

## Six Centuries of Nero in Popular Culture

Twenty-five years ago, Elsner and Masters published *Reflections of Nero* and catalyzed renewed interest in *res Neronianae*. Companion volumes from Cambridge and Blackwells, a host of monographs, and new collections of source material have placed the historical Nero and his age at the center of discussions of early imperial culture. But Nero (or, more appropriately, the idea of Nero) cannot be confined to antiquity. Imperial Rome's notorious arsonist had a lasting impact on the cultural imaginary of the post-Classical world, from late antiquity to today. To take a few recent examples: in 2016 Trier hosted a Nero festival with coordinated museum exhibits across the city, including a special exhibit on Nero in modern pop-culture (*Nero – Kaiser, Künstler, Tyrann*). The next summer a team of Oscar-winning designers and producers launched an outdoor rock opera on the Palatine (*Divo Nerone*) in which a misunderstood Nero told his own story; while the musical was terminated after only a few sold-out weeks due to tax issues and noise violations, the capital investment in the project and the front-page headlines it garnered testify once more to the hold Nero continues to have. Additionally, the popular historical fiction author Margaret George has recently published two novels (2016 and 2018) offering a first-person narrative of Nero's eventful life.

Despite this resurgence of interest in Nero outside of academic circles and the copious, rich source material available for scholars of reception, less attention has been paid to Nero's post-Classical legacy. This panel aims to set the stage for a reconsideration of Nero in popular culture from a variety of angles. In doing so, we hope to spur interest in this wide-ranging material and offer new strategies for investigating Imperial Rome's reception in the popular imagination. In our first paper, a Neronian art historian examines the complicated reception of Nero in the early modern period, highlighting Nero's enduring popularity, the desire to imitate

his artistic achievements, and his rehabilitation as a positive model for Renaissance kingship. In our second paper, a scholar of Latin literature and culture moves us forward to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and beyond in her study of Nero and political cartoons, investigating the underlying assumptions and cultural anxieties that make Nero such an effective weapon to target modern political figures or social problems. Our third paper by a scholar of Neronian reception also considers print media but with a focus on 20<sup>th</sup> century American advertising where the emperor takes on the mantle of salesman whose lifestyle we covet; through a look at three advertising campaigns, she aims to uncover the mechanisms and psychological triggers embedded within this image of Nero-as-consumerist-cipher. Our final paper by a scholar of Classics and Cinema zooms in to Nero's most famous Hollywood incarnation: Peter Ustinov in *Quo Vadis* (1951). In doing so, he elucidates the complex and at times subtle intertextuality of Ustinov's legendary performance through which Nero simultaneously becomes a would-be Homeric *aoidos*, the deranged mastermind of Neropolis, and pyromaniac.

The chronological range and diversity of media across our panel offers many entry points for scholars of reception, from Nero's political reception in Renaissance and Baroque art as well as in modern cartoon culture to Nero's commercial reception in Hollywood and modern advertising. Important also is the different perspectives offered on Nero within this material; he becomes a paragon of kingly virtue, a political meme of disapprobation, a megalomaniacal yet refined aesthete whom we love to hate, and a decadent imperialist whose style we are told we can purchase. This polyphony of perspectives on Nero, combined with the wide range of material examined, offers many paths forward for scholars interested in Nero, in imperial culture, and in reception.

Interest in Classics and popular culture is growing. Joshel, Malamud, & McGuire (2001) laid important groundwork in this regard. Moreover, Jon Solomon's mammoth study *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster* (2016) offers new strategies for Classicists interested in the popular reception of a particular figure across time and diverse source material. The time is ripe for reconsidering the ways in which 'Nero' continues to signify in post-Classical culture and for developing new, interdisciplinary methods for investigating his lasting yet changeable image. Through four papers which cover a chronologically broad timespan and materially rich set of sources, this panel aims to start this conversation.

#### Bibliography

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