



How Has Art Been Used as Propaganda?

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Art as Propaganda

Propaganda, as defined by Merriam-Webster, consists of “ideas or statements that are often false or exaggerated and that are spread in order to help a cause, a political leader, a government, and so on.” For centuries, art has been wielded by oppressive governments and power-hungry leaders in order to further their own selfish motives, as well as to simply promote the greater good of a society. Crafting art is a primary way in which people can express their love of something; what better way to express their love for their nation than through art that can stand the test of time. While propaganda often manifests itself in writing, film, speech, government and news reports, and the rewriting of history, it can most powerfully depicted through pieces of art. Paintings, sculptures, architecture, metalwork, and drawing can all be manipulated to portray a message that the artist wishes others to consider. Propaganda exists through art before the invention of writing, and can be traced namely through the Ancient Near Eastern, Egyptian, and Greek cultures.



Figure 1: Standard of Ur | Source



Figure 2: The Code of Hammurabi | Source

In the Ancient Near East

Some of the earliest civilizations of humans, found in the Ancient Near East, had governments that needed to rally their citizens and defend themselves as a unified group against other nations. For example, the Sumerians created the Standard of Ur (Figure 1), found in the royal tombs at Ur, which would have functioned as a flag carried into battle. The piece is double-sided and depicts the Sumerians in both war and in peace. It shows prisoners of war enslaved to

the Sumerians, entertainers and the king seated in a throne shown larger than life -- all of which boast about Sumeria. When carried into war this would remind the Sumerians of their own might and strike fear into their enemies. Babylon, another powerful Ancient Near Eastern civilization, birthed the Code of Hammurabi (Figure 2). It features 282 engraved laws and their respective punishments, along with a depiction of King Hammurabi and Shamash, the god of justice. Shamash is handing the king a scepter, ring, and a rope, all of which symbolize his power. This combined cuneiform and sculpture piece clearly had political motives and was meant to display the immense role of laws in Babylonian society, as well as reminding citizens that King Hammurabi was given his power by the gods themselves. These laws were no laughing matter and this seven-and-a-half foot stone stele signifies their importance. Even in the Ancient Near East, fledgling civilizations employed art in order to demonstrate the power of their nation and to unify their citizens.



Figure 3: Great Pyramids of Gizeh | Source

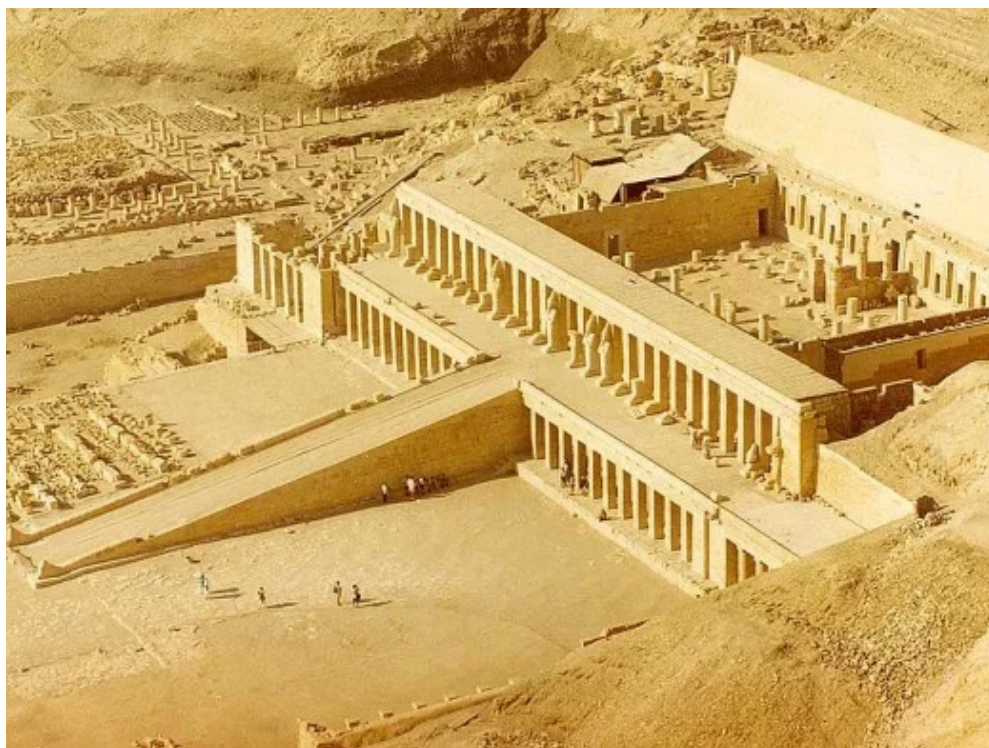


Figure 4: Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut | Source

In Egypt

Egypt was a formidable, strong, and unified civilization that had an extensive appreciation for the arts. Pharaohs understood that in order to have a lasting impact on the world, they must erect grand monuments and commission beautiful works of art to glorify their name. Most notably, the Great Pyramids of Gizeh (Figure 3) stood tall in the Egyptian desert to commemorate various pharaohs and provide them a palace from which to rule into their afterlife. These enormous structures crafted with limestone by thousands of slaves were a clear representation of the wealth and control these leaders possessed. Not just any leader could erect such a monument. In a similar fashion, the Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut (Figure 4) was built to honor the pharaoh herself as well as her connection to the sun god, Amun-Re. As a woman with unprecedented power in her time, she sought to project her power through artwork that both idealized and honored her. The temple was filled with 200 statues of her, often depicting her with the masculine features so admired in a pharaoh. Through this propaganda, Hatshepsut was able to convince her rivals and her own people that she was worthy to lead. The Egyptians were no fools and the clever pharaohs manipulated artwork in their favor so that their legacy could stand the test of time.



Figure 5: Alexander Mosaic from the House of Faun | Source



Figure 6: Doryphoros/Spear-Bearer | Source

In Greece

Greece is often known as the birthplace of democracy and, as such, it is well-known for art and architecture utilized to sway public opinion and plant the seeds of new thought. The Greeks are and were world-renowned for their lost paintings, their marble monuments, and their intricate statues. A Roman mosaic from 100 BCE exists of a 310 BCE painting by the Greeks depicting the Battle of Issus. The Alexander Mosaic from the House of Faun (Figure 5) is a copy of a Classical Greek work meant to show the military success of Alexander the Great. In the Battle of Issus, King Alexander destroyed the Persian forces led by King Darius. The enemy forces fled and victory was attained by the Greeks. The painting was a piece of influential propaganda, going as far as to depict Alexander with no armor at all – showing just how invincible he was. Another prime example of Greek propaganda is the Spear Bearer or Doryphoros (Figure 6) which depicts an idealized Olympic athlete. Paying close attention to the canon of proportions and through the balance of crossed limbs, this athlete has been described as a depiction of man similar to that of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. Overall, this 6 foot and 6 inches tall statue was created with the aim to impress outsiders and show Olympic athletes in all their glory. The Greeks valued perfection and they conveyed idealistic narratives and forms through their artwork in order to show off and leave their mark on history.



A Modern Example of Art With a Message | Source

Concluding Thoughts

While there are many tools through which propaganda can be utilized and spread, artwork is one which can stand the test of time. Architecture and art have been commissioned by leaders throughout history in order to display the best attributes of a society and be sure that their legacy supercedes them. Ancient Near Eastern settlements in Mesopotamia were frequently at odds with rival nations, and their artwork seeks to project military victory and a love of their government. Egyptian pharaohs were all-powerful beings and were motivated to prove their relationship with the gods above and their power here on Earth. The Greeks were a democratic people, and their monuments sought to develop civic life and honor their military conquests as well. Propaganda, while not always truthful or realistic, is a vital resource that both governments and the common people can procure through art.

Which civilization had the most powerful artistic propaganda?

- Ancient Near East
- Ancient Egypt
- Ancient Greece

Works Cited

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