

Trajan's Column by way of Muybridge: Repetition as Movement and Meaning

How the Romans “read” Trajan’s Column is a conundrum that endures (Jones 1910; Koepfel 2002; de Francesco 2014). Did they view it from second floor galleries? Was there ever a temporary scaffolding? Were illustrations published in some way as a guide? If the last were true, it would constitute a kind of proto-graphic novel (or, why bother with the “proto-”?).

This paper proposes that, whatever the theory for viewer assistance at the Column itself (including the theory that there was *no* assistance), the artists deployed a representational strategy in which movement was conveyed for distant eyes through similar, adjacent forms proceeding in a sequence from left to right. As examples the paper considers Scenes 4, 11/12, 31, 37, 54/55, and 99: in each of these, figures are lined up in complementary yet slightly different poses which, when viewed from afar, and brightly colored with paint as they were, express a particular type of progression—the crossing of a bridge, the construction of a wall, the waging of war, the pleading of a case. A good analog for visualizing this argument might be the famous photographs of Eadweard Muybridge from the early days of the technology: rapidly imaged shots of a horse galloping or a man jumping or a woman carrying water were arranged in sequential frames as studies in motion. In short, the eye “sees action” by it being broken down into its constituent parts, in a way that is a deliberate construction by the artist (Solnit 2004).

A second part of the paper argues that these “bursts” of movement are arranged in a way to convey historical significance. Each of these scenes occur at a weighty moment in the Dacian campaigns. Such bursts are also spaced out and arranged in the spirals to appear at multiple registers from bottom to top, viewable from any side. Should a viewer walk around the

column or stand and stare along a single side, their attention may fix upon the bursts from one to the next, and thus develop a sense of both the order of events and a varying intensity of action.

Bibliography

- de Angelis, Francesco, "Sublime histories, exceptional viewers: Trajan's Column and Its Visibility," in Jas Elsner and Michel Meyer (eds.), *Art and Rhetoric in Roman Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 89-114.
- Jones, H. Stuart, "The Historical Interpretation of the Reliefs of Trajan's Column," *Papers of the British School in Rome* 5 (1910), pp. 434-459.
- Koeppel, Gerhard, "The Column of Trajan: Narrative Technique and the Image of the Emperor," in Philip Stadter and Luc Van der Stockt (eds.), *Sage and emperor: Plutarch, Greek intellectuals, and Roman Power in the Time of Trajan* (Leuven University Press, 2002), 245-257.
- Solnit, Rebecca, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Penguin, 2004).