

Public Monuments 1870-1997: Art in Political Bondage

Sergiusz Michalski

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A nation's public monuments are at bottom permanent and revealing political propaganda-witness the Statue of Liberty or the St. Louis Arch. Michalski, an art historian at the University of Braunschweig, Germany, powerfully demonstrates this through analyses that illustrate contrasts between nations, time, period and styles.

Taking the Franco-Prussian War at his starting point, Michalski notes that both vanquished and victors embarked on an orgy of statuomania. Typically, the French thrust was intelligent, imaginative and enlightening. Statues of heroes of the Revolution helped legitimize the Third Republic as its heir; other historical or contemporary notables promoted the concept of France's "mission civilatrice." In contrast, the new Germany descended to vast monstrosities of bastardized architectural forms (usually displacing nature on a spur or hilltop), extolling Germania's primitive virtues or thrusting gargantuan statues of Barbarossa, Wilhelm I or Bismarck at the public.

Post WWI, Michalski's field broadens without diminishing the acuteness of his critical perceptions. War memorials dominate, with The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, with its Eternal Flame (in modest French, British and German versions), in startling contrast to mausolea such as Douaumont, near Verdun. Germanic/ Hitlerian monumentalism is evident in numerous Nazi-built WWI memorials-cum-parade-grounds marking European battlefields. Rather than memorialize individual sacrifice, they serve to reinforce the state's power to command mass obedience. Michalski highlights the Soviet Union's commitment to gargantuan, thrusting but seldom built architectural projects, which in glorifying the state dwarf its citizens.

After 1945 the field becomes more complex and the players more numerous. In the West, war memorials headed the construction agenda. Problems abounded: how could Germany acceptably memorialize the military dead of its genocidal war? How could the Soviet Union best position its war memorials to reinforce its role in occupied Europe? How could America's Vietnam veterans be most fittingly remembered? In the case of memorials to Holocaust victims, intense artistic and political concerns continue both in Europe and the United States. Brief considerations of monuments to the North Korean and Iraqi dictators provide an interesting excursus, and a final chapter considers the new dominance of "ideologically neutral public sculpture."

Michalski writes clearly, opening the eyes and engaging the mind of the reader. This is a rich, finely illustrated text, which, in addition to analyzing the politics of monumental sculpture and architecture, explores the psychology of leadership and the mustering of public support.

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