9.12: Arch of Constantine

The Move Away from a Naturalistic Style

Since an emperor cannot be present to all persons, it is necessary to set up the statue of the emperor in law courts, market places, public assemblies, and theatres. In every place, in fact in which an official acts, the imperial effigy must be present, so that the emperor may thus confirm what takes place. For the emperor is only a human being, and he cannot be present everywhere.

—Severian of Gabala, On the “Creation of the World” 5.5, as qtd. in J. Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 54

An important theme in Medieval art is the continuity of the Roman Empire. The Byzantine Empire of Justinian and the Carolingian Empire of Charlemagne traced their origins back to the Roman Empire of Augustus and his followers. But just as continuity is an important theme, so is transformation. The institution of imperial authority underwent dramatic changes during the period of Late Antiquity. The idea of the Emperor as the Principate or the first citizen of Rome gave way to the idea of the Emperor as the Dominate or as the absolute and awesome wielder of power. This transformation in the conception of imperial power is dramatically manifested in imperial images. As testified to by the quotation above, images of the Emperor held great power in the Roman World. Ernst Kitzinger has written that art became Medieval before it became Christian. By this he means that there was already a move away from the naturalistic and organic style of the Classical tradition to a more abstract and mechanical style independent of the influence of Christianity.

Jás Elsner in his recent book *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, has written:

Power is very rarely limited to the pure exercise of brute force. . . . The Roman state bolstered its authority and legitimacy with the trappings of ceremonial—cloaking the actualities of power beneath a display of wealth, the sanction
of tradition, and the spectacle of insuperable resources.

Power is a far more complex and mysterious quality than any apparently simple manifestation of it would appear. It is as much a matter of impression, of theatre, of persuading those over whom authority is wielded to collude in their subjugation. Insofar as power is a matter of presentation, its cultural currency in antiquity (and still today) was the creation, manipulation, and display of images. In the propagation of the imperial office, at any rate, art was power.

A monument documenting this shift in conception of Imperial power is represented by the Triumphal Arch built by the Senate to commemorate Constantine’s defeat of his rival Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE. It is hard to underestimate the importance of Constantine in the narrative of Medieval art. His patronage and ultimate conversion to Christianity were pivotal in the transformation of Christianity as a religion on the margins to Christianity as integral to imperial power. An important theme is the Christianization of Rome and the Romanization of Christianity. It is interesting to note that on the Arch that was constructed adjacent to the Colosseum, near the formal center of old Rome, there are no references to Christianity. There is not even a reference to the famous vision of the monogram of Christ that Constantine was believed to have seen before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. It is important to see how this monument justifies Constantine’s power by linking him to the Roman Imperial past. In its form as a Triumphal Arch it links Constantine to the tradition of this form going back to monuments like the Arch of Titus constructed after 81 CE.

Significantly, it was decided to include on the Arch of Constantine reliefs that were taken from monuments made for earlier Emperors. There is a relief in the passageway under the primary arch that is from the time of the Emperor Trajan, while the roundels or medallions were made for the Emperor Hadrian. The oblong reliefs in the attic come from the time of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Scholars used to argue that this use of “spolia” from earlier buildings was a good indication of artistic decline. More recently scholars have seen this inclusion of earlier monuments as a way of linking Constantine to the great emperors of the past. Despite this clear linking of Constantine to the Roman Imperial past, one can not help but be struck by the dramatic constrast in style between the earlier reliefs and the Constantinian reliefs.

Arch of Constantine, 315 CE, Rome

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