Paintings In Rome Essay, Research Paper

In 211 BC the great general M. Claudius Marcellus returned to Rome after his decisive defeat of Syracuse. With him came a vast booty of Hellenistic artifacts. Remaining outside the sacred precincts of Rome, he supplicated the Senate for the purification and glory of a triumphal procession, realizing that they would both make a visual impression in his triumph and also be an ornament for the city.” He opened his triumph impressively with an allegorical painting of Syracuse made prisoner.

Paintings carried in triumphal processions, specifically commissioned to commemorate victorious military campaigns, not only added immensely to the celebratory nature of the rite, they also increased its sociopolitical power. Roman triumphal painting also served to acquaint Romans with novel artistic conventions, previously foreign to their experience. Although none of the paintings commissioned by victorious Roman generals to decorate their triumphal processions survives, the testimonial provide crucial alternate evidence to determine their role in shaping Roman political and artistic culture in the Republican period.

During the Republic, Roman paintings with historical themes commemorated the empire’s expansion: for example, the conquests of Carthage in 201 BC, Sardinia in 174 BC, and Macedonian in 168 BC Subjects included, at one end of the spectrum, pared-down iconic personifications and, at the other end, full-fledged battle scenes in landscape settings. Roman historical paintings not only secured the private memories of participants in actual events; they also served a didactic and propagandistic function in the public sphere of Roman political and religious institutions. The Roman governing class commissioned historical paintings to inform a specifically Roman audience of its achievements, to educate that audience about its policies, and thus to persuade that audience to adopt its views and follow a particular course of action. It used historical paintings to implement ideology. Ancient Rome inherited arguments, already old, for the superiority of painting over any other form of communication to affect and manipulate an audience.

Further, Romans embraced the idea that historical painting was at its most effective when it became the embodiment of what it represented, or, to use the terms preferred by Freedberg, when the sign becomes the living embodiment of what it signifies. (Ancient authors, for example, relish anecdotes describing portraits that profoundly affected spectators long after the death of their subjects.) Toward that end, Roman patrons became increasingly sophisticated about representational strategies and throughout the course of the Republic procured the most commanding examples possible. The evidence for Roman historical painting, commissioned by a cultured elite, suggests the force of a steady Hellenization of Roman artistic practice and reveals a mentality that welcomed the transmission of Rome’s heritage by means of the conventions of another culture.

The development of Roman historical painting also provided the ruling elite with new means to understand and propagandize its own conduct, which is just as important as the historical events themselves. The political structure of the Republic is integral to the role historical painting played in the patterning of Roman culture. The course of politics from the mid- to late Republic reveals a compelling impetus for the arts of self-promotion. Social prestige was indispensable to a Roman elite that exercised its control indirectly, through elections and assemblies. Competition for the high esteem of their fellow citizens proved intense among those Romans who had an overwhelming desire for laus, or praise, on one level and gloria on a higher one. During the Republic, gloria remained the exclusive province of the aristocracy, accorded by the political class to the elite for great deeds performed in the service of the state. Cicero went so far as to state that the pursuit of gloria was the prime impulse behind all human activity. His explanation has significance not only for Roman political affairs but also for the historical paintings commissioned by aristocrats.

Military success was the single most important way to achieve laus and gloria. Not only was such achievement highly advantageous to the Roman State, it held vital importance to the personal aims and interests of Roman aristocrats. Ambitious young men of the Roman elite were obliged to undertake military service, and had to complete ten annual military campaigns as a junior officer before they could seek election to even the lowest position in Rome’s hierarchy of magistracies; inscriptions (epitaphs and elegy) indicate that during the Republic a normal part of the successful young aristocrat’s career centered on warfare.

Triumphal paintings became an integral part of this didactic display. The main purpose of triumphal paintings was to advance the personal prestige of the triumphator by documenting those achievements that had led to his triumphal celebration. They were primarily propagandistic, often with political and electoral ends in mind. L. Hostilius Mancinus, for example, used a painting commemorating his victory over Carthage as a successful polemic against his political rival, Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus. Triumphal paintings utilized diverse modes of representation. They were sometimes executed on large panels, called tabulae, which could be easily carried in the procession. In his reconstruction of Caesar’ s triumph, however, Andrea Mantegna drew on references that describe vast paintings on cloth, works that sources claim could sometimes reach three to four stories in height paintings of such magnitude, however, were probably displayed on large wheeled processional floats (pegmata). After using their paintings in the procession, triumphatores often exhibited them in public buildings, or in the temples of the gods to whom the victories were pledged, where they joined other artworks brought back as booty. Public display of the paintings shifted their function from that of parade props to permanent records. So displayed, the paintings not only commemorated the victories of Roman generals but also recalled their spectacular celebrations for future generations. Triumphal paintings thereby became a major element in the Roman civic environment.

Bibliography

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