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ART290

30 November 2022

Propaganda in Ancient Roman Arches: The Arches of Titus, Septimius Severus, and Constantine

The Websters Dictionary defines propaganda as the spreading of ideas or information for the purpose of helping an institution, a cause, or a person. Today, propaganda is often referenced as a tool used by governments or individual politicians to persuade the mass population to support and approve of that said group or person. In ancient Rome, propaganda was present in many art forms, specifically arches, as a way emperors could validify their rule and convince the Roman people that they were worthy of their position; these large-scale monuments would even depict the fictional support of their Roman gods and goddesses. In this way, art historians have identified the manipulative nature of several artworks from ancient Rome as they were commissioned propaganda and used as tools rather than just artwork. In the structures, The Arch of Titus, The Arch of Septimius Severus, and The Arch of Constantine, one can observe the characteristics of propaganda through analysis and historical facts.

The Arch of Titus is the "oldest surviving triumphal arch in Rome (Tuck 397) and was commissioned to celebrate the emperor, Titus, and his victories in the Jewish Wars. At this time, the Jewish people stood against Roman rule, and both parties engaged in a war that resulted in the fall and sacking of Jerusalem. The spoils of war that the Roman army brought back to the empire included prisoners, the golden menorah, and several tools that were used in religious rituals. In this triumphal arch, the commissioner chose specific objects and scenes to display in the relief sculptures on the panels of the arch to promote and celebrate Titus, depicting him as a

successful leader. On the South inner panel, the large, golden menorah is a vital spoil that symbolizes the victory Rome achieved and is carved into the concrete and white marble arch carried by the Roman soldiers as they walk through Rome. This image of the spoils of war specifically shows off the wealth accumulated by the Roman Army led by Titus and is all labeled on the arch for the viewers to understand the scene (Tuck 222). Because many of the Roman people did not see the war firsthand, the victory images commissioned by the emperor, like in this arch, are the only visual depictions they have of the event. On the opposite inner panel of the Arch of Titus, the relief sculpture depicts the triumphal precession. In this tradition, the emperor rides through Rome in a chariot after the war victory. In this relief, Titus is emphasized as a successful military leader as he rides in a chariot with the goddess victory holding a wreath above his head, symbolizing the gods being on Rome's side. Bodyguards stand behind him carrying staffs that become a symbol of the authority of the Roman government. The images depicted in the arch convince the viewer of the wealth, authority, and overall success of Titus' rule as emperor.

The Arch of Septimius Severus is also located in Rome near Capitol Hill on the sacred way close to the Arch of Titus and several other historical monuments. This arch was used as a way for the emperor, Severus, to connect himself and his rule to the established tradition of victory arches while validifying his authority and position to the Roman people. The Arch of Septimius Severus "grandiosely commemorated the Emperor's triumph over the Parthians" … and is a "deliberate, calculated, product of the Imperial propaganda at a time when the structure of the Roman state was undergoing profound alteration" (Brilliant 1). The structure is a three-bayed arch, larger than the Arch of Titus, and originally had bronze sculptures on top emphasizing Severus' importance and prestige. The second panel in the arch depicts the battle

scene of the Romans versus the Parthians, with Severus in the top right corner watching over the battle. Hierarchic scale is shown in this relief sculpture as Severus is carved into the arch larger than the surrounding figures in the scene. This is how Severus is identified in the scene, and further emphasizes his authority and rule. There is a small frieze depicting the triumphant precession, similar to the scene depicted in the Arch of Titus, connecting Severus to the established traditions of successful emperors and convincing the viewer of this victorious emperorship.

Lastly, The Arch of Constantine embodies similar characteristics that convey him as a prosperous emperor to the Roman people. Like the arch of Septimius Severus, the Arch of Constantine is a three-bay arch as well and is dedicated to Constantine's victory in a Roman civil war. In this arch, there is extensive repurposing of sculptures from other monuments, including a "Trajanic frieze panel" (Souza 31), as well as sculptures from Hadrian and Marcus Aelius' rule. The reused elements of the Arch of Constantine were meant to be understood by and clear to the viewer as Constantine attempted to connect himself to the 'good' emperors that ruled before him. The classical style of Hadrian's rule is depicted in the roundels above the arches. Hadrian is shown hunting, making sacrifices, and addressing the public in non-specific scenes. These actions depicted the bravery and manliness of the emperor and connected Constantine's rule to Hadrian's. While several elements of this arch are repurposed, the sculptures on the pedestals are from the time of Constantine. This is identified through the flat style, where all figures are squat, and there is little sense of 3D space in the scene. In this frieze, the figures are carved frontal, but they turn their heads towards Constantine, who is sitting down addressing the people in the

Roman forum. Constantine is larger, and with this hierarchic scale combined with the emperor placed as the focal point of the scene, the viewer gets this sense of authority and leadership and convince the viewer to accept and support his rule.

Triumphal arches were a traditional way that emperors could connect themselves to past emperors and validify their position as ruler. This form of propaganda was used in Ancient Rome to convince the Roman people that the emperors were not just worthy of their power and position but supported by the gods and should be celebrated for their victories and prosperity. Through analyzing The Arch of Titus, Septimius Severus, and Constantine, one can observe the manipulative way each emperor attempted to portray themselves in a calculated manner to secure their power as emperor of the Roman Empire.

Works Cited

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