham, 2020; Becker, 2021; Blackley, 2022; Dewhurst & Hendrick, 2017). The second category proposes improvements in representation in the artists and stories told within the museum; of particular interest are BIPOC, women and queer artists (Becker, 2021; Gullickson, 2023; Reilly, 2018). For the exhibition of the art and history of Indigenous peoples, decolonization has been a primary focus (Anderson & Keenlyside, 2021; Lonetree, 2012; Wali & Collins, 2023). Finally, adapting the tenets of critical race theory for museum practice is the primary solution proposed for the exhibition of the work and history of African Americans (Adams, 2017; Ehrenhalt, 2022; Holloway, 2016). However, the focus of these interventions has been on contemporary art and modern history.

Classics is also facing its own complicity in white supremacy and navigating what it looks like to address these issues and improve the discipline, a process that is being led by scholars of color within the field (Eccleston & Peralta, 2022; Haley & Murnaghan, 2022; Poser, 2021; Rankine, 2024; Umachandran, 2022). The creation of classics as a discipline is inextricably linked to racial thinking and white supremacy (McCoskey, 2019). Although the problems of white supremacy in classics long pre-dates the 2016 election, the rise of white supremacist groups, and their appropriation of antiquity, in the United States triggered a new round of discussion within classics circles (Bond, 2017; Davis, 2017; Illing, 2019; Morse, 2018; Stager, 2022; Zuckerberg, 2016).

The field has, especially in the last fifty years, begun to diversify in terms of both practitioners and research topics. In regard to race and ethnicity scholars have problematized the identification of ancient Greeks and Romans with 'whiteness,' explored both historical and contemporary conceptions of race as it relates to classics, and brought to the fore discussions of blackness in ancient art (Derbew, 2022; Isaac, 2004; McCoskey, 2019; Snowden, 1970). Other topics of inquiry which have expanded the field include honest discussions of ancient slavery, constructions of gender and sexuality, non-elite lives and practices, and renewed interest in the colonial periphery of the ancient world (Bowen et al., 2023; Clarke, 1998; Clarke, 2003; Fantham et al., 1995; Forsdyke,

2021; Foxhall, 2013; Hodkinson et al., 2016; Ivleva & Collins, 2020; Kamen & Marshall, 2021; Vlassopoulos, 2021).

Direct responses to white supremacy in the field include online resource lists, toolkits and books to support teachers and professors in creating meaningful and diverse pedagogy in their classrooms (Barnard College; Hu, 2021; Libatique & McHardy, 2023; Rabinowitz & McHardy, 2015; University of Illinois Department of Classics). The field has responded to white supremacist appropriations by cataloging and directly responding to white supremacists' worldviews as informed by Graeco-Roman antiquity (*Pharos - doing justice to the classics*; Zuckerberg, 2018).

One article which appears to bridge this gap between museums and classics comes from Sarah Eisen (2024), who has analyzed the presentation of Greek pottery in the Harvard Art Museums and argued for the acknowledgement and discussion of slavery and sexual violence represented therein, as a necessary part of addressing Harvard's own legacy of slavery and white supremacy. Another comes from Antony Lee (2024), who argues for "critically disruptive" interpretive strategies to challenge "outdated presumptions of Rome as a homogenized and civilizing cultural force" particularly for museums engaging with the history and archaeology of Roman Britain. Thus, a large gap in the literature exists between museological practice and classics scholarship; this gap includes information about and documentation of the ways in which classical antiquity is exhibited currently, which this study aimed to address.

## Methods

This study used a qualitative case study design, with data collected from two United States museums which have permanent exhibitions of ancient Greek and Roman art. The Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology were selected as case study sites because both museums have permanent exhibitions of Greek and Roman art but differ in size and focus. The Museum of Fine Arts Boston is a large encyclopedic art museum, while the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology is a small, university museum dedicated specifically to the archaeology of the ancient Mediterranean. Data was collected during site visits to the case study exhibitions; exhibition materials including

tombstone labels,<sup>5</sup> interpretive labels,<sup>6</sup> objects on display, audio guides, building maps and visit guides were analyzed for their interpretation of ancient Greek and Roman art related to imperialism, slavery, race, gender and sexuality. Site visits were structured around a walk-through (2-5 hours depending on exhibition size) of the relevant gallery spaces using handwritten notes and a camera to record exhibition materials. Initial impressions were documented immediately following each walk-through in a handwritten memo, and analysis was conducted after completion of both site visits. Supplemental data was collected through the case study museums' websites and in semi-structured interviews with curators.

## Results

The remainder of this article will detail the results of site visits to each of the case study museums, with attention paid to what each museum chose to discuss, how, and from what perspective, as well as to any absences in the interpretive materials. The discussion will compare the exhibitions of both museums, noting that both museums include some discussion of imperialism, race, slavery, gender and sexuality but with varying emphasis and differences in terminology used.

### Case 1: Museum of Fine Arts Boston

The Museum of Fine Arts Boston (MFAB) is an encyclopedic art museum situated in Boston, MA and holds nearly 500,000 works in its collection (*About the MFA*). In 2021, MFAB completed the reinstallation of five galleries dedicated to ancient Greek, Roman and Byzantine art with the goal of offering "fresh perspectives on an era that provided inspiration for our own modern society and [examining] contemporary issues through the art of the past." This reinstallation follows previous gallery changes for the ancient Greek and Roman collections in 2009, 2012, 2014 and 2017 (*MFA Boston Unveils five newly transformed galleries for art of Ancient Greece, Rome and the Byzantine Empire* 2021).

The entrance to the ancient Greek and Roman galleries includes interpretive text that reads, in part:

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<sup>5</sup> Labels which give basic identification information (title, maker, culture, date, material, etc.) for a particular object on display, often with limited or no interpretation.

<sup>6</sup> Labels which go beyond basic identification to give visitors more information about an object and how it relates to the larger exhibition.

When the Museum of Fine Arts was founded in 1870, collecting ancient Greek and Roman art was a priority. American and European elites had long believed that “Classical” art represented the best of human culture, ignoring the achievements of other major civilizations. Civic leaders traced the roots of the American republic back to Athens, the “cradle of democracy,” erecting columned buildings and public statues modeled on those of Greece and Rome. Today we have a fuller picture of these ancient societies, where slavery was common and women and immigrants were often marginalized. We also know that the Greeks and Romans borrowed from and were influenced by their Mediterranean neighbors, especially in Africa and the Near East.

From this introductory text, the curators establish that in the following galleries they intend to give nuanced interpretations of the ancient world, acknowledging the MFAB’s own legacy of prioritizing ancient Greece and Rome over other cultures and signaling a break with that legacy. Finally, they encourage visitors to “discover new ways to think about the art of ancient Greece and Rome.”

### *Imperialism*

Although the MFAB does not explicitly discuss imperialism, the interconnected nature of the ancient Greek and Roman world is discussed throughout the galleries and particularly emphasized in the permanent galleries for “Early Greek Art” (installed in 2021) and “Ancient Coins” (installed 2012).

The introductory text for the “Early Greek Art” gallery stresses the role that contact with other cultures had in Greek artistic innovation, and notes that the Greek “world became more global through trade and colonization.” A display exploring “Local and Regional Identities” – organized around three distinct regions of Greece and the island of Cyprus and their material and stylistic output – informs visitors that while Greeks shared “a common language [...] and ethnic heritage,” they primarily identified themselves as citizens of their city-state. The display goes on to explore the ways contact with other cultures in different areas of Greece informed particular material cultures. For example, interpretive text notes that Greek colonists to South Italy and Sicily were in contact with indigenous Italic populations and the

Etruscans which led to hybrid art styles among all three groups. Similarly, visitors are informed of the ways Greek immigrants to the area of modern Turkey were influenced by the "rich Anatolian kingdoms of Lydia and Phrygia" and there developed the "Wild Goat" style of pottery decoration. The curators highlight Cyprus as a "center of cross-cultural interactions throughout antiquity" bringing together "Phoenician, Egyptian, and Assyrian art and culture." Discussion of cross-cultural contact helps to dispel the white supremacist myth that ancient Greece and Rome were the originators of all art and culture and creates a more accurate understanding of the ancient world as diverse, innovative and interconnected.

In a display exploring ancient Greek trade networks, the interpretive text explains that in addition to creating access to "prestige goods," these networks also functioned to "expand Greek cultural horizons [...] especially with the Assyrians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Etruscans." The Phoenicians are credited with introducing their alphabet to the Greeks in a display titled "Writing," although most attention is paid to its spread along Greek trade routes. However, the curators also nuance ancient Greek cross-cultural contact in a section regarding "Foreigners," noting that while some ancient sources characterize the Greeks as "innately curious about other peoples and their lands," others describe them as "fearful of foreigners" and "hostile to immigrants."

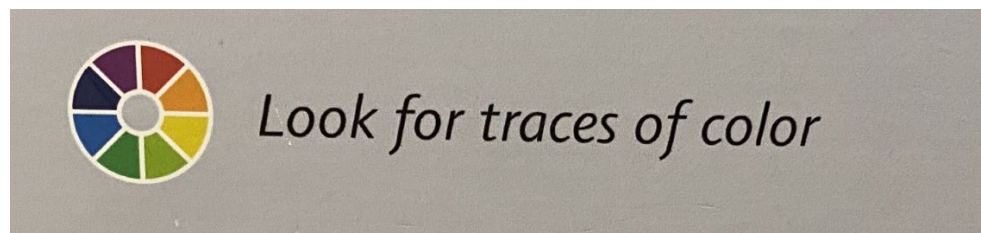
The "Ancient Coins" gallery illustrates the influence of ancient Greek and Roman culture across the ancient world but does not engage deeply with how this influence and control was spread. On display in the gallery are coins from regions including Egypt, Kyrenaica, Macedonia, Thrace, Asia Minor, Cyprus, Syria, Armenia, the Black Sea, Persia and Bactria and Northwestern India. Interpretive labels inform visitors of how local traditions often came to blend with Greek or Roman culture in their coinage. A smaller display of coins related to major historical events gestures toward the role of warfare in expanding Rome and resistance by local populations. For example, coins minted by Jewish rebels are accompanied by interpretive text stating that the coins were struck to "validate their independence and to bankroll their resistance." Another set of coins commemorates "Trajan's War Against the Dacians," from which the spoils "paid for lavish new monuments in Rome." Otherwise, the gallery largely does not engage with the perspectives of conquered or colonized populations, or the military force need to maintain Rome's empire.

## *Race*

MFAB discusses the construction of race and otherness in art throughout the exhibit, both in terms of ancient understandings and representations, and in terms of contemporary racial biases. In a display titled "Visualizing Others," the curators draw visitors' attention to the ways ancient artisans depicted foreigners "through distinctive clothing, hairstyles, poses, and gestures." Emphasis is placed on the extent to which ancient Greeks and Romans were in contact with peoples and cultures across the ancient world, including Europe, Africa and Asia. Equally, the display discusses that depictions of the other served as propaganda for the superiority of Greek or Roman culture in contrast to others. This section in particular is rooted in the ancient understanding of otherness, which gives visitors historical context.

Concepts of race are further explored in a section titled "The Myth of Classical Whiteness," centered on research MFAB has done to recover the color and pigment which originally adorned a scaled down version of the Athena Parthenos. The introductory text informs visitors that ancient sculptures were originally brightly painted, contrary to their contemporary association with whiteness. The text explains that in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the whiteness of ancient statues came to be associated with ideal beauty and racial superiority, and that white nationalists have exploited these associations, even though it is ahistorical and inaccurate. Visitors are instructed that the racial category 'white' did not exist in antiquity, and that while these "societies were hierarchical, the distinctions were not based on skin color." The label closes by explaining the ways researchers can recover these ancient pigments and encourages visitors to look for a color wheel symbol (figure 1) on other labels in the gallery, which indicates that traces of pigment are still visible on that object.

**Figure 1**



Also included in this section are a digital reconstruction and recolor of the Athena Parthenos on display (figure 2), and a digital interactive with

more information on the research and technology used to uncover the sculpture's original color. The "Myth of Classical Whiteness" display gently challenges a common misconception about ancient art, while inviting visitors into the excitement of new research and encouraging them to take part in new knowledge production by finding other examples of once-painted sculptures in the gallery. Finally, it repudiates white nationalist appropriations of classical art and makes clear the continuing relevance of ancient art and history to the world today.

**Figure 2**



In the Roman Portraiture wing, the MFAB curators return to the changing concept of race from ancient to contemporary times, and evolving scholarship on ancient art. In a display dedicated to exploring unidentifiable portraits, titled "Lost in the Crowd," particular attention is paid to a portrait head of a man (figure 3) with curly hair and facial features that might indicate origins in North Africa. As the interpretive text explains, because of modern ideas of race the portrait used to be identified as either an enslaved or low-status man; however improved scholarship has demonstrated that Rome was a multi-ethnic society and that several emperors originated in North Africa. This relatively brief section neatly gestures toward the constructed nature of race as a concept, and the different identity categories in ancient Roman culture.

**Figure 3**



Another example comes from the Gallery of Early Greek Art, which focuses on the development of and influences on Greek Art. One of the objects on display is a mug in the shape of an African man's head (figure 4); while it is a well-made piece, for a contemporary viewer it bears an unfortunate and striking similarity to a minstrel character. The brief tombstone label notes only that ancient Greeks were in contact with African peoples, identifies the characters of Dionysus and satyrs on the rim, and includes the symbol that indicates the object is part of the MFA Mobile audio guide.

**Figure 4**



The audio guide does include more discussion of the object, including more context for the African peoples the ancient Greeks were in contact with, the attention to individual details such as wrinkles and hairstyle by the artist, and the interest ancient Greeks had in representing other people and cultures. It ends with a reflection on the object by former MFAB Trustee, Ted Landsmark, who the audio guide notes is African American. Landsmark states that he appreciates the piece as a "depiction of an African [...] that goes back more than two millennia because so often Black people are overlooked in art and world culture." While the audio guide does address some of the discomfort a modern viewer might have regarding this object and provide more context for how it might have been viewed at the time of its creation, it is unfortunate that the context is hidden by the technology barrier of an audio guide, which requires a smartphone and an internet connection.

### *Slavery*

While the MFAB does acknowledge the practice of slavery in ancient Greece and Rome, it largely leaves the topic unexplored, without critical analysis of the practice or interest in the lives of enslaved persons. In the gallery titled "Daily Life in Ancient Greece," the curators use a wide assortment of material culture, to give visitors insight into the mundane aspects of daily life beyond the valorized or monumental works we are accustomed to seeing in a museum setting. The introductory text notes that enslaved people were excluded from Athenian citizenship along with "women, children and foreign residents" and labored in "the fields, quarries, mines, and households."

However, while special attention in the following displays is paid to women, children and even "foreigner residents", throughout the gallery the experiences of enslaved people remain an afterthought. For example, in a display discussing "The Greek House," enslaved people are included in the list of potential household members but not discussed further, even as the activities of men and women in the house are explored. While the activities discussed may have included enslaved people, it is not made explicit, nor is the male/female and public/private division of the house discussed from the perspective of an enslaved household member. While this may reflect the lack of surviving information on the lives of enslaved individuals in ancient Greece, it contributes to a sense that only certain classes of people merit consideration or scholarship. This same gallery acknowledges the scarcity of information on the lives of ancient Greek women but still

seeks to surface their contributions and experiences; similar consideration is not offered to enslaved people.

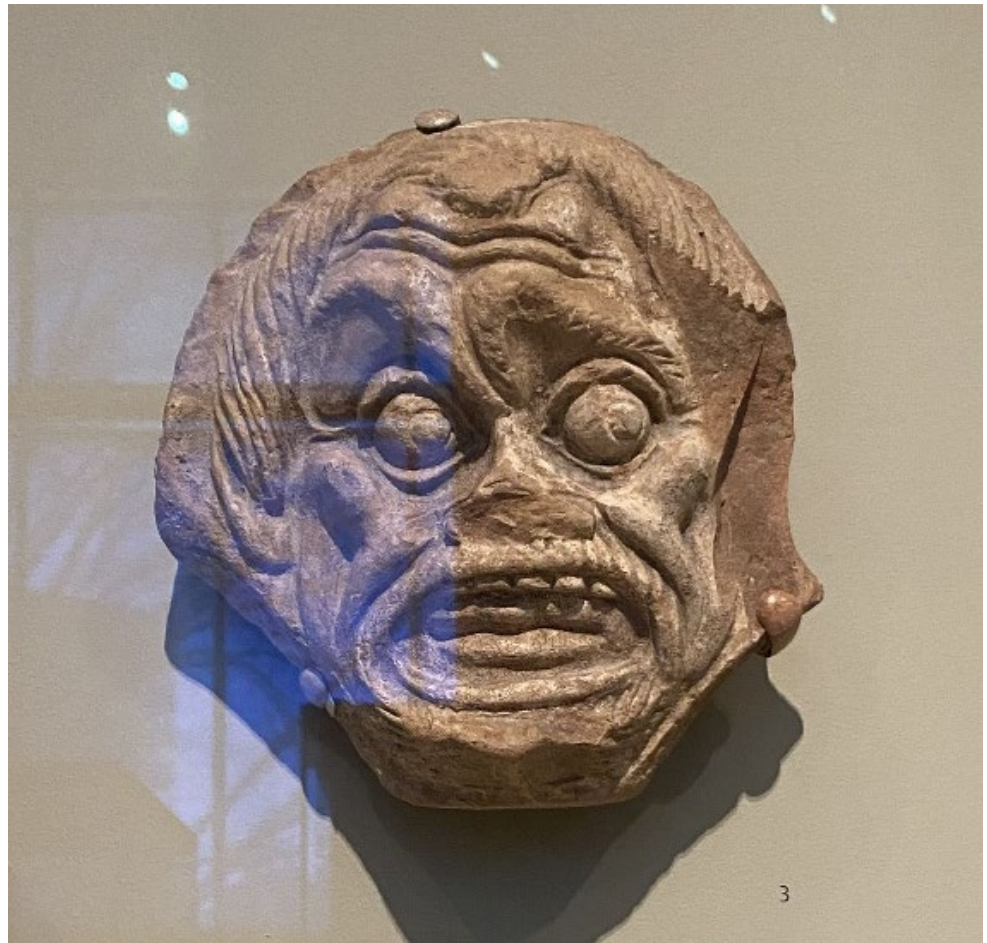
Relatedly, even when we are shown the sorts of work an enslaved person in a Greek house might have done, the exact nature of the individual's status is left ambiguous, with the term servant. A tombstone label for a funerary relief (figure 5) commemorating a high-status Greek woman, identifies the other figure as her servant, and notes that she wears a "plain dress suitable for working," is depicted at a much smaller scale, and proffers the deceased a small box. While the servant might be enslaved, the term is ambiguous enough to leave open the possibility that she was a free but low status individual, employed by the deceased. While the 'servant' figure is almost certainly not a specific individual but a type to be used as a signifier, understanding the exact role she is meant to embody would give visitors a better understanding of the ancient world generally and the relationship being depicted here specifically.

**Figure 5**



In another gallery dedicated to "Wine, Poets and Performers in Ancient Greece" a similar pattern appears in which slavery is mentioned but not explored, or potentially enslaved individuals appear but are not identified as such. For example, a display for "New Comedy" contains two ceramic representations of slave masks (figures 6 and 7), but their tombstone labels contain no interpretive text, and the introductory text only mentions that the "crafty slave" was a stock character in these performances. It is unclear from the display who would have seen this type of mask in use, what the grotesque features were meant to communicate or how these images may better inform us today about the ancient Greeks' conception of slavery.

**Figure 6**



**Figure 7**



In the same gallery, a display about the symposium includes discussion of the erotic content of these drinking parties but does not directly acknowledge the enslaved status of many of the sex workers present at such events. The label that comes closest to acknowledging this practice is for a libation bowl (figure 8) which is decorated with five women performing for three men. Within the interpretive text of the tombstone label, the women are identified as "professional female entertainers" and described as wearing "styles associated with slaves and foreigners." While another interpretive label does provide the context that women were barred from symposia unless they were "courtesans" there to provide a variety of entertainments, including sex, no further mention is made of "slaves and foreigners," or why these figures might have been depicted in this manner.

**Figure 8**



In the Roman Portraiture Wing, in a display on "Commemorating the Dead," slavery is discussed obliquely through the figure of the freedman/woman. The introductory text explains different funerary practices of aristocratic and lower status families, "including freedmen and -women," but does not mention how enslaved people were treated after death. This is part of a consistent silence, intentional or not, surrounding the lives of enslaved people.

One of the objects on display in this section is the "Funerary relief of the Gessii" (figure 9) featuring portraits of Gessia Fausta, Publius Gessius and Publius Gessius Primus. The tombstone label notes that "Fausta and her son Primus are formerly enslaved persons" and that "it was common for freed persons to take the name of their former master, as is the case here." While this description is accurate, it implies that freed persons like Fausta wanted to adopt their former enslaver's name, rather than this being a legal practice which created a clientage relationship and alienated freed persons from their birth families. More information is available on the MFA Mobile audio guide, including that

Publius Gessius likely "had a son with Gessia Fausta while she was a slave, then freed both mother and her son and married her." Also noted is that Fausta commissioned the piece after the death of Publius and Primus, with money from Primus' estate. This interpretive text offers perhaps the most personal details related to ancient slavery in the Ancient Greek and Roman art galleries at MFAB, although it only gestures at the assumed sexual availability of enslaved people in ancient Rome and elides discussion of more difficult topics or more nuanced explorations of manumission.

**Figure 9**



Finally, it is worth considering whether, by only discussing a person after they have become free, we tacitly continue ancient (and modern) methods of dehumanization which undergird the actual practice of slavery.

### *Gender and Sexuality*

Throughout the ancient Greek and Roman galleries, the MFAB curators address ancient constructions of gender, as well as sexual practices in multiple contexts. In the "Gods and Goddesses" gallery, a display titled "Births and Loves of the Gods" explores the sexual and romantic elements of the myths surrounding the gods. The introductory text quickly establishes the multiplicity of experiences present in these stories from "asexual reproduction" to "Zeus's pansexual desire" and, in so doing, challenges heteronormative assumptions about ancient cultures. The display also includes interpretive text regarding "Gender and Violence" in the myths and its relation to human culture. Visitors are instructed that in stories and in art, the gods are often depicted in "scenes of violence, unwanted pursuits or kidnapping" if not, explicitly,

rape, and that this type of sexual violence was most often perpetrated by male gods, but that the victim might be either a man or woman. The text notes that these myths were not prescriptive for human behavior, and points to Athenian law punishing rape with death as a counterexample. However, the curators emphasize the cultural "disregard for female consent" present in myth and in law, where sexual violence was a "crime against the male guardian" not the victim.

The "Daily Life in Ancient Greece" gallery explores the contours of gender in the patriarchal societies of ancient Greece and surfaces the experiences and labor of women alongside those men. For example, interpretive text on "The Greek House" discusses the division of the house between public and private spaces, in which men tended to occupy the more publicly accessible areas and women occupied the more private spaces. The text also notes the continuing scholarship on the topic indicating that the male/female divide was less stringent than once believed.

While the "Daily Life" gallery acknowledges that ancient sources do not offer a complete understanding of the lives of women, it convincingly illustrates the presence and importance of women to ancient Greek society. In a large display titled "Spinning, Weaving, Sewing," the importance of textile manufacturing to the "sustainability of any Greek household" is discussed, and the primary role of women in this industry is highlighted. Emphasis is placed on the amount of labor and collaboration required, as well as the use of textiles in Greek life for clothing, furnishings, wall hangings and window coverings. Additionally, the curators point to cultural constructions of proper womanhood, including self-sufficiency, which images of women engaged in wool working could represent.

The display discussing symposia in the "Wine, Poets and Performers" gallery explores both the gendered boundaries of ancient Greek culture as well as some types of sexual practice. For example, the symposium is introduced as an elite male social practice from which elite women were excluded, and which, in addition to drinking, centered on conversation. A portion of the display is dedicated to the erotic and sexual components of symposia, and the presence of women sex workers at such events. However, while this section includes a number of artifacts which depict erotic encounters, including intercourse (figure 10), the couples are predominantly male - female. The common practice of male - male relationships in Greek culture is relegated to one sentence in the interpretive panel regarding attendees and one suggestive, but not explicit, wine pitcher decorated with the image of a nude youth offering wine to a bearded man (figure 11). The display

includes explicit discussion of male-female sexual encounters, which demonstrates that sex itself is not the limiting factor in these discussions; possibly the curators chose to elide deeper engagement with same-sex eroticism for the comfort of contemporary audiences, in a culture which still often assumes same-sex relationships to be less appropriate for the general public. While it may also be due to the implied age differential in male-male partnerships, as the ancient Greeks are known for the practice of pederasty, this did not limit discussions of male-female sexual contact which would also have included age differences that would not be considered acceptable to contemporary viewers.

**Figure 10**



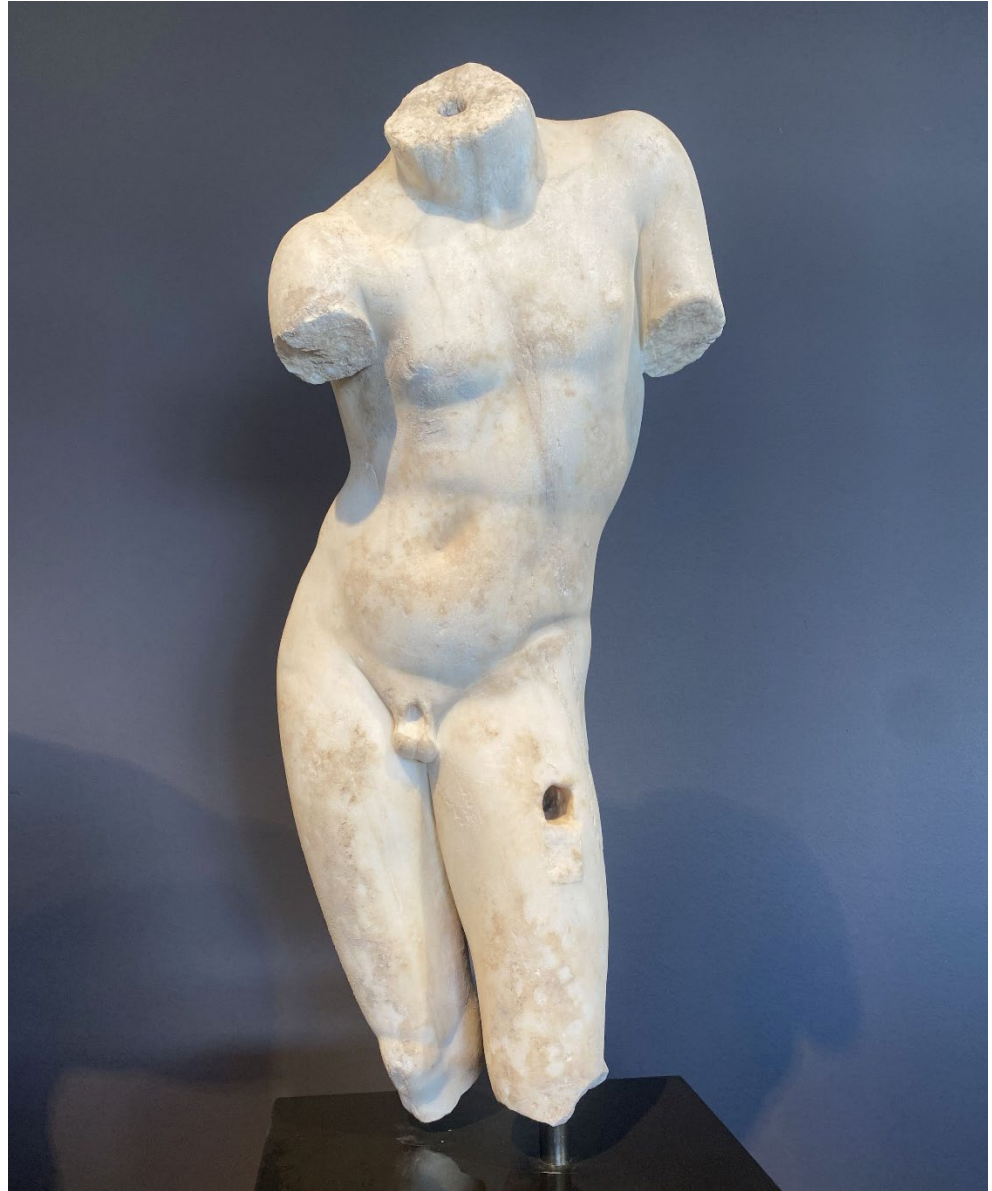
**Figure 11**



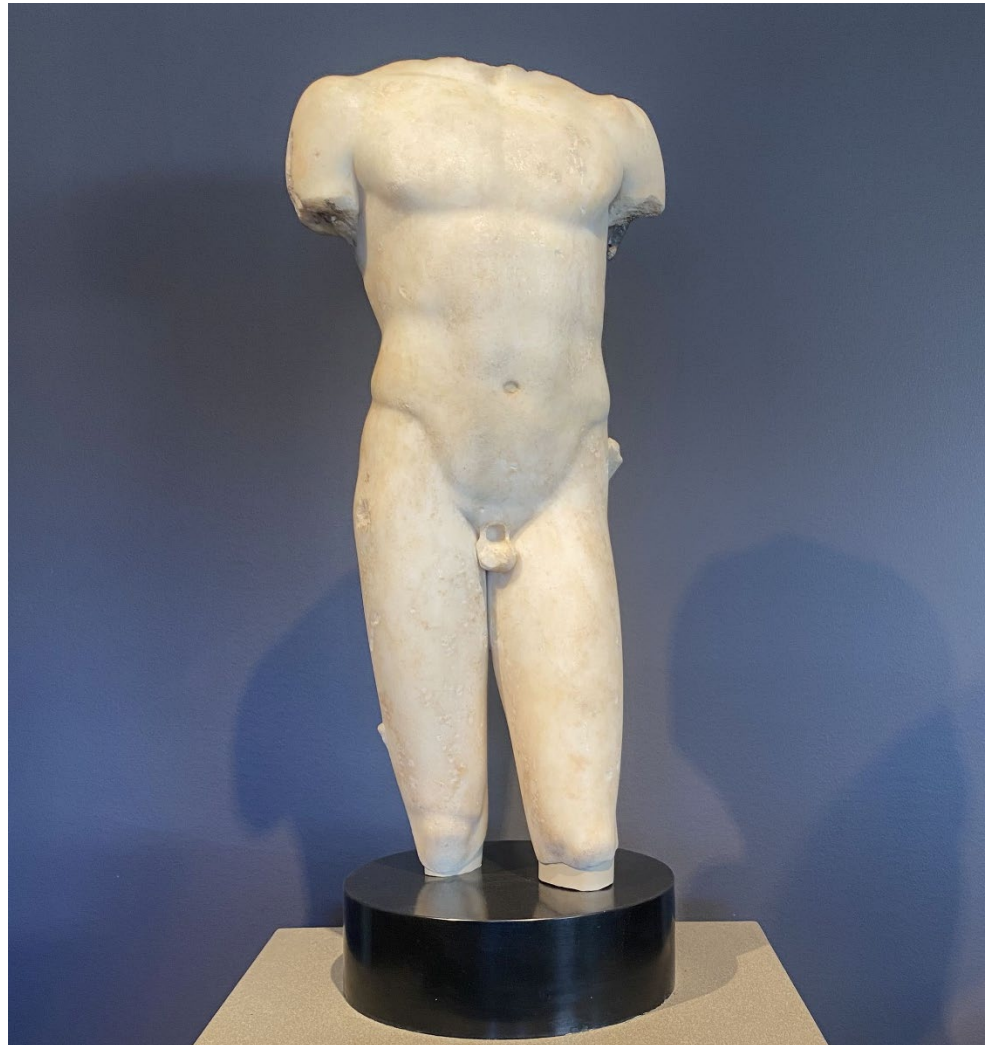
A similar seeming hesitance to explore ancient male - male sexual practice or eroticism in much depth is also present in the hall of Roman statuary. For example, two sculptures of nude, male youths (figures 12 and 13) appear in the gallery with tombstone labels that include language that gestures toward the erotic or sensual possibilities of the images. One is described as "provocatively posed" while the other is described as possessing a "suggestive pose and soft, effeminate body" intended to "accentuate the eroticism of the figure." No other

interpretive text is available to help visitors understand why an adolescent male body might have been erotic to a Roman audience, or who the intended viewer would have been.

**Figure 12**

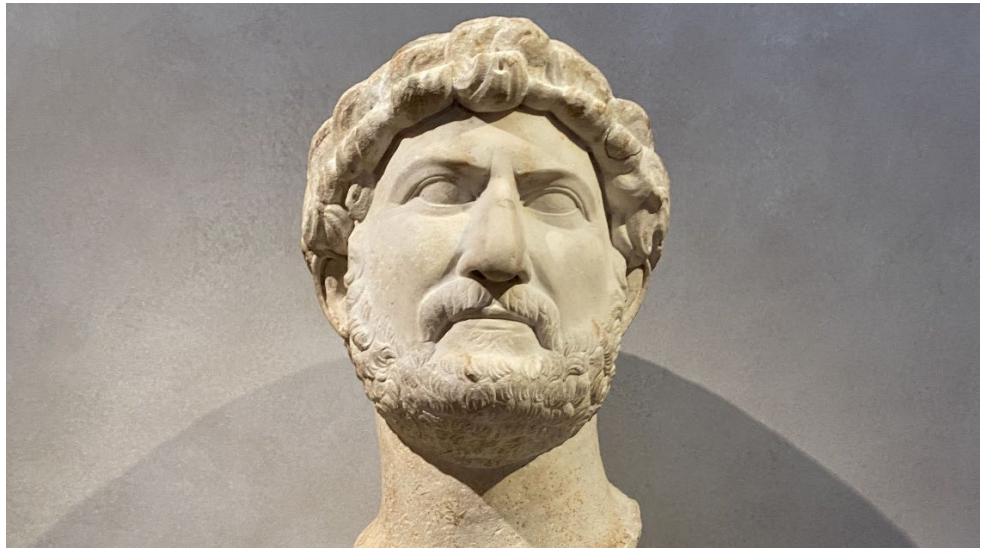


**Figure 13**



In the Roman Portraiture wing, the curators focus on the ways Romans made their identities legible through self-fashioning. The interpretive text "Fashion Statements" makes clear that both men and women engaged in this type of identity work through hairstyles and clothing choices, in life and in art. For a portrait of the emperor Hadrian (figure 14), the curators draw attention to Hadrian's choice to wear a beard, and how his rule changed Roman associations with the beard from one of Greek decadence to one of Greek erudition and learning. A statue of a woman's body (figure 15) is used to discuss the expectations of "chastity and moral restraint for Roman women" and how these virtues could be communicated through dress.

**Figure 14**



**Figure 15**



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In the same hall, the curator's selection of funerary monuments illustrates both the ideal of Roman patriarchal society, and the ways women exerted their autonomy in actual practice. For example, the tombstone label for the "Relief of Petronia Hedone and her son, Lucius Petronius Philemon" (figure 16) draws visitors' attention to the absence of Petronia Hedone's husband in the relief. It instructs visitors that Roman fathers typically held the power in their families, particularly over their children. However, this funerary relief implies the intentional exclusion of the husband/father, in favor of Petronia Hedone as head of household in a familial unit with her son.

**Figure 16**



Consistent with the introductory text to the Greek and Roman Art galleries, which encourages visitors to “discover new ways to think about” the art on display, the MFAB’s exhibition challenges traditional assumptions and interpretations of Greek and Roman art, adding nuance and dispelling myths of cultural superiority or singularity. This is most present in discussions of cross-cultural contact, race and otherness, and constructions of gender, especially in highlighting the lives of ancient women. The gallery text routinely discusses the ongoing

relevance of the study of Greek and Roman antiquities, including actively challenging white supremacist appropriations and noting the MFAB's own past complicity.

## Case 2: The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology

The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology (Kelsey) is located on the University of Michigan campus and maintains a collection of more than 100,000 artifacts related to Mediterranean, North African and Middle Eastern archaeology. In addition to hosting permanent and special exhibitions, the Kelsey sponsors archaeology field projects and supports student research. In addition to serving the University of Michigan community, the Kelsey is open to and offers programming for the general public, and admission is free for all.

The museum's website states that its mission is to "[advance] understanding and appreciation of the ancient Mediterranean world" (*Our mission, values, and vision: U-M LSA Kelsey Museum of Archaeology*). Within the two floors of gallery space, exhibitions are arranged, loosely, by date and by culture rather than thematically; the major gallery spaces are "Ancient Middle East," "Dynastic Egypt," "Graeco-Roman Egypt," "Cyprus, Greece, Etruria," "Roman Empire" and "Pompeii". This aligns well with the curatorial emphasis on context, both historical and archaeological.<sup>7</sup>

### *Imperialism*

Consistent with the Kelsey's curatorial emphasis on context, the interaction between and among ancient Mediterranean cultures and peoples is one of the primary interpretive lenses used across the galleries. The Kelsey discusses this cross-cultural contact in terms of trade, colonization, artistic innovation and conquest. As the gallery spaces are organized by the primary culture under discussion, each section begins with a large introductory text which gives visitors a description of the culture, its particular history, and the type and extent of its contact with other groups. Maps help to illustrate the territories under discussion.

In the section which explores ancient Greece, the curators introduce the Greeks as "socially diverse" and "politically connected [...]" throughout the Mediterranean." In broad strokes, the introductory text

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<sup>7</sup> It is unclear when these galleries were originally installed or how frequently they are updated. However, the curatorial strategy was established at the museum's inception, according to a Kelsey curator emerita.

tracks the ebb and flow of Greek influence across time; starting with trade networks to "Egypt and Near East" during the Bronze Age, followed by a period of decline, before a resurgence led to Greek colonization in places such as "Egypt, the Black Sea region and the western coast of Turkey, southern France, Sicily, and southern Italy." The text notes that local populations usually responded by either resisting the Greek colonists or by finding "ways to combine Greek and local traditions," and that the Greeks were "influenced by these contacts" as well. Nor are the Greeks treated as the only powerful culture present, as the text notes that the Phoenicians, the Etruscans and the Romans at different times "rivaled them in political and economic strength." The introduction closes with discussion of Alexander the Great, "extending Graeco-Macedonian political power southward to Egypt and as far east as Afghanistan," before his death and the eventual splitting of the territory. The discussion of cross-cultural contact in other interpretive labels in the Greek section note specific influences other cultures had on the Greeks, such as alphabetic writing from the Phoenicians, "new types of pottery, and experimentation in sculpture and architecture."

Although not directly within the purview of this analysis, the Kelsey devotes significant gallery space to the Etruscan culture and the peoples who populated Southern Italy and Etruria. The Etruscans are described as a prosperous and influential culture, with extensive trade networks into northern Europe and across the Mediterranean, with a "distinctive visual culture." Importantly, the Etruscans are not treated as a sidenote to the histories of Greece or Rome, but as a distinct culture that exerted influence and was influenced in turn.

For discussions of Graeco-Roman Egypt, the Kelsey emphasizes syncretism in religion and the arts, and the economic dimension of control over the region. The curators locate the origins of "stylistic dualism" in Egypt with the rule of Ptolemy I, who began the practice of commissioning art which would appeal to immigrants from Greece and to native Egyptians. From this stylistic dualism, the interpretive text notes, emerged hybrid styles which continued into the period of Roman control of Egypt. Regarding religion, the interpretive text states that Egyptian religion and worship of gods continued, even as Greek and Roman immigrants brought their own practices and gods, and that "hybrid gods such as Serapis and Isis-Aphrodite" were born of this cultural milieu. An interpretive text titled "The Economy of Roman Egypt" briefly discusses the economies of the Roman world from the perspective of the Roman-Egyptian town of Karanis. The town itself is described as having a "diverse local economy" with access to goods

imported from elsewhere and those produced locally. Karanis paid taxes to the capital city Alexandria in the form of grain, money or other local products, and the text informs visitors that "most of the grain would be shipped to Rome for distribution throughout the Roman world."

Imperialism and conquest are explored most deeply in the gallery spaces devoted to Rome. For example, a display titled "Rome's Expansion and Rule" describes Rome as "conquering all of Italy, [...] Greece, the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East, North Africa, and [...] western Europe" and reaching its greatest size under emperor Hadrian. Attention is paid to the establishment of provinces in conquered territories, which "greatly enriched Rome and fueled Roman consumption at home" and "supplied military recruits."

A large display is dedicated to the Roman provinces in Syro-Palestine, Asia Minor, Gaul and Germany, and Northern Africa and Carthage. Discussion of these provinces is primarily in terms of the material resources Rome gained from them, with some discussion of artistic output and the establishment of Roman empire; North Africa, for example, "sent olive oil and animals for the arena to Rome," and specialized in mosaics for the houses of the wealthy. The display also notes the importance of Roman soldiers and veterans to colonizing and establishing "Roman political and social institutions" in Syro-Palestine, Asia Minor, Gaul and Germany.

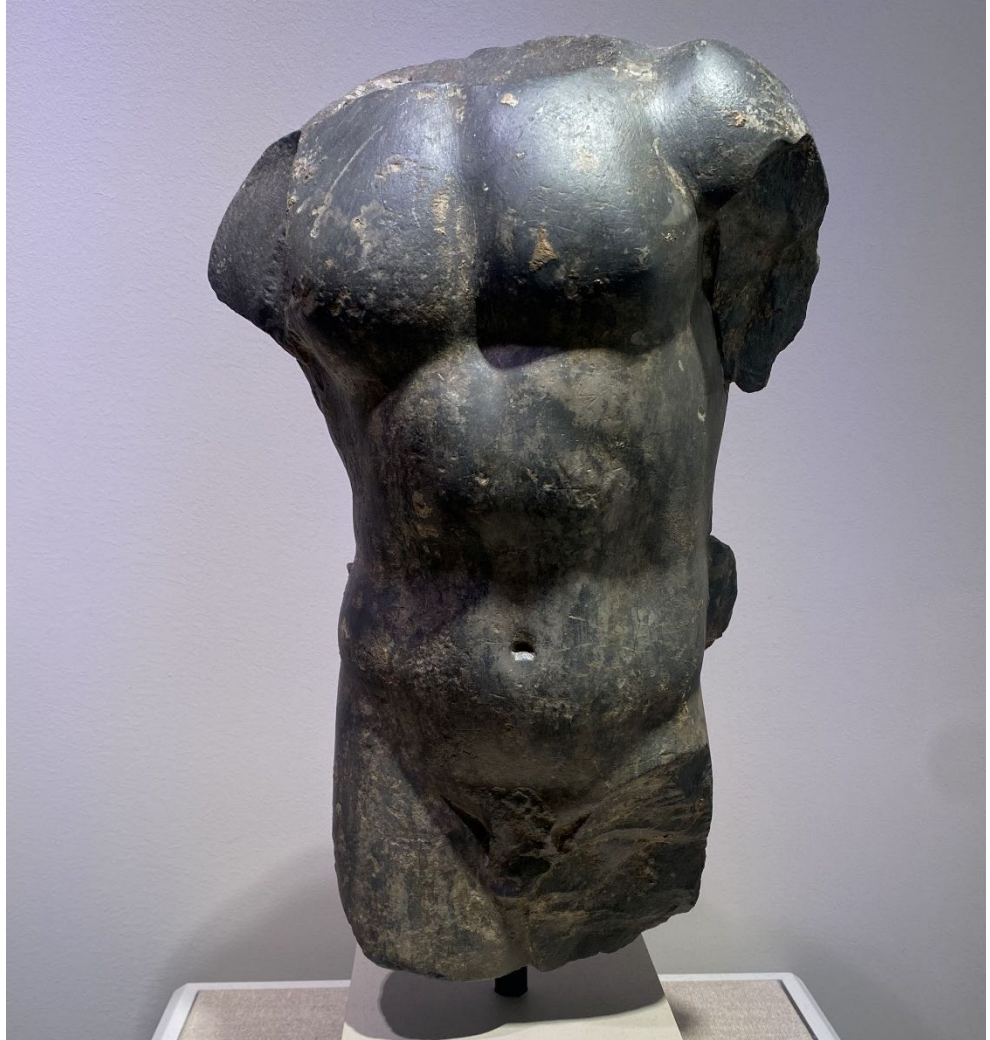
Little attention is paid to the experiences of conquered populations or to resistance against Roman rule. The interpretive text titled "Rome's Expansion and Rule" does inform visitors that provinces could gain legal rights within Rome and that "many people benefitted from the construction of roads, aqueducts, and other public works" while maintaining "their local character." In a display titled "Peace and the Flow of Goods," the curators also note that Roman control of the Mediterranean made trade across great distances easier and reduced the threat of pirates. Not explored are the death tolls or continual border conflicts required to maintain Rome's territorial holdings.

### *Race*

Within the Kelsey's galleries, race and otherness are not meaningfully explored or used as lenses for reading ancient material. For example, a sculpture in black limestone from the Ptolemaic period of Egypt is identified as the "Torso of a Nubian Captive" (figure 17) but no

additional information is offered to visitors. Similarly, a lamp in the shape of a Nubian man's head (figure 18) is displayed in a case focused on the Roman settlement of Karanis, Egypt. The tombstone label which covers four objects, including the Nubian-head lamp, notes only that lamps could "show a variety of figural designs" and that these designs might be decorative or apotropaic.

**Figure 17**



**Figure 18**



In a display which discusses Roman practices related to "Health, Adornment & Entertainment," the interpretive text gestures toward constructions of Roman identity in contrast to non-Roman others. The curators state that "certain standards of bodily care distinguished civilized Romans from non-Romans," but what these standards of care were or what defined a non-Roman in opposition are not discussed, nor is the term "civilized" explored, problematized or nuanced. Finally, representations of foreignness in art are briefly mentioned in a display titled "The Use and Meaning of Marble." The text notes that because *pavonazetto* came to be associated with foreignness "Romans frequently sculpted defeated enemies" from the stone.

It is clear that the Kelsey does not lack material in their collections, or currently on display, which could be used as an entry point to deeper engagement with race and otherness in the ancient world. The curatorial decision not to engage with the topic of race may reflect the older academic tradition which holds that race is not a meaningful category, or interpretive strategy, for the study of the ancient world.

## Slavery

Throughout its galleries, particularly in the Roman displays, the Kelsey acknowledges the practice of ancient slavery, but little attention is paid to the experiences or lives of enslaved people. For example, in a display about "Roman Agriculture in Campania," the interpretive text focuses on the rich soil of the region, the agricultural products commonly produced there and the farms and villas which populated the area in antiquity. It notes that "large farms had slaves to do the hard work" and that the tools on display were predominantly used by enslaved people; however, there is no discussion of who these people may have been. Similarly, alongside an ancient grain mill an interpretive label notes that "animals or slaves operated [grain mills], and it was thought to be degrading work" but no other information about enslaved people is provided.

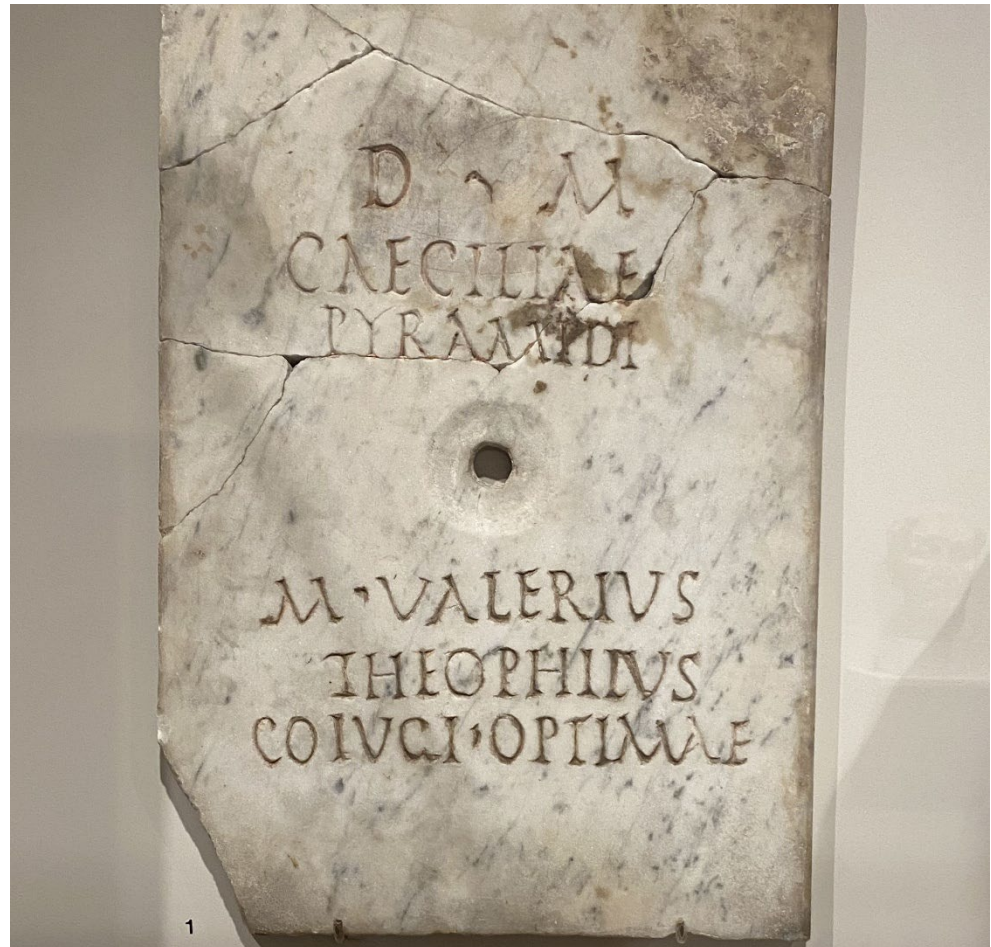
The practice of slavery appears consistently as a backdrop in discussions of other Roman activities, often in the form of dangerous or onerous labor, the luxurious lifestyle of elites or in the figure of the freedman/woman. For example, a small display on "The Emperor's Quarries" notes that "slaves labored with simple iron hand tools" to pull rocks out of quarries. Interpretive text regarding "Dining in Roman Style" states that at Roman dinner parties "slaves [...] served the wine and cut food into bite-size pieces for the diners." Finally, in an exploration of Roman medical practice doctors are identified as commonly being "freed slaves who had been trained as apprentices."

Where attention is paid to the lives of a group comprised primarily of enslaved people, the connection to slavery is minimized, as is the case for the special exhibition "Gladiators: Life in the Arena." This display is part of the "Kelsey in Focus" series, which highlights the research of Kelsey "curators, faculty, staff, and students" (*Kelsey in focus*). While the introductory text acknowledges that "most gladiators were enslaved individuals," it pivots in the same sentence to state that free people also chose to participate and minimizes the role of slavery with the statement that "only three out of five gladiators were enslaved." The role of slavery is not discussed further in the gladiator exhibition, in favor of explorations of gladiatorial weapons, fighting styles and celebrity.

A larger display titled "Tombs & Burials in the Roman World" offers visitors some insight into aspects of Roman slavery. The introductory text describes the various funerary practices across time and social status, noting that people of average means (including freedmen) might build their own tombs, while aristocratic and wealthy families often had

family tombs which could include "former and current slaves who were highly regarded." Other information regarding slavery in this section comes through the figure of the freedman/woman. For example, the tombstone label for the "Grave Marker of Caecilia Pyramidis" (figure 19) explains that it may have been "commissioned by a former slave for his wife."

**Figure 19**



Another example is the "Grave Marker of Cornelia Hermione" (figure 20) for which the tombstone label notes that her name "suggests that Cornelia Hermione was a slave who may have married her former master." The label also states that her sons, who commissioned the grave marker, "would have been freeborn" if they were products of this marriage. There is no further information offered regarding the lives or experiences of these individuals prior to manumission, or about the practices which created these types of familial arrangements.

Figure 20



### *Gender and Sexuality*

Although gender is not a primary lens that the Kelsey uses to examine and interpret objects in its galleries, it does appear in a number of displays. Sexuality, however, is left largely unexplored. In the section regarding Etruscan material culture, for example, gender is explored in the context of grave goods and the identities of the people who may have used the artefacts in their daily lives. Interpretive text for fibulae

informs visitors that both men and women wore them, and that archaeologists can use their various shapes to help identify burials as belonging to either men or women. Similarly, crescent shaped razors are described as "characteristic male burial goods" (figure 21) while hand mirrors "were common possessions of Etruscan women" (figure 22).

**Figure 21**



**Figure 22**



Different constructions of gender roles and appropriate behavior are gestured toward in comparisons of cultural practice. For example, the tombstone label for a "Bell-Shaped Vessel for Mixing Wine" (figure 23) informs visitors that the scene depicted on the vessel is of symposium which is indicated by the "inequality between the male and female figures" because in Greek society "high status prostitutes" were the only women allowed at such events. The text contrasts this practice with the Etruscan version, "where respectable women joined the men."

**Figure 23**



More attention is paid to the construction of male and female identity in the gallery space dedicated to Rome, particularly in regard to practices of self-fashioning, and to Roman cultural expectations for men and women. For example, a display exploring Roman jewelry, notes that jewelry was used by Romans to communicate "social rank, economic means, political connections, marital status, and religious affiliation." This practice is explored in more depth through discussion of *bullae*, worn by both girls and boys who were freeborn, and were dedicated to the gods when the child reached maturity. The text notes that maturity meant different things depending on gender, with girls coming of age on "their wedding day [...] between the ages of 12 and 13" and boys traditionally being slightly older between the "ages of 15 and 18."

A nearby display titled "Feminine Beauty" informs visitors that Roman women "were expected to fulfill their role in society as wives and mothers." The display includes artifacts related to makeup, jewelry and hairstyling as methods Roman girls may have used to attract suitors. A separate display featuring an oil lamp decorated with a *genius* figure, discusses the toga as "the mark of Roman [male] citizenship" and pairs the concepts of the *pater familias* (father of the Roman house) and the *pater patriae* (father of the Roman state) but does not expand on or explore these ideas as representative of a patriarchal society or expectation of male identity.

A small display on Roman medicine notes that Romans made "assumptions about the body that are different than our own." However, the text also seems to adopt a similar andro-centrism to the Romans, stating that "women [...] were thought to possess weaker and colder constitutions than men," therefore treating men as the default.

One small object in a larger display regarding Roman Karanis, opens the possibility of ancient identities beyond the male/female binary. The object is a small faience image of Hermaphroditus (figure 24), for which the associated label reads in full: "No. 18 represents Hermaphrodite, the dual-sexed child of the Greek deities Hermes and Aphrodite. In decorative contexts Hermaphroditus were often depicted as erotic or comic figures." No further information is provided, and no other non-binary or gender-nonconforming figures are discussed in the galleries.

**Figure 24**



Throughout its galleries, the Kelsey consistently interprets the artifacts on display from an overhead perspective focused on historical and archaeological context, with more attention paid to large movements and patterns than to individual lives or experiences. Relatively little interpretation is devoted to race, slavery or gender and sexuality, instead the primary interpretive lens is one of cross-cultural contact, including imperialism. The Kelsey's interpretive strategy is consistent with a traditional, academic study of the ancient world.

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate that imperialism, race, slavery, gender and sexuality are topics which are addressed, to greater and lesser extents, in exhibitions of ancient Greek and Roman art. The museums often differed in the language they used to address these topics and in the content they chose to emphasize.

Both institutions addressed imperialism, although the Kelsey devoted more direct attention to the topic with a large display dedicated to Roman imperial provinces. Both museums favored discussion of cross-cultural contact more broadly, than imperialism or conquest specifically. The role of trade networks throughout the ancient Mediterranean to bring disparate people and cultures into contact was highlighted in both museums, and often illustrated through stylistic hybridity in art. Neither museum discussed the experiences of conquered populations in depth, nor engaged deeply with acts of resistance to imperial rule. Discussions of cross-cultural contact offer visitors more accurate, nuanced histories of the ancient world and challenge outdated, white supremacist narratives which place ancient Greece and Rome at the center of all art, learning and culture. Deeper engagement with acts of resistance to ancient Greek and Roman imperialism could further nuance this history and challenge assumptions of Graeco-Roman superiority which undergird white supremacy.

The MFAB explored race and otherness throughout their ancient Greek and Roman art galleries. In addition to addressing ancient constructions of the other, the MFAB illustrated how modern racial constructions do not map neatly onto ancient ones and can lead to incorrect interpretations of ancient art. Additionally, the MFAB acknowledged the modern appropriations of classical art by white supremacists, and the legacy of white supremacy of both the museum and classics fields generally and the MFAB specifically. These discussions in particular made evident the continuing relevance of scholarship on Graeco-Roman antiquity to the contemporary public. In contrast, the Kelsey did not use race or otherness as a lens for interpreting works in its galleries.

While both museums acknowledged the practice of slavery in their galleries, neither explored the topic more deeply. Consistent with Eisen's (2024) research at the Harvard Museum of Art, neither museum offered visitors information or interpretation from the perspective of an enslaved individual or discussed the experiences of enslaved people. Where more information regarding the lives of enslaved people

was present, it was through the figure of the freedman/woman, which may continue the dehumanization of enslaved people by deeming them unworthy of attention or capable of agency before manumission. The two institutions differed in their terminology, with the MFAB preferring the terms “enslaved people/persons/individuals” in labels and the Kelsey opting for “slaves.”

Finally, both institutions discussed ancient constructions of gender and the role of self-fashioning to signal identity. The Kelsey’s interpretive texts spoke more to ancient ideals of gender while the MFAB included information about how these ideals might be challenged or subverted in practice. The MFAB addressed sexuality more extensively than the Kelsey but not as a primary topic for consideration. Largely missing from both institutions was the presence of ancient people beyond the male/female binary. Perhaps reticence to engage with sexuality in museum displays reflects larger social or cultural discomfort with discussions of sex and sexuality in contemporary American audiences. However, discussions of diverse sexualities and gender identities in the ancient world would challenge white supremacist assumptions of gender/sex essentialism which are often pointed to as traditional or natural.

While two case studies do not offer enough data to make sweeping judgements of the entire field of Greek and Roman antiquities in US museums, some larger trends may be visible. The Kelsey, with its curatorial emphasis on historical and archaeological context since its inception, likely represents a more traditional interpretive strategy in its galleries. In contrast, the MFAB with its newly updated and renovated galleries, likely represents a newer mode of interpretation of antiquity, and incorporates the expanding scholarly literature on topics such as race, slavery, gender and sexuality, as well as new museological approaches for creating representative, equitable and relevant exhibits.

As the introductory text of the MFAB’s Greek and Roman art galleries makes clear, the exhibitions were designed to encourage visitors to think in new ways about the objects and cultures on display, as a break from the museum’s past practice. This is indicative of the necessity of intentionality when designing exhibitions of ancient Greek and Roman art meant to challenge traditional or white supremacist narratives. Museums seeking to create similar changes in their exhibitions of Graeco-Roman antiquity will likely need a similar directness and clarity of purpose. Nor is this kind of change inexpensive; renovations, reinstallations, and the creation of new exhibition materials require large investments of labor, time and money. Larger institutions then

may be more capable of supporting this type of shift in their interpretive strategies.

## Implications

This study represents only the beginning of research for how to address white supremacy in exhibitions of ancient Greek and Roman art. More research should be conducted at other institutions for insight into other interpretive approaches. Further lines of inquiry might include: do other art museums have interpretive strategies more similar to the traditional approach of the Kelsey, or to the updated approach of the MFAB; what approach is the primary interpretive strategy in US art museums; why and how do curators of Graeco-Roman antiquity choose these interpretive strategies; and what role do curators envision for exhibitions of Graeco-Roman antiquity in addressing white supremacy. This study also did not consider or collect data on visitor interactions with the exhibition. Research on the efficacy of exhibit messaging and materials to inform visitors about the ancient world and challenge white supremacy is still needed.

As the United States experiences the second term of a presidential administration that has aligned itself with white nationalists and has committed to white supremacist policy agendas, including mass deportations, rolling back women's and LGBTQ+ rights, and censoring discussions of race, gender and systemic oppression, education about and resistance to white supremacy is critical (May 2025 Intelligence Project Dispatch 2025; *Project 2025, explained* 2025; Sullivan, 2025). As institutions that hold a high level of public trust, museums have a responsibility to tell accurate histories which address issues of continuing relevance in the contemporary world, including white supremacy. More than anything this study has demonstrated that it is possible to create exhibitions of Greek and Roman art which challenge white supremacist myths, but that this work is not complete nor universal. Museums or curators wanting to address white supremacy in their own exhibitions of Greek and Roman antiquities may use this research as a starting point for thinking about how they want to discuss and contextualize imperialism, race, slavery, gender and sexuality in the ancient world.

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