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Ice Age to Baroque: Artworks in History

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### How Historical Context Influences Architectures' Meaning and Effect

Artworks and architectures are unavoidably shaped by historical contexts, which in return are affected by artworks and architectures. This essay is intended to compare different ways in which historical context plays a role in the meaning and their effect of three architectures: the Parthenon in Athens, the Pantheon in Rome, and the Palatine Audience Hall in Trier.

Before going in depth about the three architectures, it is necessary to make clear the definition of the historical context. According to Louise Gardner, general historical context refers to the political, social, economic, scientific, technological and intellectual background that accompanies and influences the specifically art-historical events<sup>1</sup>. A shift of regime, a prevalence of custom, or an advancement in technology could all generate changes or transformations in art. However, historical context does not include all historical incidents: it only consists of those which have some particular effect on the art-historical events. Every work of art is made in its own historical background, and to fully and appropriately understand it, one needs to relate it to its original context.

The first architecture to be analyzed is the renowned Parthenon in Greece. Dominating the city of Athens and the neighboring country for miles, the Parthenon is perhaps unsurpassable as a monument to characterize the Classical period in Greek art<sup>2</sup>. The Parthenon we could see today is built between 447 and 438 BC, which was during the Golden Age of Athens, as part of the greater Periklean building project. The Periklean Parthenon (Parthenon III) was a replacement of an earlier marble temple (Parthenon II), begun after the victory at the battle of Marathon at approximately 490 BC and destroyed by the Persians in 480 BC. This temple had replaced the very first Parthenon (Parthenon I) in 570 BC<sup>3</sup>. After playing a leading role in the repulse of the Persians and obtaining dominant political force in Greece, Athens became quite prosperous, and it was amid this period when drama, philosophy, and art began to flourish. Under the prosperous and peaceful background,

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Gardner, *Art Through the Ages, 1926-1944*, New York, 1980, 5-6

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Honour, John Fleming, *A World History of Art, 1982-1995*, Peking, 1999, 136-142

<sup>3</sup> Ioanna Venieri, 'Description of the Parthenon', *Odysseus Website*, [http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/2/eh251.jsp?obj\\_id=912](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/2/eh251.jsp?obj_id=912), accessed 28/10/2015, Para.1

there were proficient architects and sculptors, sufficient fund, enough labors, and supportive policy to ensure the timeless quality of the architecture, which to survive centuries and still be of great artistic value.

The extraordinary quality of the Parthenon enabled it to remain till modern times, however the process was not smooth: it has undergone many conversions and damages. At first, it was a Greek temple housing the cult statue of Athena Parthenos, which did not survive the afterwards depredations. It was changed into a Christian church at the fifth century AD, and then a Turkish mosque was built inside its naos under the Ottoman conquest of Greece. In 1687, the center of the building was destroyed by a Venetian rocket. Later in the early nineteenth century, much of the sculptural decoration of the temple was looted and sold to the British Museum. Through its history, we could see the Parthenon altered its function throughout different periods of time, and at last was even dismembered. Although the Parthenon now remains in two separate locations, with the core almost in ruin, its historical and artistic meaning did not recede. “The uncomfortable conclusion is hard to resist: that, if it had not been dismembered, the Parthenon would never have been half so famous.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, in some ways, it is because of its unique history which ignites passions and involves government attentions that makes it more eminent. Thus, it was the prosperous economic and favored political background that provided perfect condition for the Parthenon to be built in high artistic quality, and the historic transformations that gained it more attention.

More than five hundred years after the establishment of the Parthenon in Greece, The Pantheon was built in Rome. There are a number of intriguing similarities and differences in the historical contexts of the two architectures, generating the similar and varied meaning and effects of the two. Similar to the Parthenon, the Pantheon was established in a period of great prosperity. It was built in 117-126 AD, which was in the midst of the peace-prevailing time, Pax Romana. In the first century, the Roman Emperor Augustus and his successor implemented a policy of boosting architecture, art, and an ample variety of public works, sometimes even to an extravagant degree, intending to build a new and magnificent Rome. As a result, the Roman empire attained its largest geographical extent and pinnacle of its power in the second century, during which architectures reflected its grandiose imperial designs with Romanization and urbanism of the provinces taking place<sup>5</sup>. This thriving historical background provided conditions for the high artistic and historical value of the Pantheon. Another fact that the Pantheon and Parthenon have in common is the

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Beard, *The Parthenon, 1987-1999*, New York, 2002, 3-22

<sup>5</sup> Honour, Fleming, *A World History of Art*, 201-202

different functions in different periods, which contributes to their fame in the modern times, although that is also why the Pantheon is one of the best preserved of all Roman monuments. In 609, the Pantheon was converted into a Christian church and consecrated to Santa Maria ad Martyrs. The building's consecration as a church saved it from the abandonment, destruction, and the worst of the spoliation that befell the majority of ancient Rome's buildings during the early medieval period. Since the Renaissance the Pantheon has been used as a tomb and now it is in use as a Catholic church.

Different from the Parthenon, an essential factor of the Pantheon in historical context is the further improved skill in Roman architecture. Although the Romans founded their empire on the ruins of the Hellenistic kingdoms, the art and architecture changed as the artists were given new tasks and adapting their methods accordingly<sup>6</sup>. With the support of engineering knowledge, which includes the qualities of solids and statics of inert masses, Roman architects were creative in the construction of great interior spaces. They developed and improved the superior skills of erecting structural units, such as the arch, the vault, and the dome. Unlike the Greek temples, the Pantheon is to be experienced from within, not from without: the interior of it is a sole, consolidated, self-sufficient whole, undisturbed by supporting solids; it is a whole that encloses the visitor without imprisoning him, a small cosmos that opens through the oculus to the drifting clouds, the blue sky, the sun, universal nature, and the gods<sup>7</sup>. Leading by a contrast between the exterior architecture of mass and the interior architecture of space, visitors of the Pantheon may feel somewhat a visual excitement; passing from a world of hard confining angular forms into one of spherical infinity, one could also feel his internal peace. Thus, with the prosperous historical background serving as a prerequisite, the advancement in Roman art and architecture skills helps the Pantheon survive through change of beliefs and dynasties to the modern times.

When the Palatine Audience Hall in Trier was built, the historical background was not as flourishing and peaceful as that of the Parthenon or the Pantheon. After the anarchy of the third century, the empire begun to disassemble like personal property by the emperor's sons. For most of the fourth century, Trier was the favored residence of Roman emperors, and Emperor Constantine used it as the capital of his fading western Roman Empire. The Palatine Audience Hall was built from 305 to 312 AD, before Constantine took possession of Rome and then found a new capital at Constantinople. Under such waning political background, the advancements in architecture strongly

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<sup>6</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art, 1934-1953*, London, 1956, 79-81

<sup>7</sup> Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*, 185-193

reflected the ebbing authority of the Roman empire. A fusion of military with imperial palace architecture remarkably mirrored the changed life style of the late imperial period, when increased centralization and standardization incorporated into all levels of the Roman society with militaristic thinking<sup>8</sup>. Instead of making improvement of the architectural skills and showing magnificence, architectures of this period mostly shared the austere style.

Located in the northeastern quarter of the city, the Palatine Audience Hall was the earliest building project attributable to Constantine, as a part of the palace complex at Trier. Since it was built for the imperial throne, there should be at least some elements of splendor against the overall austere architectural style: the interior walls were originally covered with slabs of marble revetment that added color and variegated patterns to the interior, while it is now simple and plentifully lit by large windows, as austere as the exterior<sup>9</sup>. As the first building attributed to Constantine, the Palatine Audience Hall also holds one of the keys for understanding the development of early monumental Christian church architecture. The rectangular structure with an entrance at one short end and an apse at the other, as well as the simplicity of its construction, had been used in the large Christian churches to be built by Constantine in the following years<sup>10</sup>. Similar to the Pantheon, the Palatine Audience Hall remains the best preserved Constantinian architectural monument in the world due to its conversion into a church. The point is that although the hall is no longer a splendor as before, as long as it remains, it gives people opportunity to imagine this gorgeous hall of justice in ancient times: decorated with golden mosaics, rich marble, colorful stucco, and busts of Constantine. Thus, since the Palatine Audience Hall was built at the early stage in a fading empire, it formed its unique architectural style, and was set as a canon for the later Christian architectures.

In conclusion, historical context functions various ways in architectures' meaning and effect. The economic and political environments are always fundamental factors for architectures in their construction, which in turn affects its meaning and effect. Prosperous and peaceful backgrounds provides every conditions that are necessary for an architecture to be a masterpiece: sufficient fund, advanced constructing techniques, adequate labors, and outstanding architects and artists. Nevertheless, when political and economic background is less favorable, it gives architectures other sort of characters and meaning. Therefore, architectures in history, apart from their concretization

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<sup>8</sup> Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*, 203-206

<sup>9</sup> Richard Krautheimer, 'The Constantinian Basilica', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 21, 1967, 115-140

<sup>10</sup> Mark J. Johnson, 'The Architecture of Empire', in Noel Lenski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, Cambridge, 2007, 278-297

from the outward, are worthy of exploration to the historical context behind them, which will lead to further or even brand-new understanding.

( 1811 words)

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