

Art in the ancient world was rarely produced spontaneously or frivolously and was often a commissioned product of the leadership of its time. Public art was costly and relied upon the patronage and funding of those with power and wealth, and therefore reflected their concerns. Democratic leaders, publicly elected, were concerned with ensuring their electorate did not decide to *deselect* them. For example, under Athenian democracy, if anyone fell out of favour, citizens could exercise their right to ostracise them for ten years, without any particular reason other than mass disapproval. Autocratic leaders did not have to trouble themselves with such risk. It was, however, essential for them to assert their power, to protect their individual position and often that of the dynasty that would follow them. Although not elected, autocrats needed public support of their rule, and sometimes turned to instilling fear to avoid revolution. Therefore, the art of both autocracy and democracy expressed concerns that primarily focussed on ensuring public approval of regimes and their leaders, however, the differences between these systems of governance meant that their art expressed these concerns in somewhat different ways.

Concerns expressed in democratic art were often symbolic. In Athens, democracy was dismantled in 404 BC, after their defeat in the Peloponnesian War, but it resumed approximately a year later. In 375 BC, Athens won a naval victory against Sparta, and in the following year, made peace with them. They would have seen this as a chance to reassert democratic power. Around this time, a statue of Eirene and Ploutos appeared in the agora, most likely commissioned by the state or an aristocratic individual (i.e. Athenian leadership). The statue shows a woman (Eirene, personification of peace), a baby in her left arm (Ploutos, personification of wealth), and a cornucopia, symbol of plenty. The statue's message to the multitude of Athenians passing through the agora each day was clear: peace fosters wealth. Although it seemed counter-intuitive for Athenian leadership to make peace with a longstanding enemy like Sparta, the statue showed Athens that along with peace, comes wealth. The

wealth may be small, infantile, in fact, but it shares a close relationship with the motherly figure that will raise it: peace. The pair look deeply into one another's eyes, indicating the powerful bond that exists between peace and wealth, and that should the Athenians accept this peace that may not seem logical to them, they will find that it will foster, in time, wealth that will benefit all of Athens. In this way, the statue of Eirene and Ploutos represents the concern of Athenian leadership in showing to their populace and ultimately, electorate, that the choices they made were for the benefit of Athens, and therefore, their place as leaders was justified. The very production of fine art should serve as evidence that Athens' funds were not suffering, and that it could afford to commission statues while providing for citizens. Indeed, it is likely that not all would see the statue with politics at the forefront of their minds. But even if someone failed to see the political symbolism of the statue, they would at the very least be reassured that their leadership could provide for them, since it could afford to spend money on art.

In this way, one could argue that art produced by autocratic leaders represented a similar concern to democratic art, in that ultimately, both regimes needed popular support. Across the Roman Empire, sympathetic imperial imagery is proof of attempts to garner public backing, but a particularly good example is Trajan's Column, appearing in his forum in AD 113. The column commemorates Trajan's victory in the Dacian Wars in a lengthy spiral bas relief. Coins minted around the time of the column's erection indicate early plans to place an owl atop of it, but a statue of Trajan was placed on top instead. Only three coins showing the owl now exist. One, kept in Paris, appears to show a faint spiral on the column, a doorway in its base, and the owl on top<sup>1</sup>. Built alongside the column were libraries containing scrolls of Greek and Latin, and so the owl is thought to symbolise the wisdom

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<sup>1</sup> Stevenson, p.55-56

contained in these buildings<sup>2</sup>. However, the decision to replace it with a statue of Trajan himself is telling. A spiral relief, requiring the viewer to circle the column many times with head tilted, does not lend itself to clarity. Anyone who didn't take the time to read it would simply have looked right to the top, where they would see the emperor high above everyone else, depicted in a grand statue. Someone reading the frieze would probably have become quite dizzy before having a chance to finish, having circled it 23 times. Archaeologist Paul Veyne has the same question, asking why someone would walk around it so many times, "le nez en l'air, sans distinguer grand-chose?"<sup>3</sup>. However, he goes on to note that the column can be read vertically. Trajan appears on it c.58 times, his image distributed carefully across the bands so he can be spotted at any point around the column's circumference. Not only this, but the libraries built in conjunction with the column had viewing platforms. One can imagine that anyone going into such a library would take an interest in using the platforms to read the column more clearly. If so, they would have been greeted with relatively peaceful imagery for a depiction of war. The war against Dacia was shown to be about expansion as well as defence, illustrated by the few battle scenes and multitude of building scenes. Mary Beard writes that the army is "as much concerned with logistics as with slaughter"<sup>4</sup>. Trajan presents himself as merciful yet conquering, addressing Rome's distrust of the army, showing that they weren't violent, simply helping to expand Rome's frontiers and protect them from outside threats. The concern expressed on Trajan's column is to show the Roman people that their emperor had great power, both to conquer enemies and commission great monuments, but also ensuring that the complex format was accessible to any viewer. An interesting frieze, provisions for those that wanted to read it, but also more simple, summarising imagery at the column's summit.

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<sup>2</sup> Stevenson, p.55

<sup>3</sup> Veyne, p.6

<sup>4</sup> Beard, p.483

It is clear that democratic and autocratic art shared common concerns, those of public image. Art is a universal language, and so those thinking of politics were given the opportunity to see it expressed artistically; those not looking for symbolic meaning were shown that the regime they were living under was flourishing sufficiently to produce art, and thus they could have faith in their leader.

However, there is a much greater sense of individualism in Trajan's Column than there is in the statue of Eirene and Ploutos. Democratic and autocratic art may have shared concerns, however, the way these concerns were addressed in their art differs. In Athens' public squares, in lieu of soaring columns with a single leader on top, they preferred art that *symbolised* their power. Democracy was not necessarily typical in Greek city-states, so retaining a sense of national pride was essential to ensuring that it was not dismantled, particularly by the wealthier classes, for whom democracy was not inherently beneficial. Athenian art therefore tends to prioritise state symbolism over individualism, ensuring a celebration of the success of their regime and leadership in a more conceptual way. In other words, democratic art does not depict democracy directly. The Temple of Hephaestus in the agora is a good example of this. Constructed between 449 BC and 415 BC, it formed part of Pericles' building plans, which included the Parthenon, at the height of Athenian democracy. Decoration includes the labours of Heracles and Theseus, the birth of Athena, the fall of Troy, and the Centauromachy. Art showing the labours of two great Greek heroes, one supposedly the founder of Athenian democracy<sup>5</sup>, the birth of the goddess patronising the city, the fall of an Eastern power at the hands of the Greeks and the victory of civilisation over barbarism (the Persian defeat at Plataea having recently taken place in 479 BC), and yet nowhere is there a citizen assembly, for instance. This seems to indicate a desire to hide democracy in democratic art. As mentioned earlier, democracy didn't inherently benefit the elite, and yet on the Parthenon, for example, they are the only people that appear. The symbolism and hiding of the lower classes seem

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<sup>5</sup> Plut. Comp. Thes. Rom. 2.1

to indicate that a concern expressed in democratic art was to show the elite that although democracy would appear to be detrimental to them, it was not<sup>6</sup>. In fact, they appear in pride of place on the great democratic temple atop the Acropolis. Furthermore, the lower classes, although left out, would find pride in the symbolic depictions on temples like that of Hephaestus. Previous mythical triumphs of their ancestors showed that they too had a place in Athens and its democracy. Democratic art therefore expressed a concern with concealing the true democracy that did not seem beneficial to all, and expressing instead that every Athenian could have pride in their society, since they were given a place in its art, whether through religious symbolism or literally.

When autocrats brought religion into art, they preferred to use it to justify their place as leader, rather than to symbolically convey national pride. One of the carvings at Taq-e Bostan, a collection of Sassanid rock reliefs in Persia, demonstrates this. The relief, from the fourth century CE, depicts the coronation of King Ardashir II. In the relief, he stands on the right, handed a ring trailing ribbons, a symbol of coronation, by a figure who is generally considered to be Shapur II, Ardashir's predecessor. The third figure, haloed, is the Zoroastrian god Mithra, in his role as protector of oaths and truth. The two kings stand on a fallen figure, recognised as Roman emperor Julianus Apostata, defeated during the reign of Shapur with Ardashir's assistance. Whereas in democratic art, current political figures were not glorified, here, the entire message is one of glorification. Ardashir's rule is justified by this relief, in more ways than one. Firstly, his predecessor hands him the cyndaris ring, a symbol of support of his investiture. Secondly, the god who is protector of truth is present, looking upon the ceremony in a demonstration of divine approval, something that earlier autocratic leaders also showed an interest in exhibiting (for example, the bare feet of Augustus in his Prima Porta

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<sup>6</sup> See Pericles stressing aristocratic meritocracy over popular democracy in Thuc. 2.34 – 46.

statue illustrating his divine status and therefore right to rule). Mithra holds a barsum, a Zoroastrian instrument for sanctifying ceremonies, therefore he evidently approves of the coronation. Ardashir shows that figures of authority support his investiture, but he also demonstrates that he as an individual is worthy of rule, standing on a defeated enemy, paying him no heed, but looking ahead to his coronation. This relief clearly expresses the concern of Ardashir to justify his place as a ruler, by showing his prowess in defeating enemies, but also the approval of the gods and his predecessor. It seems to be a piece of art designed to protect the dynasty that would follow him from public disapproval, especially since he was merely a temporary ruler until Shapur III came of age.

On the whole, it seems that democratic art and autocratic art expressed remarkably similar concerns, despite the differences between these systems of governance. Art can convey powerful rhetoric that leaders made great use of in the ancient world to ensure public approval. While democratic art preferred to do this symbolically and autocratic art with greater individualism, it appears that these regimes shared common interests in instilling awe, pride, and approval into the people living under them.

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