

Imperial Art and Architecture

Background Notes

Beth Taylor – 13 January 2016



Present Light on the Past Ben Johnson, 2001



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Winchester Art History Group
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The art and architecture of classical Greece, and of the Roman Empire, was admired and emulated in 18th and 19th centuries. The neo-classical style was fashionable across Europe and used in Britain to celebrate the heroes of the Napoleonic War. The style and its sources were associated with political messages which were to influence the way Britain viewed the growth of its Empire. This seminar looks at some key themes – monumentalism and power, myth, militarism and heroism, and ideas about ‘barbarians’ which were reflected in the art and architecture of both the classical period and of the British empire.

Some mythical and divine figures



Achilles The most famous of Greek legendary heroes whose temperamental behaviour and fighting skills are the principal theme of Homer’s *Iliad*. Artists portrayed his close relationship with Patroklos, his duel with Hector, his combats with the Amazons.

Aeneas Born of the goddess Aphrodite, Aeneas, the Trojan, left Troy when the Greeks invaded. The legend of his journey westwards became the theme of the foundation of Rome, as described in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. He is described as large, manly,

pious and a shrewd leader.

Amazons Tribe of female warriors, with whom various warriors, including Achilles, Herakles and Theseus, tangled.

Aphrodite Goddess of love, beauty and fertility.

Athena Patron goddess of Athens, worshipped throughout Greece. Warlike but also protectress of women’s work and of crafts.

Dionysos (also known as **Bacchus**) God of wine cultivation. He had a large following in Greece.

Hector Eldest son of **Priam**, (king of Troy at the time of the siege of the city described by Homer).

Herakles Son of Zeus, a mortal who was celebrated for his ‘Labours’ (heroic deeds). Appears frequently in art, from infancy to old age, and was an alter-ego for political autocrats like Alexander the Great and several Roman Emperors.

Odysseus (known as **Ulysses** in Latin) The hero whose adventures are described in Homer’s *Odyssey* and in the *Iliad* also. His hallmark is a quick intelligence.

Patroklos In the *Iliad*, the close friend of Achilles. His death spurs Achilles into a furious battle which ends in the death of Hector.

Theseus The special hero of Athens, credited with many adventures and with uniting Attica as a region. He was moulded into a hero of the Athenian democracy in the early 5th century.

Historical figures

Greek



Alexander the Great (356-323 BC)

Educated by Aristotle, Alexander became king of Macedonia following the death of his father, Phillip II, in 336BC. He reasserted Macedonian power within Greece and set out to conquer the Persian Empire. He led his armies to victories in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt without suffering a single defeat. By the age of 25 he

was leader of the Greeks, overlord of Asia Minor and Pharaoh of Egypt. In the next eight years he led his army a further 11,000 miles, founding over 70 cities, and creating an empire which stretched from Greece in the west, north to the Danube, south into Egypt and as far to the east as the Indian Punjab. He died of fever in Babylon in June 323 BC.

Apelles 4th century BC painter connected with the court of Alexander.

Aristotle (384-322BC) Philosopher, literary critic and natural scientist. Pupil of **Plato** before setting up his own school, the Lyceum.

Homer Little is known about the supposed author of the two great Greek epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were written down in the 6th century BC. His works conjure up an heroic age in the 8th century at the time of the Mycenaean civilisation.

Peisistratos Tyrant of Athens from 561 BC to his death in 527 BC. He funded a number of temples on the Akropolis. It is said that he saw himself as a second Herakles.

Perikles The outstanding Athenian politician of the 5th century BC to whom the monumental development of the Akropolis is owed.

Pheidias (c.490 – c.430BC) Most gifted artist of the 5th century BC. His best works, the statues of Athena in the Parthenon and Zeus at Olympia, have perished. He is thought to be the designer of the surviving Parthenon sculptures.

Plutarch Greek born writer, 1st and early 2nd century AD. Principal source for biographical information on leaders like Perikles.

Praxiteles Mid 4th century BC sculptor, famed in antiquity.

Thucydides (c.460-400 BC) Historian of the Peloponnese War between Athens and Sparta in 431 – 404 BC.

Roman



Augustus (63 BC-14 AD) Born Gaius Octavius, Augustus was the great nephew of Julius Caesar. Fought to avenge Caesar's assassination and defeated Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium. He founded the principate, a system of monarchy headed by an emperor holding power for life, taking the name Augustus, meaning 'lofty' or 'serene'. He retained ultimate control of all aspects of the Roman state, with the army under his direct command. Rome was transformed with impressive new buildings and he ensured that his image was promoted throughout the empire by means of coins and statues. He embarked on a campaign of expansion to make Rome safe from

the 'barbarians' on its frontiers, but had to abandon Germany, east of the Rhine, when 3 legions were annihilated.

Julius Caesar (100-44 BC) A politician and general, Caesar was elected consul in 59 BC. Appointed governor of Roman Gaul (60 -68 BC) he added the whole area of modern day France and Belgium to the Roman Empire. He made 2 expeditions to Britain, in 55 and 54 BC. His return to Italy led to a civil war in which he defeated the republican forces led by Pompey. He became dictator, carrying out a number of reforms. But when he declared himself dictator for life, he was assassinated by republican senators, led by Cassius and Brutus.

Constantine (306 -312 AD) A military tribune under the emperors Diocletian and Galerius, he campaigned under his father in Britain. Acclaimed emperor by the army in York in 306, Constantine was victorious in a series of civil wars, becoming sole ruler of both west and east by 324 AD. Constantine was the first Roman emperor to claim conversion to Christianity and established Constantinople as the capital of the empire for over 1000 years.

Hadrian (76 – 138 AD) Born in Spain, he was named emperor by Trajan just before his death. During his reign he travelled to nearly every province of the empire. He admired Greece and sought to make Athens the cultural capital of the empire, ordering the construction of many temples in the city. He used his Greek lover Antinous to underline his philhellenism. In Rome he rebuilt the Pantheon and constructed the Temple of Venus and Roma.

Trajan (53 – 117AD) A successful soldier-emperor who presided over the greatest military expansion in Roman history. As well as implementing welfare programmes, Trajan oversaw extensive building programmes. He reshaped Rome where his Forum, Market and Column are enduring landmarks. On his death he was deified by the Senate and his ashes were placed under his column. He was succeeded by his adopted son, Hadrian.

Vespasian (9-79 AD) A successful soldier, Vespasian became consul in 51 AD and governor of Africa in 61 AD. He led the suppression of the Jewish Revolt (66-70 AD) and made a successful bid for power after the death of Nero and was made Emperor by the Senate. The building of the Colosseum began in his reign, funded by spoils from the conquest of Jerusalem. A man who enjoyed a relatively simple way of life and of whom the historian, Tacitus, said was the first man to improve after becoming emperor.

Virgil (70 -19 BC) Publius Vergilius Maro, known as Virgil, published his first work, the *Eclogues* in mid 30s BC. This was an Arcadian rendition of the pastoral world which also included references to contemporary politicians. In 29 BC, he published the *Georgics*, a poem on farming which looked back to the work of Hesiod, an archaic Greek poet (c. 700 BC). Virgil's last work was the *Aeneid*, an epic poem, looking back to Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, describing the journey of the Trojan hero, Aeneas, to Italy and the wars he fought there. The text alludes to the whole course of Roman history, culminating in Augustus's re-establishing of Rome.

British



Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758 -1805) Nelson joined the navy at the age of 12, becoming a captain at 20, and saw service in the West Indies, Baltic and Canada. When Britain entered the French Revolutionary Wars in 1793, Nelson was given command of the *Agamemnon*. He served in the Mediterranean, helped capture Corsica and lost an eye in battle at Calvi. He lost his right arm at the Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1797. His victories at Cape Vincent in 1797, at the Battle of the Nile in 1798, at the Battle of Copenhagen in 1802 were due to his bold action and occasional disregard for the orders of his seniors. Under his leadership, the Royal Navy proved its supremacy over the French. His last and most famous engagement at Cape Trafalgar in 1805, saved Britain from the threat of invasion by Napoleon.

Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington (1769 –1852), Wellesley was born in Dublin to an Anglo-Irish family, educated at Eton and then at a military academy in Angers. He was commissioned as an ensign in the British Army in 1787, serving in Ireland as aide-de-camp to two successive Lords Lieutenants. He was also elected as an MP in the Irish House of Commons. He was a colonel by 1796, and saw action in the Netherlands and then in India where his brother, Richard, was Governor General. He fought in the 4th Anglo-Mysore War and at the Battle of Seringapatam. He was appointed

Governor of Seringapatam and Mysore in 1799 and, as a newly appointed major-general, won a decisive victory over the Maratha Confederacy at the Battle of Assaye in 1803. Rising to prominence as a general during the Peninsular campaign against the forces of Napoleon in Spain and Portugal, he was promoted to the rank of field marshal after leading the allied forces to victory against the French at the Battle of Vitoria in 1813. He served as ambassador to France after Napoleon's defeat and was made a duke. During the Hundred Days of Napoleon's return in 1815, he commanded the allied army which defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. He returned to politics as a Tory after ending his active military career, being twice Prime Minister, from 1828-1830 and in 1834. He continued as one of the leading figures in the House of Lords until his retirement and remained Commander in Chief of the British Army until his death.

Major General James Wolfe (1727–1759) was a British officer, known for his training reforms but remembered chiefly for his victory over the French battle at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in Canada in 1759. Wolfe's part in the taking of Quebec in 1759 earned him posthumous fame, and he became an icon of Britain's victory in the Seven Years War and subsequent territorial expansion. Wolfe was posthumously dubbed "The Hero of Quebec", "The Conqueror of Quebec", and also "The Conqueror of Canada", since the capture of Quebec led directly to the capture of Montreal, ending French control of the country.

Glossary

Acropolis	The citadel of a Greek city
Agora	The place of assembly, the market place in a Greek city
Annexation	To join as an addition to existing territories
Barbarian	Someone speaking a different language, a non-Greek; a non-Roman; a non-Christian; uncivilised, savage, rude
Charisma	In Greek usage, especially favoured by divine grace
Classic	Of the first rank or authority, belonging to Greek or Roman antiquity, adhering to classical rules or models
Classical	Used in art-historical chronologies to define the period c. 480 BC to 350 BC
Classical Civilization	The entire Greek and Roman period

Classicism	Adherence to the principles of classical style, Latin or Greek form, art that emphasizes the qualities considered to be characteristically Greek and Roman in style and spirit, i.e. reason, objectivity, discipline, restraint, order, harmony
Classicizing	To make classic
Colony	<u>Roman</u> : a settlement of Roman citizens in a hostile or newly conquered country <u>Greek</u> : a settlement of 'people from home' as an independent self-governed state <u>British</u> : three classes of colony – Crown colonies, colonies with representative governments in which the crown partly controls the legislature, and has the right of veto over local legislation, and colonies with responsible governments, the crown having only the right of veto
Dominion	the right of governing or controlling countries outside of England or Great Britain; or designating the larger self-governing British dominions, e.g. Canada (from 1867)
Empire	Supreme and extensive political dominion
Forum	In ancient Rome the place of assembly for judicial and other public business
Helladic	Greek Bronze age period as it occurs on the mainland
Hellenistic	In art historical chronology, the period 323 BC to 31 BC Using Greek modes of style, expression or language
Hero	In antiquity, a name given to men of superhuman strength, courage or ability, favoured by the gods, regarded later as demigods, and immortal; in later usage, one who does brave or noble deeds, an illustrious warrior; a man admired and venerated for his achievements and noble qualities
Imperialism	The principle or spirit of empire, advocacy of imperial interests
Magna Graeca	'Great Greece', the area of southern Italy colonised by the Greeks, often used to include Sicily
Myth	'Mythos' (Gk.), a fable, no basis in actual events
Legend	Some basis in actual events
History	'Historia' (Gk.) knowledge gained by inquiry
Mythhistoria	Myth-history – term coined by the Greeks who were aware that even Historians who set out to be rigorous were prone to embellish a chronicle
Nobilis opera	Latin for 'great work' or masterpiece
Pantheon	a temple or sacred building dedicated to all the gods. By 18th century BC, used to denote a building in which the illustrious dead of a nation are buried or have memorials erected to them
Polis	A Greek city state, eg Athens

Suggestions for further reading

Barringer, T., Quilley, G., Fordham, D.,(eds.) *Art and the British Empire*, 2007
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Caygill, M. *The Story of the British Museum*, 2nd ed., 1992
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Mace, Rodney *Trafalgar Square: Emblem of Empire*, 2nd ed , 2005
Spivey, Nigel *Greek Art*, 1997

Web resources

www.britishmuseum.org

www.ashmolean.org



The Akropolis at Athens



Radiator grill of a Rolls Royce

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