

Political Propaganda

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Art History 210
December 6, 2000

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Propaganda has existed in art for centuries—in times of peace and war. Propaganda was used as a way of gaining the public's trust, interest and support in the ruler. Through symbolism the propaganda becomes more intellectual; it becomes more than just a nice painting or a statue—it becomes a vision of what the ruler wants to achieve or what they think of themselves. All throughout history, we see examples of political propaganda in ancient Egypt, the Roman Empire, France and America. In every example, we see the effects that the history of the time has had on the type of symbolism and the style used by the artist.

The Triad of King Menkaure is an excellent example of propaganda. It could be seen as religious or political propaganda, but since there was no separation between church and state in ancient Egypt, this distinction has very little importance. This carving could be considered a high relief carved out of slate. Slate was a very hard stone to carve; many times the artist would leave a background of thick slate that acted mainly as support to the weight of the statues. Four of these triads were found in the Pyramid temple of King Menkaure at Giza; three were intact. Each of the four statues were in the same format, but differed slightly in detail¹.

In one particular Triad of Menkaure² stands with the god Anubis standing on his left and the goddess Hathor to his right. Menkaure stands in the center wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt with his arms held stiffly at his sides. He holds in his hands something that almost looks as if there should be some sort of cart or wheelbarrow attached behind him. This could be a symbol of authority; perhaps he is “pulling” Egypt. His left leg is out in front of him as if he would take a step except that his weight is resting on the right leg. This could be a representation

of resolution or determination. The arms of the two women are wrapped around Menkaure embracing as if to say, “You have our full support.”

The lack of emotion on the faces of the figures is very perplexing. This statue was found in the pyramid tomb of the King, which means that its purpose was not for public display. There was no need for an accurate depiction of emotion or personality, only an accurate depiction of what the king looked like. Only the faithful servants making sacrifices to Menkaure would have seen this statue, which means the purpose of the statue was to evoke dedication and obedience, which is the aim of propaganda art. The people are viewed in top physical condition, with their eyes forward as if they could see into the future—a reminder of the physical state of the body in the afterlife. Everything about this statue would make someone want to pay homage to the Pharaoh as an assurance that they will enjoy a worthy afterlife.

About 2500 years after this statue was carved, rose the Roman Empire and the rule of Augustus and the carving of Augustus of Prima Porta. This is clearly propaganda. Its main purpose was propaganda, plain and simple. The statue of Augustus stands with his weight on the right foot forward as if he were to walk somewhere. His right arm is held out in front of him with his hand in the orant position as was employed by the Roman Senate, meaning that person had the floor and the undivided attention of the Senate—or as could be manipulated for the purposes of the statue—that he has the undivided attention of the empire. Augustus is dressed in Roman armor; the armor portrays a victory scene of Augustus to remind the people who see this statue of what Augustus has done for them. Yet, over his left arm is draped a robe, signifying that although he is the ruler, he is still a citizen—he is still human. He is so human, in fact, that his nipples and belly button are manifested through the breastplate he wears.

Augustus is portrayed as much on a deity level as on a human level. He is barefoot which signifies that he is walking on holy ground; this perhaps could be alluding to his promotion to divinity. In keeping with his “divine” status, a small figure of cupid rides a dolphin at his right heel. The figure of Cupid refers to the notion that he is a descendent from Aeneid, who is the son of Venus, and the dolphin refers to Venus having been born an adult from the sea³. The constant references to Augustus’ heritage and divine right to rule Rome is what really makes this propaganda. Propaganda plays to the beliefs of the people.

Propaganda also plays to the unpretentiousness of the people. In the early 1700s, during the Baroque period, Hyacinthe Rigaud was commissioned to paint a portrait of Louis XIV. The portrait is painted from the point of view of a person looking at King Louis XIV as they are pulling away a large curtain to reveal the “true” Louis XIV. All masks and pretenses are removed in this painting. The crown has been removed and is sitting on an ottoman to the right of the King. Lying beside the crown is a staff with a symbol of the orant. The symbolism of these things lying *beside* the king instead of *with* him makes him seem very human. Not just his legs are exposed in this painting but his soul is as well. The spectator is able to catch a better glimpse of his attributes as a person, than a monarch just by looking at the eyes. This type of propaganda helps the common man to relate to their monarch because he seems attainable in this portrait.

Another very human portrayal of a leader is the sculpture by Jean-Antoine Houdon of George Washington. Houdon did this sculpture in the classical style. It shows George Washington standing in contemporary clothes with his right hand resting on a cane and his left arm resting on a fasces, a bundle of wooden rods tied together, which is a Roman symbol of

authority. He stands very casually with the top buttons of his vest unbuttoned, exposing his undershirt. Against the fasces lean a sword and a plow. The sword is symbolic of the battle George Washington fought for the freedom of this country and the plow represents the time of peace and plenty that is to come. Over the fasces is draped a toga, symbolic of the intellectual and learned side of George Washington.

The face of George Washington, though, is what really conveys who he was. A few well placed lines on his forehead convey a warning sense of the concern George Washington had for the country and the importance he placed on the people he fought for. The eyes seem to convey the sense that he can see into the future and is worried because of all the hard times that this country will have to endure. The face looks so warm and inviting, like a person you might automatically want to run up to and hug. He looks much more a visionary man than a man of action, which is contrary, perhaps, to what history believes him to have been as a General⁴. He is so great, yet so human.

During the same period, Jacques-Louis David painted a scene, which might have been inspired by a performance of Horace he saw in late 1782. Oath of the Horatii was painted in the neoclassical style during the period of great turmoil in France around the time of the French Revolution. This is a great example of the revival of ancient Roman Empire themes and drawing strength from the literature and philosophy of that period. The scene depicted in Oath of the Horatii was never part of the story. David took artistic liberties in imagining what must have taken place right before the battle. The scene is when the father makes his sons swear as they are preparing to leave, that they will fight to the death—to conquer or die against the Curatii.

The drama in the scene is very deliberate. The emotions involved in the scene draw out from the observer a sense of patriotism. What is most interesting about this painting is the scene happening behind the back of the father as he makes his sons take this oath of death; the women sit mourning as the boys resolve to set out on their journey. One of the women is the mother of the boys, another, a sister that is engaged to one of the Curatii and a sister-in-law who is a Curatii herself. The women know that no matter what, they are going to lose someone they love⁵.

One of the greatest masters of propaganda art was not an artist. Napoleon understood the influence art can have on the public and knew that if he were to win the hearts of the citizens, he would have to publicize himself. One piece of art in particular conveyed Napoleon as a healer, or a savior. Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa on 11 March 1799 painted by a pupil of David's, Antoine-Jean Gros, portrays Napoleon the way he wanted the people to see him. The people saw him as an all-powerful military leader, a ruler, a healer, brave, and strong; they had no reason to believe otherwise. What they knew to be true is what they were given to believe.

This particular painting shows Napoleon visiting a plague-house where many his soldiers had taken ill. He touches one of the soldiers without fear, as if he is not human and will not contract their disease; as if his touching the soldier is all that is needed to heal. Unfortunately, history reports that upon leaving the plague-house he ordered the men to be poisoned and their bodies be disposed of because they would mar Napoleon's reputation and stand in the way of his crusade⁶. The painting employs many romantic techniques such as soft lines, mood created by the coloring and the sentimental emotion evoked by the mess of soldiers decaying and writhing in agony on the ground, hoping that their leader will see them and have mercy on them.

Propaganda art has been employed by many different people in many different facets of history. Though some types of propaganda art may have been aimed specifically at different things, all had the same purpose--to further the reputation of the leader. We still have our share of propaganda art today. More often than not, that art form is television, radio, magazines and newspapers. Wherever there is a leader that needs support, there you find propaganda art.

¹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1999) 273.

² Cyril Aldred, Old Kingdom Art in Ancient Egypt (London: Alec Tiranti, LTD., 1949) Plate 25.

³ Andrew Ramage and Nancy H. Ramage, Roman Art: Romulus to Constantine (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1991) 87.

⁴ H.H. Arnason, The Sculptures of Houdon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) 77.

⁵ Lawrence Gowing, Paintings in the Louvre (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1986) 584. Marylyn Stokstad, Art History (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. and Prentice Hall, Inc., 1995) 956-7.

⁶ Gowing 598. Stokstad 959.

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