

**Imago Triumphalis:
The Function and
Significance of Triumphal
Imagery for Italian
Renaissance Rulers**

Margaret Ann Zaho

PETER LANG

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Introduction



The triumphal procession was a prominent and important iconographical tool used by Italian Renaissance rulers in an effort to create and enforce a powerful personal mythology. Independent rulers in fifteenth-century Italy used the motif of the Roman triumph or *pompa triumphalis*, for self-aggrandizement and personal expression. The image of the triumph, for them, became an immensely significant *concetto* used in the construction of their personal image.

The triumphal motif was personalized and used, often in a propagandistic fashion, to illustrate to the court and the public a ruler's individual admirable qualities. The iconographical construction of the triumphal motif remained virtually unchanged from its Roman prototype while its meaning and intention shifted radically depending upon who used it. Renaissance rulers engaged the motif in a variety of media and in both public and personal manifestations to exemplify and glorify their own personal identities.

The interest in triumphal arches, processions and imagery coincided with and was fostered by the revival of classical antiquity in all its forms which developed during the Renaissance. The triumphal arch and triumphal procession were recognized in the Renaissance as tangible and powerful bearers of meaning which immediately reflected the power and glory of classical antiquity. Furthermore, for Renaissance rulers, triumphal imagery represented a genre which was replete with connotations of power, victory, rulership, and splendor.

Pliny, in his *Natural History*, made clear the function of triumphal arches and their decoration. He explained that the Romans constructed arches in order to elevate the status of ordinary

men. Arches and their decoration were intended as propagandistic monuments that both honored and commemorated the power of the individual for whom they were constructed.

The Greek scholar, Manuel Chrysoloras, wrote a letter in 1411 to Pope John VIII in which he addressed the importance of Rome's ruins as an expression of the Roman mind. Chrysoloras described the ancient arches in Rome as monuments of incomparable splendor and beauty. He believed the arches served as glimpses into the classical past, and marveled at the historical accuracy of the details represented on the arches.¹

The enthusiasm of scholars such as Chrysoloras and Poggio Bracciolini and artists such as Nicola Pisano and Lorenzo Ghiberti helped to ignite the passion for antiquity during the Renaissance. From this resurgence Renaissance artists and rulers drew inspiration for commissions that would serve to honor and commemorate their rulership while echoing the style and sentiment of the classical past.

Alfonso of Aragon in Naples, Federico da Montefeltro of Urbino, Sigismondo Malatesta of Rimini, and Borso d'Este of Ferrara are prime examples of rulers who manipulated the triumphal motif into a grand and eloquent expression of their own personal character. The appeal of the motif and its power as a visual bearer of meaning is evident in each man's decision to incorporate the motif into their life and art. Each, however, incorporated the imagery in such a way as to benefit and reflect his own individual persona.

The versatility of triumphal imagery made it an almost irresistible motif to the Renaissance artist and ruler. The motif has the inherent capability to recall the classical past, the glory of Medieval pageantry as well as represent the humanist aesthetic. Further, it contains within its visual construct aspects of enthronement and coronation that make it quintessentially monarchical. The triumphal procession incorporates visual associations and decorative possibilities that are fundamentally regal and laudatory, qualities that are enticing and complimentary for any ruler. The flexibility and inherently hieratic quality of triumphal imagery made it a significant and dominant feature in

1. Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist observers of painting in Italy and the discovery of pictorial composition 1350-1450*, Oxford, 1971, 80.

the iconographical vocabulary of the Renaissance ruler during the Quattrocento. No other single motif in Italian art has been so widely dispersed with such relative uniformity while being able to express such diverse meaning.

Several studies have focused on an encyclopedic survey of the triumphal motif in art but none has attempted to address why the motif was so prominent or how it was used. One of the earliest studies is Werner Weisbach's *Trionfi* published in Berlin in 1919. It is a brief survey of the motif primarily focused on its appearance in the Renaissance in a variety of media. That work has been superseded by the much more exhaustive survey, published in Italy in 1963 by Giovanni Carandente, entitled *I Trionfi nel Primo Rinascimento*. Carandente's work is a survey of the uses of the motif in art including the decorative arts and manuscripts. His study, which emphasizes the importance of Petrarch on all later manifestations of triumphal imagery, does not attempt an interpretive analysis of the function of the motif. A chronological survey of triumphal events enacted during the Renaissance has been compiled by Bonner Mitchell. His works, *Italian Civic Pageantry in the High Renaissance* and *The Majesty of State*, both include lists with brief descriptions of the triumphal parades, entries and progresses that occurred in Italy from the late fourteen hundreds through sixteen hundred. None of these studies, however, has addressed the purpose triumphal imagery served for rulers who often chose the motif for major artistic commissions in which they themselves were represented. It is the intent of this book to make the association between the use of the motif and its importance as a visual tool for Renaissance rulers as a means to construct images of themselves.

Chapter one addresses the classical origins of the motif and its appearance in both literature and art. It includes a discussion of the particulars of the triumphal event in the Roman world and its basis on Etruscan sources. Literary sources such as Pliny, Livy, and especially Josephus offer rich and elaborate descriptions of actual triumphal processions. Triumphal arches themselves, however, serve as the primary repositories of information about the visual character of the triumphal procession. Triumphal arches, like the Arch of Titus, often displayed a visual representation of the triumph they commemorate. These extant monuments, and fragments from lost monuments, offered artists a readily accessible and relatively uniform classical model to follow.

The triumphal motif as a decorative component on honorific monuments incorporated political propaganda with religious rites and Imperial power. For the classical Roman world the image of a triumph signaled victory, power, honor, and divine sanction.

Chapter two examines the shift in meaning that occurred during the Middle Ages. The Medieval period reinvented the Imperial Roman triumph and gave it a moralizing character. The triumphal procession lost its militaristic focus and became a sort of theatrical pageant whose focus was religious in nature. It became a vehicle, both literal and metaphorical, for the Christian liturgy. The Medieval triumph retained its antique associations of honor, power, victory and divine providence but redirected it into the service of the church and Christ.

It is directly from this synthesis of pagan antiquity and Christian religion that authors like Dante and Petrarch drew their inspiration. Petrarch used as his model classical sources, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione* to construct his epic poem, *I Trionfi*. In the poem Petrarch incorporated both the classical model of the triumphal procession as well as the allegorical and moralizing quality of the Medieval pageant. The structure of the poem as a series of six successive allegorical triumphs; Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time and Eternity, as well as its pictorial quality offered a model for all later manifestations of the triumphal motif, in both art and literature.

The earliest Renaissance representations of the triumphal motif follow Petrarch's model and were widely used in the decoration of wedding chests, birth trays, and other household objects. The narrative quality of the Triumphs and their inherent linear format made it an extremely popular choice for decoration. The popularity of the motif was due, in part, to the wide range of literary and classical allusions that it provided. The motif at once recalled classical antiquity, Medieval pageantry and the victorious triumph of virtue over vice.

During the second half of the Quattrocento the focus on the triumph's inherently decorative quality seems to have shifted. The narrative aspect was elaborated so that the dramatic elements of the triumphal procession became paramount. Moreover, the heightened interest in antiquity helped to realign interest in the motif as one that exemplified the classical world. The motif served to synthesize classical antiquity, Medieval allegory and Renaissance humanism. The representation of a triumph

contained, within one visual construct, artistic, poetic and historic associations that linked the classical and Christian past.

Chapter three focuses on the emergence of the individualization of the triumphal motif by powerful men. Alfonso of Aragon was one of the first of the Renaissance rulers in Italy to adopt the antique triumph as a personal device. Not only did he reenact a grand triumphal procession to mark his victorious entry into the city of Naples, but he had the event recorded in stone on the triumphal arch erected at the entrance to his castle. His early adaptation of the motif also proves to be the most closely linked and classically inspired example of all the later interpretations.

Chapter four examines two diametrically opposed despots and their uses for triumphal imagery. Sigismondo Malatesta, ruler of Rimini, used the triumphal motif in a variety of manifestations in his *Tempio Malatestiano*. He incorporated the triumph as a tool to express his own *all'antica* interests, his role as victorious general, his spiritual link to ancient Roman generals and his love for his mistress. Federico da Montefeltro, on the other hand, chose to have his own portrait, as well as that of his wife, backed with triumphal processions. These processions emphasize the allegorical nature of the triumph and were used to comment on the personal virtues of the ruler and his wife. Comparison of the two reveals the power of the motif to recall the victories of past rulers while maintaining a specificity necessary to serve as a personal commentary on the individual.

Chapter five examines the use of the triumphal motif in the late Quattrocento by Duke Borso d'Este. His commissioning of a series of frescoes for his palace exhibits a new complexity and function for the triumphal motif. The frescoes, which incorporate the iconography of the triumphal procession in combination with astrological, mythological, and daily life scenes, are complex and yet highly personalized. The artist Francesco della Cossa and the court astrologer devised a series of triumphal frescoes which illustrate not only the succession of the months but also the ideal city of Ferrara and the divinely providenced rule of Duke Borso d'Este.

The Quattrocento saw the height of the triumphal image as a personal device. By the early Cinquecento its function had shifted and it became the stuff of carnival pageants and marriage parades. Though it did not lose its popularity as a decorative theme, it did not retain its power as a tool in a ruler's self definition.

In summation, this study's intention is to establish that the revival of the image of the antique triumph during the Renaissance was a powerful propagandistic tool. Its popularity relied on the fact that the image of the triumphal procession could at once suggest victory, antiquity, perpetuity, and power. Moreover, artists and rulers recognized the malleable quality of the triumphal motif to both retain its classical associations and function as a highly personalized commentary. Ultimately, there was perhaps no better single image to convey the wide array of political, hierarchical and humanistic concepts so important in the self promotion and image of the Renaissance ruler.

The History of the Roman Triumph



This chapter focuses on the early history of the triumphal procession and traces its development from Near Eastern militaristic and Greek religious origins. It further examines the Etruscan civilizations' incorporation of the triumphal procession into religious ceremonies and the basic components that were developed in connection with it, including the chariot, dress, insignia and general processional organization. The latter sections discuss the Roman triumphal procession in both its Republican and Imperial manifestations as well as its importance as an honorific ceremony. Finally, there is a discussion of the event and its record in literature and in the triumphal arches which were built to commemorate the event itself.

Eastern Origins

The archetype of the Roman triumphal procession did not originate in Italy. Instead it was an amalgamation of early Near Eastern military parades and Greek religious processions that were then filtered through the Etruscan civilization.¹

The Greeks and Etruscans derived the Near Eastern influence from Asia Minor. Assyrian relief panels from the palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, Mesopotamia, show an early example of a military victory procession (fig. 1). The stone bas-relief panel shows the king seated under a canopy riding in a great two-wheeled chariot. The king's chariot, preceded by soldiers and bound captives, is being led to inspect booty after the victorious

1. Thomas Payne, *The Roman Triumph*, London, 1962, 17.