Triumphal arch and triumphal procession as antiquity identification means in European society in the 15-17 centuries

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Abstract. The article considers the European society’s tendency to identify with the antique culture and establish the ruling power through symbolic architectural objects such as triumphal arches. Along with this, triumphal processions are briefly characterized in connection with the significant historical events of the 15th-17th centuries. The authors emphasize that the triumphal arch was a symbol of the great Roman Empire’s might for the contemporaries and the generations to come; and that the festive triumphal processions and performances reflected the mass infatuation with antiquity and striving to identify with it. The tendency manifested itself in many European countries, i.e. Italy, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Russia.

1. Introduction

Striving to identify with past events is a specific social-and-cultural phenomenon. The choice of past events is clearly connected with the constantly changing historic ideals that directly influence the formation of styles in art. This phenomenon is of special interest when it becomes large-scale and acquires a mass character. Turn to the triumphal arch as an independent architectural object of the ancient Roman culture in different periods of European history can be considered a bright illustration of this historical process. Another social phenomenon illustrating the tendency to identify with antiquity is triumphal processions that became popular in European countries in the 15th-17th centuries.

2. Materials and methods

It is known that as far back as in the 4th century, there were over 350 triumphal arches in the Roman Empire. The stylistic analysis has been conducted for the most representative extant architectural objects, i.e. the Arch of Augustus in Aosta, Italy (35 B.C.) (Picture 1a), the Arch of the Sergii in Pula, Croatia (29-27 B.C.) (Picture 1b), the Arch of Orange, France (27 B.C.) (Picture 1c), the Arch of Caracalla in Djémila, Algeria (216 A.D.) (Picture 2a), the Arco dei Gavi in Verona, Italy (1st century A.D.) (Picture 2b), the Arch of Trajan in Benevento, Italy (114-117 A.D.) (Picture 2c), the Arch of Hadrian in Jerash, Jordan (129-130 A.D.) (Picture 3a), the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome, Italy (205 A.D.) (Picture 3b), the Arch of Constantine in Rome, Italy (315 A.D.) (Picture 3c), and the Arch of Titus in Rome, Italy (81 A.D.) (Picture 4). The comparative-historical study of the triumphal
processions has been performed based on the following written sources: 'History of Florence, 1532' by Machiavelli, 'Triumphs' by Petrarch, 'Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects' by Giorgio Vasari, et al. The research methodology includes the principles of dialectics and historicism that allow the study of the architectural and social phenomena in their dynamics and in a concrete historical context.

3. Research results and analysis

Erecting triumphal arches was common in ancient Rome. The arches were placed at the city and forum entrances, on the major roads and bridges, and on the streets where triumphal processions usually took place. The arches were dedicated to different memorable events of the past, celebrated figures, and private persons. The special status was emphasized by inscriptions and decorations such as reliefs, sculptural groups, and murals. Most triumphal arches were erected during the empire period.

Prominent due to their size (10-20 m high) and solemn proportions, the triumphal arches imparted a festive significance to the surrounding architectural space. When looking from a distance, one could at a glance take in the noble simplicity of their majestic dimensions, and when approaching, read the dedicatory inscriptions, and discern the décor. For the generations to come, the triumphal arches became a symbol of the Roman Empire’s might and greatness.

![Picture 1](image1.jpg)

**Picture 1.** a. the Arch of Augustus in Aosta, Italy (35 B.C.), b. the Arch of the Sergii in Pula, Croatia (29-27 B.C.), c. the Arch of Orange, France (27 B.C.).

![Picture 2](image2.jpg)

**Picture 2.** a. the Arch of Caracalla in Djémila, Algeria (216 A.D.), b. the Arco dei Gavi in Verona, Italy (1st century A.D.), c. the Arch of Trajan in Benevento, Italy (114-117 A.D.).
The presentation value of the triumphal arches was appreciated in the Renaissance epoch. Along with other remnants of the ancient Roman architecture, they became the objects of research interest for the architects and sculptors. It is not by chance that the triumphal arch was the main motif for many architectural structures in Italy. It also became an element of some well-known scenery paintings depicting the image of an ideal city. One of the examples is the 'Delivery of the Keys to Saint Peter', a fresco executed by Pietro Perugino and located in the Sistine Chapel, Rome.

**Picture 3.** a. the Arch of Hadrian in Jerash, Jordan (129-130 A.D.), b. the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome, Italy (205 A.D.), c. the Arch of Constantine in Rome, Italy (315 A.D.).

The triumphal arch became an object of special interest in Italy as far back as in the 15th century when antiquity was an inseparable part of the townspeople's life. This was revealed in the great interest of the educated population to everything connected with the antique: the Latin language and literature, rhetoric art, mythology, numismatics, Roman architectural and sculptural monuments. The Italian Renaissance humanists strived to master the world of antique culture and introduce it to the masses. “The striving to turn into Romans and imitate the antique lifestyle is characteristic of the later
periods of humanism as well" [1, p.43]. And "it would be strange to think that in their treatises and poems, the humanists and art innovators of the 15th century conveyed what some craftsmen or merchants had in their mind and heart; or that the Renaissance monumental art, architecture, frescos or sculptures addressed to the masses were fully perceived by the latter and adequately reflected their psychology. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that the impulses coming from the commoners and the counter impulses from the humanistic environment deeply penetrated each other" [1, p.48].

This was brightly manifested in the festivals of that time. In his 'History of Florence, 1532', Machiavelli states that the festivals in the middle of the 15th century were held to occupy the people’s minds and to distract them from the thoughts on the situation in the state. That is why the performances were organized in such a pompous way that for months, all the townspeople were busy with the preparation for the festival and with the festival itself [8, p.163]. Triumphs became part of the festivals. The ancient Rome custom to honor the winner with a triumph became extremely popular in the Renaissance epoch. The festivity program included a solemn chariot entry in the city and mass processions with the participation of the masquerade figures personifying pagan gods, great ancient commanders, classic and theological virtues. This topic was first allegorically developed in the famous 'Triumphs' by Petrarch and thus became popular in the humanistic literature from where it quickly spread to the fine arts. In Naples, humanism was extensively implanted by Alfonso V, the King of Aragon. In 1443, he entered Naples wearing a garment of a Roman victor, on a golden chariot inscribed with scholastic allegories, surrounded by the actors playing Destiny, Virtue and Julius Caesar [2].

It was the festive processions and performances that revealed the mass fascination with antiquity and the people’s striving to identify with it. For example, in 1471, in connection with Duke Galeazzo Sforza's visit to Florence, Lorenzo Medici organized a festive procession representing the triumph of Marcus Camillus, the Roman statesman of the 5th century B.C. who drove the Gauls out of Rome. Seven ‘ancient Roman’ chariots took part in the procession - with bulls, oxen, horses, and buffalos harnessed to the chariots. On the decorated elephants, were sitting allegoric figures of Saturn, Janus, Julius Caesar, Emperor Augustus, Emperor Trajan; Numa Pompilius surrounded with liturgy books; and Titus Manlius Torquatus who became Consul after the Carthaginian war and whose rule enhanced the prosperity of Rome. Many cardinals came to watch the procession in which besides other animals, leopards and panthers took part. "Renaissance domesticated the archetypic formulas of mythology and rhetoric and made them uplift the existent reality" [1, p.120].

In his 'Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects', Giorgio Vasari mentions Piero di Cosimo as one of the first artists that invented masqueraded triumphs. ‘...He significantly improved them by enriching the made-up story not only with the music and words but also with the immensely pompous processions of people, both unmounted and horsed, masqueraded correspondingly... With torches in their hands, dressed in the same way, so that sometimes over 400 of them would pass. And behind them, there was the triumphal chariot decorated all over, with trophies or other intricate devices on it; such things refine the talents and give a great pleasure...to the folk' [4, p.349]. Erection of triumphal arches was connected with such festive triumphal processions. The arches were part of the temporary architectural-and-spatial décor transforming the main streets and squares where the festivals used to take place and the honored guests of the city used to be welcomed.

During the Shrovetide festival in March 1515, when the whole Florence was celebrating the election of Pope Leo X, the son of Lorenzo Medici, many triumphal processions were held. Two of them, especially beautiful and pompous, were performed by the town liege lords and noblemen. One of the triumphs was called ‘Diamond’ and was headed by liege lord Julian de Medici... The second procession named ‘Stump’ was headed by the liege lord Lorenzo, the son of Pietro de Medici. His emblem was a stump embodying the dry stem of a laurel tree on which green leaves grow again, thus showing that the name of his grandfather was always fresh and renewed [5, p.333]. In September 1515, during the visit of Pope Leo X to Florence, Lorenzo Medici held a festival again. All the town artists were called together to receive the guest in a most magnificent way. There were 12 triumphal arches erected and decorated with statues and paintings; various monuments, obelisks, columns and
sculptural groups resembling the Roman ones were put up between the arches [9, p.116]. "As soon as the Florentines got to know that Pope Leo X was going to grace the city with his visit, they contrived great festivities and magnificent and pompous decoration with so many arches, facades, temples, colossi and other statues that nothing as pompous, rich and beautiful as this had ever been created before… Jacopo di Sandro (with the participation of Baccio da Montelupo) erected an arch inscribed with stories at the entrance of the Porta San Pier Gattolino. Another arch was built by Juliano del Tasso in front of the San Felice Church… Granaccio and Aristotle da San Gallo erected an arch between the abbacy and the Podesta palace; and Rosso built another arch with various figures magnificently set on it at Il Canto dei’ Bischeri" [5, p.274]. The ‘stories’ were usually dedicated to ancient Rome's allegories or events.

For the Annunciation festival of the San Felice in Piazza Church held by the Cup Community in 1525, Jacone, following the tradition, made the external decoration as most beautiful, very high double triumphal arch with 8 columns, pilasters and pediments [5, p.458].

In 1536, when Charles V arrived in Florence, he was given a pompous reception. "As an award and besides the big banners for the castle and the fortress, I got an order for… a façade as a triumphal arch 40 cubits high and 20 cubits wide that was erected on the San Felice Church plaza” [10, p.530]. About the same time, Vasari got an order to develop the general layout of the triumphal arches. The decoration work for the triumphal entry of Charles V and his son Philip in Antwerp in 1549 was performed by the famous Dutch architect Hans Vredeman de Vries (1527-1607).

In the Netherlands, folk festivities became common, when the market and the streets would get filled with a festive exaltation. The cities and corporations competed in luxury and allegoric artistry, for which purpose triumphal arches are erected. The description of such a festival held in 1561 is given in one of the sources of that period: “On one of the summer days, when 14 violinist chambers met before the city gates, through the festively decorated streets with the multiple triumphal arches erected, they headed to the market area where the main arena was set up” [10, p.42].

Triumphal arches and triumphal processions were also built in France. Under Francis I, they became especially popular. For example, when Henry II was entering Rouen in 1520, he passed through a few triumphal arches where “there were six elephants made so artfully that people took them for real ones” [7, p.109].

Infatuation with antiquity is brightly represented in ‘Triumphal Arch’, a fine print by Albrecht Durer. It is one of the biggest images of the triumphal arch, executed in 1515 by the order of Emperor Maximillian I who had been Durer’s benefactor since 1512. The graphical composite of 3.5 x3 m, printed from 192 boards and designed as a wall decoration is filled with the images of triumphal processions, and allegories.

The tradition of ceremonial entries with triumphal arches lasted as long as through the 17th century. For example, Peter Paul Rubens dealt with sketching triumphal arches. In 1634, by the request of the Antwerp sovereigns, he developed sketches for the ceremonial welcome of Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand, Governor of the Spanish Netherlands, in order to honor the victory of Ferdinand’s troops over the Swedish at the Battle of Noerdlingen. One of the sketches, ‘Apotheosis of Infanta Isabella’ that depicts antique allegories, is located in the State Museum of Fine Arts in Russia. However, the interest in triumphal arches in the baroque epoch was no more connected with the wish to familiarize with the antique ideals; it was only a continuation of the tradition, the last tribute to the Renaissance epoch. The images of triumphal arches, along with the attributes of glory, became the elements of vanitas still lifes as a symbol of human futile striving. One of the examples is ‘Allegory of Death’ that was executed in the 17th century by Juan de Valdes, a Spanish painter.

4. Discussion
The study shows that origination of neoclassicism in the second half of the 17th century evoked interest in the antique ideals and revived the triumphal arch as an architectural object and a symbol of the Roman Empire’s might. The first triumphal arch in Paris was the Porte Saint-Denis (1672) created by François Blondell. The arch glorified the military victories of Ludwig XIV. The large size of the arch (25 m high, 24 m wide) and its reliefs resembled those of the ancient Roman arches. Shortly thereafter, in 1674, Pierre Bullet built the Porte Saint-Martin in Paris. It was a three-cord triumphal arch 17 m high that resembled the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome. The Roman traditions were revived in the inscription in the upper part of the southern façade: “To Ludwig the Great for that he twice took Besançon and Franche-Comté and defeated the German, Spanish and Dutch armies, from the Paris merchants’ prévôt and échevin, 1674”. One of the reliefs shows Ludwig XIV as Heracles trampling on the mythical heroes Achelois and Heron, another one shows him as Mars.

The Russian architectural tradition of that period was not ready yet for the language of the European allegories, and decorations in the form of sculptural compositions were perceived as idols. Still, in 1696, for the first time in Moscow, Peter the Great erected a triumphal arch dedicated to the victory of Russia in the Azov campaign. Thus, a European form of the state power propaganda entered Russia. The tradition continued in Peter's baroque period - to commemorate the Treaty of Nystad signed by Russia and Sweden in 1721, four triumphal arches decorated with antique allegory images were erected in Moscow.

It is remarkable that in the 20th century, there was another turn to the antique heritage and to the idea of 'power triumph' - this time, within the frames of the National Socialism culture policy (1933-1945). The Third Reich artists had to follow the ideal that the Nazis discovered in the antique culture. In Hitler’s opinion, the simplicity of the ancient Greek art and its clear lines were an absolute reflection of the reality, and the human body harmony represented the highest ideal of beauty. The Fuehrer was convinced that in the ancient Greek idea of man, essential vital human functions were brightly represented: “The male image is an expression of the higher human power, its essence and the exactness required by nature. The female image is full of life and maternity as its ultimate purpose. Correctly considered, this purpose setting reflects the higher measure of beauty” [11, p.212]. The Nazis have certainly proven that it is not only possible but also extremely effective to use the cultural values in a political campaign. At the same time, the Nazis absolutized their own artistic ideals and demonstrated an utter intolerance to the alien aesthetic canons, using their political power [12, p.273].

5. Conclusion

The results of the study show a steady trend in European society of the 15th-17th centuries, i.e. identification with the antique culture. The neoclassicism of the middle 18th–early 19th centuries turned to the triumphal arch again and made it a symbol of monarchical power. This predetermined the large-scale architectural boom that resulted in a whole series of significant works of art in Europe [12, p.273].

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