

Art History

Alexander the Great in Art

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Alexander the Great is widely recognized as a powerful warrior-king who was worshipped as a god. The most renowned individual of his time, Alexander the Great expanded his empire to include all of Greece and eventually the empire of the once-dominant Persians. As befitting such a famous figure, there are numerous representations of Alexander, from mosaics to portraits, to his so-called sarcophagus. Alexander realized that he could use art in order to project a new and powerful image of himself to his people, thus giving them a personal connection to their ruler. Throughout history, people have been captivated by the awe-inspiring figure of Alexander the Great. This fascination informs his representation in art as a larger-than-life, god-like ruler.

From an early age, Alexander was depicted in art, and when he became king, he continued that tradition as a political tool. He wished to convey his special status – essentially that of a hero who had finally become a god (Burn 63). The creation of his image was so important, that Alexander personally selected artists to portray him. As the Roman historian Pliny the Elder stated, Alexander “decreed that no one other than Apelles should paint his portrait, no one other than Pyrgoteles engrave it, and no one other than Lysippos cast it in bronze” (217). Despite his edict, Alexander’s image was made by many other artists, both during and after his death, but there is not a single one that can be confidently attributed to any specific artist (Beard and Henderson 226). Most of the original depictions of Alexander are lost today, but we do have some extant copies.

There are many images of Alexander that cannot be given a name, an artist, or even a definitive time and place of creation. These images are referred to as a marble head of Alexander, or a portrait of Alexander, or some other general description. These images have been identified as Alexander because of his likeness, particularly the lion-like mane of hair and the tilted head. These identifications, however, are tentative ones, for there are few historical sources to support them (Beard and Henderson 226). An example of such an image is a portrait made around 338 BC of a young Alexander, which was possibly sculpted by Leochares (Bieber 183). Titled the “Head of Alexander Rondanini,” this image has Alexander’s characteristic curls, clean-shaven face, and large eyes. Another portrait thought to be Alexander is in the British Museum. Considered to be from the 3rd or 2nd century BC, this “Marble Head of Alexander” was found in Alexandria, Egypt, and is an idealized, posthumous depiction of the ruler (Burn 65).

Other works of Alexander are considered to be copies of those made by Lysip-

pos, for, according to the historian Plutarch, “only Lysippos, it seems, brought out his real character in the bronze and gave form to his essential excellence” (Plutarch 50). In one portrait, called the Azara Herm, Lysippos characterized Alexander not as a god, as Apelles and Pyrgoteles did, but as a vigorous and thoughtful man. According to Margaret Bieber, Lysippos captured the “manliness and lion-like fierceness of his countenance” as well as the “softness, brightness, and melting glance of his eyes” (183). The Azara Herm, now in the Louvre, is recognized as Alexander because of its inscription, “Alexander, son of Philip of Macedon” (Bieber 183).

Possibly the best known depiction of Alexander is the Alexander Mosaic, which was found in 1831 in the House of the Faun at Pompeii. The scene in the mosaic is that of Alexander either at the Battle of Issos in 333 BC or the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BC, fighting with the Persian emperor Darius (Stewart 133). Amidst the chaos and death of the battle, this scene captures the exact moment when Alexander’s charge causes Darius to retreat, and thus symbolically represents the pivotal turning point that leads to the fall of the Persians and the rise of Alexander the Great. The battle shows the bravery of Alexander, since he is leading his army against the Persians without a helmet. Darius is portrayed as weak compared to Alexander because of his gesture of entreaty and the flight of his charioteer. The dead tree in the background also plays an important part in the image. For Andrew Stewart, it becomes a “metaphor for the death and dismemberment of the Persian Empire” (140). Considered to be a second-century BC copy, and portrayed so prominently in a Roman house many years after his death, this mosaic demonstrates the enduring appeal of Alexander the Great (Burn 40-41).

Another famous representation of Alexander is that on his sarcophagus, which was made in the 4th century BC. The Alexander Sarcophagus, found at Sidon, in modern-day Lebanon, was used for a royal burial, perhaps that of King Abdalonymos, who was installed on the throne by Alexander after the Battle of Issos (Webster 38). Shaped like a miniature temple with the lid patterned after a pediment, the sarcophagus has four battle and two hunting scenes. One scene shows a lion hunt, in which Alexander is likened to Heracles hunting a lion and later wearing its skin. Abdalonymos is probably one of the figures next to Alexander, perhaps to strengthen his own reputation and importance as a ruler (Burn 43). Alexander is also in one of the battle scenes, along with his closest friend Hephaestion. The other hunting scene is one of a panther, and another battle is between Greeks and Persians, with Alexander recognizable on the left (Webster 41).

Regardless of who commissioned the Alexander Sarcophagus, it and the scenes on it were probably used by Alexanders’ successors, according to Lucilla Burn, as a “technique of seeking to legitimize and popularize themselves by reference to their illustrious leader” (43). Even after his death in 323 BC, Alexander’s image was recreated and glorified as one of strength, power, and divinity. On account of his overwhelming popularity with the people of Greece, his god-like status, and his likeness to the hero Heracles, Alexander’s contemporaries put his image to good

use in generating support for themselves.

Images of Alexander continued to appear after his death in many different media. Throughout his empire Alexander's image was put on coins in order to keep his memory alive, even though previously most coins featured Heracles. Soon the coins of Alexander and Heracles were indistinguishable from each other, since both began to take on the traits of Alexander (Stewart 163). Some coins kept the likeness of Heracles, while others, such as those from Sidon, were closer to the characteristic head of Alexander. The best example of coins bearing Alexander's image came from Babylon, where he last resided and died in 323 BC (Stewart 164). On the Babylonian coins, according to Bieber, "the protruding forehead, the large eyes, the slightly pendant tip of the nose, the full lips, the rounded chin, and the elongated cheeks are certainly meant to be the features of Alexander" (Bieber 185). Most of Alexander's coins represent him wearing the ram's horn of the Egyptian deity Zeus Ammon, which is a significant portrayal that attributes yet another god-like quality to Alexander.

Just as with the Alexander Sarcophagus, the coins of Alexander were minted because of the political power they wielded over the Hellenistic people. Alexander's successors' adherence to his image on coins, according to Stewart, "proclaimed to their subjects and followers (their troops in particular) their continuing allegiance to the concept of an undivided empire and boosted their own prestige by emphasizing their service with Alexander" (Stewart 264). As Alexander's prestige and relevance lessened, however, these rulers started to replace his image with their own for the same reasons that Alexander himself first conveyed his own image to the public, in order for the people know him more personally.

Alexander the Great is considered one of the most powerful rulers in history and can be categorized with figures such as Constantine, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon. As a forerunner to the leaders who came after him, Alexander manipulated art to create a god-like status for himself. In doing so, he fostered a near-obsession among his subjects and all those who have come afterward. The images that we study today admirably convey the intense fascination that generation after generation has had with the monumental figure of Alexander the Great.

Works Cited

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