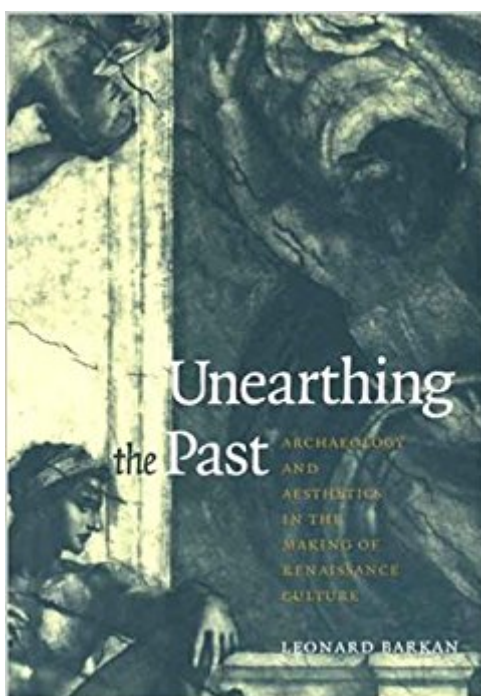


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# Unearthing The Past: Archaeology And Aesthetics In The Making Of Renaissance Culture



## Synopsis

A fascinating story of the impact of the rediscovery of antique objects, long-forgotten and often physically buried, on the consciousness and art of 15th- and 16th-century Rome. Barkan brings to life the inspired attempts to bridge the huge gap between ancient and Renaissance Rome, a rebirth which not only transformed art but also poetry and history. Stories of the rediscovery of statues such as the Laocoon and the Torso Belvedere is accompanied by extracts of Roman descriptions of statues and art as well as Renaissance accounts of uncovering them and their attempts to understand them. Finally, Barkan examines the influence of sculptures on specific Renaissance artists and works, notably Bandinelli.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 42 pages

Publisher: Yale University Press; First Edition edition (December 31, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0300076770

ISBN-13: 978-0300076776

Product Dimensions: 10.2 x 7.4 x 1.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.9 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #802,998 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #68 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Visual Arts > Sculpture](#) #384 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Sculpture > Appreciation](#) #694 in [Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Archaeology](#)

## Customer Reviews

"In this book the idea of the Renaissance is itself reborn." -- Stephen Greenblatt, Harvard

University "This book is a teasing exploration of . . . epistemological mysteries in the history of art." --

Garry Wills, New York Times "Throughout this remarkable book, Barkan demonstrates an eye that is

as refined and penetrating as his writing." -- John Hollander, Yale University --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Winner of the 1999 Scaglione Prize in Comparative Literary Study from the Modern Language Association --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

For those of us who first view the Forum in Rome, the crumbling structures of the Palatine Hill, and

the many other rich fragments of a (then-known) world-spanning empire, the discontinuity is perhaps the greatest shock of first encounter. Gibbon, unlike us, who observed the barefoot friars of Christianity moving through its remains, had a synoptic and often mordant view of what those fragments of imperial glory represented, one that is difficult for us to comprehend because we do not bring his sensibility and contemporary understanding to the task. Imagine, then, what puzzles and wonders the remains of the Roman world, not to mention the Hellenic, presented to those earlier on in the Renaissance who unearthed those monuments, sculptures, and glories which had been razed and plundered in ages past-- and used, literally, as convenient building materials. Attempts to understand what those remains signified, the culture of which they were emblematic, have been part of a continuous, fascinating effort from the 15th century up to the present day. How those concrete "clues" were to be read and used to reconstruct the life, realities and values of the classical, ancient world of the West is a question that has faced Popes and artists, scholars and speculators right up to the present day. Like the German and British scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries, we continue to employ such unearthed evidence to justify our imagining of what "Rome" was. Our imaginings tell us as much about ourselves as they do about that cruel and enlightened, economically foredoomed and incredibly ambitious accretion of post-Etruscan civilization. I can't do justice to Barkan's subtle exploration of how a particular "present" uses the past for its own ends. This is truly the work of a scholar adventurer, a trip to the Greco-Roman (inextricably intertwined) past that can be taken on the wings of his scholarship and vision. By the way, if you go there, take Barkan and avoid Alitalia. The food is terrible and the seats worthy of the Inquisition.

The book promises a really focused study of the effect of Roman art on the development of the Renaissance artist, but I failed to find this. Although there is a lot of really interesting information about Roman art and Renaissance art, there is an emphasis on information as opposed to knowledge or understanding. The book tends to be focused, but not always on the topic at hand. For example, the section titled "Artists" is almost exclusively about Bandinelli, with an occasional aside to Michelangelo, and Botticelli appears to be non-existent. This tends to be typical of the book where the focus on detailed knowledge tends to destroy any attempt to impart understanding. The style is dry and the use of Latin ( and on one occasion French ) terms throughout the text does not add to readability. This reflects the assumption that the reader has a thorough understanding of both Renaissance and Roman art. As such it is really a book aimed exclusively at an academic audience, which is a pity because the information presented is significant. There is one really beautifully written passage where the author describes the joy of living in Rome, and how new

works of art were being discovered near his hotel. Unfortunately, he never really imparts this sense of wonder anywhere in the book, and that is a pity of the book. The joy and wonder of Michelangelo being present at the discovery of the Laocoon sadly is lost in an inventory of historical facts.

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