

A Reflection on the Crisis of Public Monuments The Case of Historiated Column

Francesco Del Sole

Department of Cultural Heritage, University of Salento, Lecce, Italy

Abstract

The twentieth century generated a crisis of public monuments. This paper proposes a reflection on the choices made by society regarding what aspects of history to remember and how in order to provide a foundation for its collective identity. Since ancient times, the task of public monuments has been to imprint in history the perpetual memory of a character, identified as the ideal model around which the history of their time revolves. With the French Revolution, there was a fundamental change of course on this front. The public no longer needed to follow an ideal sovereign, and the story was no longer calibrated to a single character but to each citizen. The crisis of public monuments after World War II dealt with the concept of durability, a fundamental attribute for this archetype, with the consequent birth of the counter-monument. To fully understand this crisis, the evolution of one of the commemorative monuments par excellence – historiated column – will be analysed through three key examples, far apart in space and time, each exemplifying a precise evolutionary phase: *Trajan's Column*, the *Vendôme Column* and the *Monument against Fascism, War, Violence*, erected in 1986 by Jochen and Ester Gerz.

Keywords: Public monument; Column; Identity

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Introduction

A public monument has always been understood as a *hypomnemata*, a device created to preserve memory in a collective space. It constitutes a material memory and highlights the choices made by society about what aspect of history to remember and how to remember it in order to provide a foundation for its identity. Since World War II, the discourse has frequently focused on a general crisis of public monuments, mostly linked to the catastrophes of the twentieth century that changed the world. The broken memory of the men who survived World War II inaugurated a new way of remembering, making evident monument's impotence in reproducing what some historians define as unrepresentable and unspeakable (Agamben 1998; Halbwachs 1987). Here, we will attempt to retrace some of the stages of this crisis by analysing the evolutionary course of one of the most significant archetypes in the history of architecture – the historiated column – through three key examples, far apart in space and time, each exemplifying a precise phase of evolution.

The Building: Trajan's Column and the Construction of a Perpetual Model

Apollodorus of Damascus introduced a new monumental typology: a column decorated with a spiral frieze, with a spiral staircase inside and a colossal statue on top (Abdulkarim et al. 2003; Agosti and Farinella 1985; Becatti 1960; Fagiolo 2007, 2009; Fagiolo and Madonna 1985; Leander Touati 1987; Martines 1983; Settis 1988; Staccioli and Vignuda 2013). Since its introduction, the column has taken on an autonomous meaning, no longer related to the architectural orders (Becatti 1960, 40). Scholars agree that this monument represents one of the highest expressions of Roman art (fig. 1). As Bianchi Bandinelli (1938, 2004) recalls, it is an undisputed masterpiece not only for the quality of the reliefs made by the “master of Trajan’s enterprises”, but, above all, for the innovative meaning the forum in which the column is inserted: “the path from the Arch to the Column and the Temple [...] is a sort of biographical trace that began with the prince's military exploits and [...] stops around the Column, among the libraries; and here it stretches out to tell the story of the events (in the frieze); it alludes to the work of the Forum (in the inscription) and to the wisdom of the prince (in the libraries); it welcomes (in the base) his ashes, transforming the Column into a funerary monument, or rather giving them, without depriving them of the first, an additional meaning and function. (Settis 1988, 84)”.

The ideology underlying the construction of a forum, since the time of Caesar, has always been a celebratory one. However, there is an element of absolute novelty in the Forum of Trajan: The client is glorified in relation to a war of conquest. The whole political programme of Trajan and his consequent interventions in the heart of Rome revolved around the Dacian campaigns, which took place in two stages between 101 and 106 AD.

If the military *virtus* is the first useful piece to shape the image of the perfect princeps, it must be combined with an equally fundamental value: political wisdom. As a public monument, the column must also be read as per its rhetorical function: an invitation to view Trajan’s history. Stendhal (1973) called the column a historical document rather than a work of art; therefore, today we can define it as a history book carved in marble. The column was intended to present the emperor and his exploits to all Romans like a public speech aimed at arousing unanimous support for his figure would (Fehr 1985, 39–60). However, many scholars have questioned the complete “readability” of the work (Di Pasquale, 2019). At the time, none of the emperor’s subjects needed to observe all the episodes carved in the marble, since the column told a known story. Everyone in those years had at least a passing knowledge of the sovereign’s deeds. The so-called “formula of attention” towards the character of Trajan is noteworthy: The other protagonists’ eyes are always realized as converging on the figure of the emperor. Trajan has been represented about sixty times in the entire rotulus, according to a pattern of recurrence and repetition (anaphora) that produces an amplification (the multiplication of presences) of the image, which has both an expressive and a narrative function, for the spectator. The message that is received, decidedly redundantly, is that Trajan is to be considered the ideal sovereign.

Therefore, Trajan’s Column is not only a historical narration of an archival nature but also a real manifesto of a political project subtly defined. It inaugurated a new type of public monument with the task of handing down an exemplum of a sovereign in which all the people identify themselves; it tells the story of a man who has given body to his public image, displaying himself as the incarnation of all the necessary principles (military *virtus* and political wisdom) useful to shape the *optimus princeps*, a model to refer to for the future.



Fig. 1. Trajan's Column, detail of the decorated frieze, Rome (source: wikimedia commons).

The crew: Napoleon and the Vendôme column

Between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, the young French Republic, after the revolution, had to face an unprecedented war effort against European countries that mobilised their armies to re-establish the old regime (Furet and Richet 2004; Howard Brown 2007; Jonathan 2016). In this context, Napoleon, after various coups d'état, came to call himself the Emperor of the French in 1804. A year after his coronation, he achieved his most brilliant victory at Austerlitz. During this time, he decided to erect his column in the centre of the Place Vendôme in Paris, based on the model of Trajan's Column (1806–10) (fig. 2). Its shaft was covered by a bronze spiral made from the cannons of the armies defeated at Austerlitz. At that time, Napoleon possessed all the requisites to claim the same glory that had been given to Trajan when his column was constructed: He was a divus, an emperor who had demonstrated his capacity as a leader in battle; his politics derived from the ideals that had led France to revolution (Delogu 2019). It was in fact in the guise of Caesar imperator that August Dumont represented him in the statue at the top of the

monument (Polverini 2003). Although erected to celebrate Napoleon's military exploits, the Vendôme Column is not called the "Napoleonic Column". After first taking the name "Column of Austerlitz" and "Column of Victory", Napoleon formally expressed his desire to dedicate the monument to the Great Army, as the inscription on the base reveals. The 1789 insurrection brought a change within the society of the time. The emperor no longer found himself, as in the Trajan era, in front of subjects who were immersing themselves in the sovereign celebrated in the frieze of the column bearing his name. Although Napoleon stood at the top of the column in a totalising position, he found himself in front of citizens who had fought for their freedom and equality, dreaming of a state in which sovereignty was embodied by the nation and no longer by the *optimus princeps*. Who can enjoy the victory is the entire people who lead the Nation and are part of the army. The Emperor must consider this legacy of the Revolution from which his own power derives. The triumphal arch, the second monument built by the emperor to celebrate the victory of Austerlitz, in which Napoleon is represented only in a high relief by Jean-Pierre Cortot placed on a facade of the monument, should also be read from this perspective.



Fig. 2. Vendôme column, Paris (source: wikimedia commons)

The ambivalent nature of Napoleon’s politics imposed on revolutionary France the new enlightened despotism of a general. It led Gustave Courbet, a member of the *Art Commission* set up at the time of the Paris Commune uprising (1870–71) (Cervelli 2015; Milza 2009), to show his contempt for the Vendôme Column: “It is a monument devoid of any artistic value, created to perpetuate the idea of war and conquest which were part of the imperial dynasty, but which had to be opposed by a republican nation” (as quoted in Ten-Doesschate Chu 1992, 45). The Paris experienced by Courbet is “a real paradise; no police, no nonsense, no exactions of any kind, no quarrels. Paris goes on by itself, as if on wheels. We should be able to stay like this all the time” (as quoted in Ten-Doesschate Chu 1992, 82). The demolition of the column created with the bronze of enemy cannons, all dedicated to war and the exaltation of the emperor, would have meant the beginning of a new era. In its place, Courbet proposed a new “column of peoples”: “Leave us your Krupp cannons, we will fuse them together with ours; the last cannon, with its mouth at the top, adorned with the Phrygian cap, placed on a pedestal with three cannon balls at the base, this colossal monument, which we will erect together in Vendôme Square, will be our column, of you and us, the column of the peoples, the column of Germany and France federated forever” (as quoted in Ten-Doesschate Chu 1992, 47). In this climate of sovereignty, on 12th April, 1871, an official decree of the commune opened the way for the demolition of the column on 16th May, in the presence of a festive crowd of communards (fig. 3). With its fall, the link between a monument and the history it narrated was symbolically broken. The revolutionary crowd no longer recognized itself in an exemplum. It follows that the story is no longer calibrated on a single character but rather on countless stories: “Previous regimes [...] have almost destroyed art by protecting it and depriving it of spontaneity. The feudal approach, supported by a despotic and discretionary government, has produced nothing but aristocratic and theocratic art, the exact opposite of the modern trend, of our needs, of our philosophy and of the revelation of man who manifests his individuality and his physical and moral independence. Now that democracy must direct everything, it would be illogical for art, which governs the world, to lag behind the Revolution that is taking place in France at the moment” (quoted in Ten-Doesschate Chu, 1992, 47).

From *exemplum* to *enumeratio*

The conquests of the French Revolution created the impulse for a new public mode of remembrance that evolved after the Great War. The twentieth century was the era of catastrophes; conflicts broke out involving the entire globe, using technological innovations to destroy entire cities. The events, at such times, are dramatic – the world changes and with it change the public needs of remembrance. Although the lists of names of generals who had led the army already appeared in the Napoleonic arc, it was only at the end of the Great War that the public monument would give life to that enumeration of identity with which, coming out of anonymity, all citizens would find their place in the forms of collective commemoration (Bassanelli 2015; Carraro and Savorra 2014; Denti 2016; Giuffrè et al. 2007; Pirazzoli 2006, 2010, 2011; Piretto 2014). It became necessary to save the name of one’s beloved, to keep their memory alive. This would result in a moment in which the notion of immemorial memory was born (Assmann, 2003; Aymonino, 1998; Rossi, 1991). It is not always possible to trace the identity of corpses piled up on the front. Many soldiers are dead, and most of them are anonymous war heroes.



Fig. 3. Felling of the Vendôme column, Paris, 1871 (photography by Franck - source: wikimedia commons)

Ceremonies in honour of the unknown soldier were born, through which the people honoured not the suffering of one but the blood sacrifice of an entire people (Miniero 2008); when a soldier without a name is found, the memory sometimes turns into a popular legend: Think of the famous tomb no. 107 of soldier Peter Pan in the shrine of Monte Grappa (Celi 2005).

The Disappearance: The Crisis of the Public Monument and the *Monument Against Fascism, War, Violence* by Jochen and Ester Gerz

“The strangest thing about monuments is that they are not noticed at all. Nothing in the world is more invisible. There is no doubt, however, that they are made to be seen, indeed to attract attention; but at the same time they have something that makes them waterproof, and attention flows over them like drops of water on a garment soaked in oil, without stopping for an instant” (Musil 1936).

After World War II, despite the collective demand to erect monuments, there was a distance from them. The very notion of monuments was almost rejected, both because it had become a form of expression of totalitarian regimes and because it was inadequate to collect the memory of war events that had just ended. The heritage of war is not only a disaster but a real upheaval that marks a fracture, in some ways irreparable. What has happened appears unspeakable and unrepresentable. The visible signs of destruction do not stop at the battlefields but are everywhere, involving urban areas, which are also the theatre of war. Artists and architects are confronted with the physical emptiness of cities gutted by bombing and the cultural void of a population that certainly did not have the desire to perpetuate memory forever but the vital need to rework mourning and promote processes of reconciliation (Bassanelli 2016; Pirazzoli 2006, 2010, 2011). The most important aspect that marks the natural evolution of a monument is the crisis of the concept of duration in time that leads to the birth, in parallel, of the counter-monument (Young 1993). Eternity has always been a fundamental attribute for a memorial, defined as “fluid” in Bauman’s (2000) theories, but in our time, the search for eternity is no longer appropriate. The historiated column erected in Hamburg in 1986 by Jochen and Ester Gerz – *Monument against Fascism, War and Violence* (1986–1993) – is a counter-monument (fig. 4). It is a twelve-metre-high completely smooth column on which the inhabitants of the city are invited to sign or write their history against dictatorship and war (fig. 5). After the accessible part of the column is signed, it is plunged into the ground until it disappears (figs. 6, 7).

“We invite the citizens of Hamburg, and visitors to the city, to add their names here. In doing so, we are stimulated to reflect on something. Many names will cover the 12 metres of the column that will slowly disappear into the ground. One day the monument will be completely underground, and the site that hosts it will remain empty” (Vickery 2012).

In Young’s (1993) words, Gerz’s column could be called a “vanishing monument”. In fact, the “monumentality” is lost, the attribute that, in Roman times, made the Trajan column the archetype of the memorial par excellence. The eloquence of the communication strategy is matched by aphasia; the sobriety of the naked column imposes itself on Trajan’s redundancy; individual responsibility replaces the choice to rely on an exemplum, the symbol of every virtue. The twentieth century saw the progressive development of the idea that everyone can, with their own choices, change the course of history. Gerz’s column, although intimately connected to the war and what follows from it, does not propose a known story, like the one told in Trajan’s Forum. For the naked column to acquire a meaning and become an historiated column, the contribution of all the subjects of the community involved in the operation is required; these subjects in Trajan’s time would have been simply “public”. The abstraction and the anti-monumental monumentality of the column, with its slow disappearance, evoke the intrinsic paradox of the monument – that which is born to preserve memory (*hypomnemata*) can achieve the opposite result, promoting oblivion. Over the years, about seventy thousand people have put their names on the Hamburg column, while dialogue, criticism and discussion about the artwork has developed in the city. The monument disappeared after seven years and all that remains is a plaque indicating that “in the end it is only through reflection with ourselves that we can overcome injustice” (Vickery 2012).

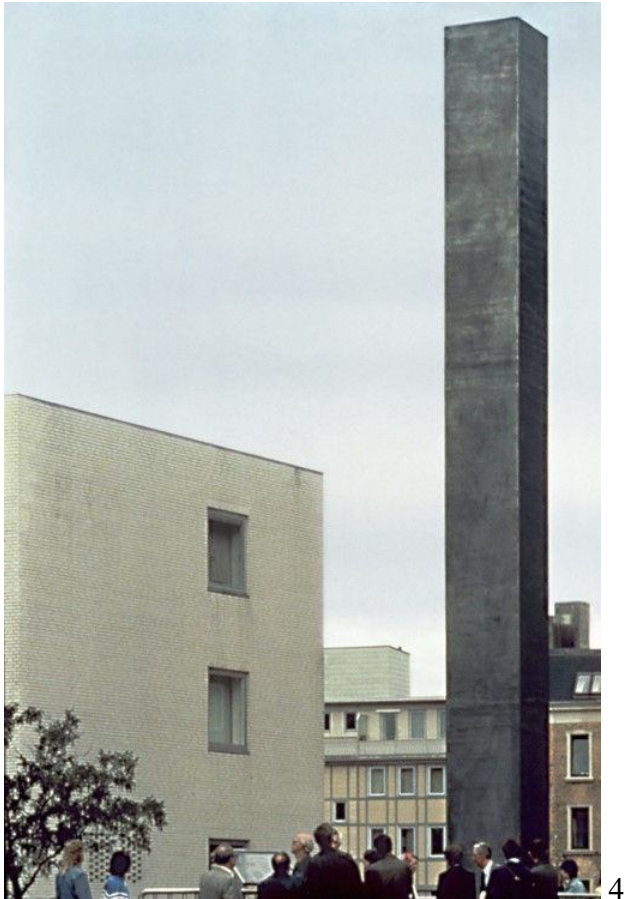


Fig. 4. Jochen and Ester Gerz, *Monument against fascism, war, violence*, 1986 (source: wikimedia commons).

Fig. 5. Jochen and Ester Gerz, *Monument against fascism, war, violence*, detail of a woman signing, 1989 (source: wikimedia commons).



Fig. 6. Jochen and Ester Gerz, *Monument against fascism, war, violence*, detail of the almost underground column, 1991 (source: wikimedia commons)



Fig. 7. Jochen and Ester Gerz, *Monument against fascism, war, violence*, detail of the disappearance, 1993 (source: wikimedia commons)

Conclusions

It is precisely in the moment when memory relies on external support that it is possible to forget it, making the story told on the column a warning for a never again that, with a new affirmative charge, marks the total lack of meaning in past events. Despite the passage of time and the semantic passage from *exemplum* to *enumeratio*, it is still important to reflect on the strategy of memory representation inaugurated by Trajan's column. A change in the public needs of remembrance has been matched by an adaptation of the forms of collective commemoration; however, the task of the monument itself has not changed, and it is still that of telling a story, albeit in different ways and forms.

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