

Dewey's Aesthetics and the History of Art: three examples from the Late Antiquity¹

A estética de Dewey e a história da arte: três exemplos da antiguidade posterior

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Abstract: Although John Dewey's aesthetics has been the subject of a great amount of studies conducted through very different approaches (philosophical, sociological and pedagogical among others) there is a lack of contributions capable of recognizing the linkage between Dewey's aesthetics and the history of art. In this article we analyze three works of art from the Late Antiquity (III-VI century a. C.) mainly following Dewey's key concepts of detour and formal analysis, in order to reconstruct the aesthetic experience of the author, the beholder and the patron of each artwork. Our purpose is twofold. Firstly, we want to demonstrate that an approach based on Dewey's theory is fruitful when it comes to studying ancient works of art. Secondly, we want to demonstrate that a pragmatist interpretation of late antique art is more fruitful and less reductionist than the traditional ones (Formalist, Orientalist, and Marxist).

Keywords: Aesthetics. Detour. Formal Analysis. History of art. Late antique art.

Resumo: *Ainda que a estética de John Dewey tenha sido assunto de uma grande quantidade de estudos conduzidos através de abordagens muito diferentes (filosófica, sociológica, pedagógica, entre outras) há uma ausência de contribuições capazes de reconhecer vínculos entre a estética de Dewey e a história da arte. Neste artigo, analisamos três obras de arte da Antiguidade tardia (séculos III-VI a.C.), principalmente, seguindo os conceitos-chave de Dewey de análise formal e desvio, para reconstruir a experiência estética do autor, o observador e o patrono de cada obra de arte. Nosso propósito é duplo. Primeiro, queremos demonstrar que uma*

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abordagem baseada na teoria de Dewey é frutífera quando se estuda obras de arte antigas. Segundo, queremos demonstrar que uma interpretação pragmatista da arte antiga tardia é mais frutífera e menos reducionista do que as tradicionais (Formalista, Orientalista e Marxista).

Palavras-chave: *Estética. Arte antiga tardia. Desvio. Análise formal. História da arte.*

1 Introduction

John Dewey's aesthetics has often been considered the heart of his philosophy, even though a systematic approach to art and aesthetics arose at a larger stage in his career (only in the second half of the '20s).² The relationship between Dewey's theory of art and art-making has been treated extensively by many scholars and a great amount of studies have been produced within the following fields: comment

- The influence of Dewey's aesthetics in the development of visual arts in the United States (BUETTNER, 1975; JAY, 2002; BARBEREAU, 2003; SENALDI, 2007; DREON, 2009, among others).
- The social and political implications of *Art as Experience* (see, particularly, MAVIGLIANO, 1984; DREON, 2013; UENO, 2016; CAMPEOTTO and VIALE, 2018).
- The relationship between Dewey's aesthetics and education (REYNOLDS, 1997; JACKSON, 1998; COSTANTINO, 2004; NAKAMURA, 2009; UENO, 2016; CAMPEOTTO and VIALE, 2017).
- The critical interpretation of modern works of art through the lens of Dewey's aesthetics (mainly in JACKSON, 1998; and MCDERMOTT, 2007).

Dewey's aesthetics, as can be observed in several interpretations, has always been understood in terms of *modernity*. However, there are no comprehensive studies about the possible relationship between pragmatism in general and specifically Dewey's aesthetics, and the history of art. The only partial exception to this could be the original book of Molly Nesbit *The Pragmatism in the History of Art* (2013), which does not in any case provide a satisfactory answer to the following questions. The first one is: even if pragmatist thought, as presented by Nesbit, had a certain influence in the development of modern art research, is there a place for a typically pragmatist history of art? The second one is: looking at Dewey's aesthetics, can we take it as the paradigm for the development of a pragmatist approach to history of art? And finally, the third question: is *Art as Experience* useful for a historical and critical art interpretation of antique works of art, and not merely of modern ones?

In this article, we will attempt to answer these three questions following two steps. Firstly, we will carry out analysis of three late antique works of art, namely the statues of the Four Tetrarchs in Venice (293 a. C.), the Arch of Constantine

2 For a reassessment of the genesis and the development of a systematic aesthetics within Dewey's oeuvre see CAMPEOTTO and VIALE 2018b.

(315 a. C.), and the Sarcophagus of Helena (327 a. C.), using some of Dewey's philosophical key-points developed in *Art as Experience*. We will consider more precisely the crucial concept of *detour* and the analysis of the formal properties of art. Secondly, after showing that Dewey's view of aesthetics can be applied in an art historical context, we will develop the second aim of this article, which is to prove that an approach based on Dewey's aesthetics is more fruitful than the traditional ones (Formalism, Orientalism, Marxism) when it comes to reading the stylistic changes between antique and late antique art.

2 Dewey's concept of detour and the formal analysis of art

Dewey's naturalistic approach to art is clearly exposed from the first pages of *Art as Experience*.³ For the pragmatist philosopher, works of art are not separated from everyday life, but rather they are the result of a process in which the human being is in constant interaction with his environment. We quote *in extenso* some considerations made at the very beginning of the book, which state one of the first aims of Dewey's aesthetics, namely the continuity between art and the normal processes of life:

When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from the association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing and achievement. *A primary task* [of the philosopher] [...] *is to restore continuity*

3 In A passage of *Democracy and Education* (1916) Dewey clarifies his idea of naturalism: "At the outset, the rise of modern science prophesied a restoration of the intimate connection of nature and humanity, for it viewed knowledge of nature as the means of securing human progress and well-being. But the more immediate applications of science were in the interests of a class rather than of men in common; and the received philosophic formulations of scientific doctrine tended either to mark it off as merely material from man as spiritual and immaterial, or else to reduce mind to a subjective illusion. In education, accordingly, the tendency was to treat sciences as a separate body of studies, consisting of technical information about the physical world, and to reserve the older literary studies as distinctively humanistic. The account previously given of the evolution of knowledge, and of the educational scheme of studies based upon it, are designed to overcome the separation, and to secure recognition of the place occupied by the subject matter of the natural sciences in human affairs (*MW* 9: 300). Roberta Dreon judges as "inadequate the label of naturalistic reductionism applied to Dewey's reflection" since for her nature is not a sum of things but it is made by "stories, events, relationships which consolidate themselves [...] within things [...]. The continuous attention to scientific analysis, as it results from the first chapter of *Experience and Nature*, seems actually motivated by the need to emancipate the philosophical reflection from the dualism between experience and nature, to recognize instead the first as a part of the second, rooted in it and emerging from it" (DREON, 2009, p. 35-36. *Our translation from Italian*). In addition, over the same issue we mention a notable work by Robert Innis, who links Dewey's aesthetic naturalism with the philosophy of Samuel Alexander (INNIS, 2017).

between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience (LW 10: 9. Our italics).

Crucial to Dewey's naturalistic approach to aesthetics is his conception of *action*, which examines how the relationship between man and environment occurs. Specifically, about the experience of art-making, Dewey states:

[N]othing takes root in mind when there is no balance between doing and receiving. Some decisive action is needed in order to establish contact with the realities of the world and in order that impressions may be so related to facts that their value is tested and organized [...]. Hand and eye when the experience is esthetic, are but instruments through which the entire live creature, moved and active throughout, operates (LW 10: 52-56).

The work of art is, primarily the work of the artist's intelligence. Following his intelligence, he chooses, selects and organizes the elements of the world according to his point of view and his own experience. Art is not the product of an "idle luxury or transcendent ideality" (LW 10: 52-53) but the intelligent *development* of traits that belong to everyday life experience.⁴ In Dewey's words:

Because perception of relationship between what is done and what is undergone constitutes the work of intelligence, and because the artist is controlled in the process of his work by his grasp of connection between what he has already done and what he is to do next, the idea that the artist does not think as intently and penetratingly as a scientific inquirer is absurd [...] The difference between the pictures of different painters is due quite as much to differences in capacity to carry on this thought as it is differences of sensitivity to bare color and to differences in dexterity of execution [...]. [D]ifference depends [...] more upon the quality of intelligence brought to bear upon perception of relations than upon anything else (LW 10: 52).

According to Dewey, the first step to understand a work of art is to forget about its artistic qualities and come back to the raw and primitive conditions of ordinary experience, which are the base for the development of an aesthetic experience. Dewey calls this operation *detour*.

⁴ We highlight the word "development" since, according to Dewey, the works of art must be intended not as a merely final product but as a process which aims to its fulfillment. Over this point Thomas Alexander states: "At the commencement of an expressive act, self and world hang tensely poised; the field of possibility opens and the need for definite, organized activity, of controlled response is revealed. Action and response, exploration and adjustment, discovery and integration initially display experience as a rhythmic field, hitherto indeterminate, but insistently pointing toward a determinate, organized, individual experience" (ALEXANDER, 1987, p. 234).

In order to understand the meaning of artistic products, we have to forget them for a time, to turn aside from them and have recourse to the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as esthetic. We must arrive at the theory of art by means of a detour [...] In order to *understand* the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of the man, arousing his interest and affording his enjoyment as he looks and listens (LW10: 10).

For the author of *Democracy and Education*, to perceive a work of art and grasp its aesthetic nature is an operation different from mere recognition. This activity involves, in the same way and with the same intensity, both the author and the beholder of the work of art.

It is not easy in the case of the perceiver and appreciator to understand the intimate union of doing and undergoing as it is in the case of the maker [...]. [Perception] involves activities that are comparable to those of the creator. But receptivity is not passivity. It, too, is a process consisting of a series of responsive acts that accumulate toward objective fulfillment [...]. The difference between the two is immense (LW10: 58).

The linkage between the artist's and the beholder's experiences is highlighted throughout *Art as Experience*. To perceive a work of art, the beholder needs, on the one hand, an act of recreation, which means a process of organization of the elements of the object like the one of the artist. About this point, Dewey says: "a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent" (LW10: 60). Without this act of recreation, the object cannot be perceived as a work of art. On the other hand, the same artist should embody the attitude of the beholder to give aesthetic qualities to his work. In Dewey's words:

The doing or making is artistic when the perceived result is of such nature that *its* qualities *as perceived* have controlled the question of production. The act of producing that is directed by intent to produce something that is enjoyed in the immediate experience of perceiving has qualities that a spontaneous or uncontrolled activity does not have. The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works (LW10: 55).

It is known that Dewey built his theory following mainly the artistic taste and suggestions of his friend Albert C. Barnes, who played a central role in putting aesthetics at the core of Dewey's philosophy.⁵ These focused mostly on modern art,

5 The importance of A. C. Barnes's thought in the formation of Dewey's aesthetics is a topic that so far has received less attention than it deserves. Over this peculiar issue see: SMITH, 1971; DENNIS, 1972; HEIN, 2011 and 2017; UENO, 2016 (chapter 6); CAMPEOTTO and VIALE, 2017; 2018b.

where the relationship between the artist-creator and the beholder-enjoyer is closer and nearer. By contrast, when we speak about ancient art, we must necessarily consider a third component, namely the patron, whose experience had an influence in art making as strong as the ones of the artist and the beholder.⁶

Since it seems impossible to recapture exactly the experience underlying the creation of a work of art, the scholar needs to select all the historical, cultural, political and social elements that might have played a part in the relationship between human being and environment. This is, at once, the relation between doing and undergoing. In other words, the scholar needs to make a *detour*, from the work itself, i.e. the aesthetic experience, to the environment, i.e. the ordinary experience. By doing this, he is trying to underline the three primary components of experience (artist, beholder and patron), wherever possible.

Two passages of *Art as Experience* are critical to understanding Dewey's conception of *detour*. In the first one, Dewey tries to undermine the traditional conception that architecture is not representative:

Architecture is not representative if we understand by that term reproduction of natural forms for the sake of their reproduction [...] But architecture does more than merely utilize natural forms, arches, pillars, cylinders, rectangles, portions of spheres. It expresses their characteristic effect upon the observer. Just what a building would be which did not use and represent natural energies of gravity, stress, thrust, and so on, must be left to those to explain who regard architecture as non-representative. But architecture does combine representation to these qualities of matter and energy. It also expresses enduring values of collective human life. It 'represents' the memories, hopes, fears, purposes, and sacred values of those who build in order to shelter a family, provide an altar for the gods, establish a place in which to make laws, or set up a stronghold against attacks. Just why building are called palaces, castles, homes, city-halls, forums, is a mystery if architecture is not supremely expressive of human interests and values. Apart from cerebral reveries, it is self-evident that every important structure is a treasury of storied memories and a monumental registering of cherished expectancies for the future (*LW* 10: 225-226).

Meanwhile, the following passage is one of the few examples in which Dewey speaks about works of ancient art. The philosopher, in fact, mentions the aesthetic qualities of the Parthenon and shows, at the same time, how to manage a *detour*:

6 Not many scholars addressed systematically the issue of the artistic patronage and its influence over art-making before the XIX Century. A significant contribution is the book of Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (1988 [1972]), whose critical approach focused on "the practices of daily life (school, churches, marketplaces)" of the beholders (p. 318) and the capacity of the patrons to be the "medium" of the artists (p. 40).

By common consent, the Parthenon is a great work of art. Yet it has esthetic standing only as the work becomes an experience for a human being. And, if one is to go beyond personal enjoyment into the formation of a theory about that large republic of art of which the building is one member, one has to be willing at some point in his reflections to turn from it to the bustling, arguing acutely sensitive Athenian citizens, with civic sense identified with a civic religion, of whose experience the temple was an expression, and who built it not as a work of art but as a civic commemoration. The turning to them as human beings who had needs that were carried to fulfillment in it; it is not an examination such as might be carried on by a sociologist in search of material relevant to his purpose. The one who sets out to theorize about the esthetic experience embodied in the Parthenon must realize in thought what the people into whose lives it entered has in common, as creators and as those who were satisfied with it, with people in our own homes and our own streets (*LW* 10: 10).

Beyond the “memories, fears, purposes and values” of everyday experience, which revolve around the work of art and which the work of art embodies, there is another component, internal to the artistic language, which Dewey analyzes in his theory of art: the formal properties of art.

This part of Dewey's theory has often been interpreted as close to European formalism or as a return to his old idealistic roots (see, for example, “The Pepper-Croce Thesis” in: ALEXANDER, 1987, p. 1-14). As noticed by David Granger, this side of his aesthetics is indeed the most influenced by Barnes' thought, especially by his reading of the English critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry.⁷

Those parts of *Art as Experience* that develop themes introduced previously in *Experience and Nature* could likely have been written even if Dewey had never met Barnes. But the detailed commentary on the formal properties of the plastic arts and different art media, especially in relation to specific pieces of painting and sculpture, were very likely dependent on Barnes's expertise (GRANGER, 2007, p. 54).

From a Deweyan perspective, artistic forms, materials and techniques are also the result of the continuous interaction between the living creature and the environment.

7 About the influence of Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's theories in Barnes and Dewey see also McWhinnie, 1987. Though it is possible to find a certain influence of Bell and Fry over Barnes' and Dewey's aesthetics, there are several passages in both American authors that show an attempt to overcome the esthetic conceptions of the two English formalists. Dewey, who tells Barnes in a letter that he had read Bell's work (See *The Correspondence of John Dewey*, Vol. 2, N: 04283, 1931.02.20, John Dewey to Albert C. Barnes), is critical of Fry's conception of the non-relevance of the subject-matter in visual arts (*LW* 10: 94-97). Barnes, in an article published in 1940, says that Bell's theory of “significant form” (see BELL, 1916; FRY, 1920) places too much emphasis on the emotional component of art and ends up considering emotion as “something that has no connection with intelligence and cannot have been justified either” (BARNES, 1940, p. 90).

In other words, they are also part of the intimate relationship between doing and undergoing. Speaking about techniques, Dewey states: “Significant advances in technique occur [...] in connection with efforts to solve problems that are not technical but that grow out of the need of new modes of experience” (LW10: 146). While linking forms, materials and techniques, the American philosopher speaks again in similar terms:

If form emerges when raw materials are selectively arranged with reference to rendering an experience unified in movement to its intrinsic fulfillment, then surely objective conditions are controlling forces in the production of a work of art. A work of fine art, a statue, building, drama, poem, novel, when done, is as much a part of the objective world as it is a locomotive or a dynamo. And, as much as the latter, its existence is causally conditioned by the coordination of materials and energies of the external world [...]. Interaction of environment with the organism is the source, direct or indirect, of all experience and from environment come those checks, resistances, furtherances, equilibria, which, when they meet with the energies of the organism in appropriate ways, constitute form. (LW 10: 151-152).

If, in his theorization of the *detour*, the philosopher suggests quitting from the work itself and looking over the ground of ordinary experience, now Dewey proposes to examine the formal aspects of art and consider the correspondences between what is outside the work and its internal, constitutive and formal elements. For the philosopher, the subject matter and the form of art are indissolubly linked.

In summary, for Dewey, any work of art is the result of the doing and undergoing between man and environment. The artist procedurally organizes the elements of art and its forms according to his intelligence. To understand the meaning of a work of art we must learn, in Barnes’ words, “to see as the artist sees” (BARNES, 1925, p. 7), in such a way as to reconstruct first, the “memories, fears, purposes and values” of the raw experience and then, their formal arrangement in the very process of art-making.

An art work for Dewey, as distinguished from the material art product is, as he outlines in a pivotal chapter on the ‘Organization of Energies’ [...] a framed, that is, organized, and realized field of energies of various sorts encountered in particular objects. In this sense, it is distinctive kind of form or thematic unity. For Dewey, the art work is defined by, or constituted by, the ‘work’ the material (in whatever medium) art product does in experience, by the types of meaning-experiences it gives rise to, including experiences of recollection and stretching toward the future (INNIS, 2016, p. 23).

3 Three works of art from the Late Antiquity

The statues of the four Tetrarchs (293), exposed in San Marco Square in Venice, show one of the first bold breaks with the classical tradition of Roman statue making

(fig. 1). It is a sculptural group which portrays four images of emperors dressed in the same garments and with very similar features. Each one of the four figures are placing one hand over the peer's shoulder, while the other hand holds a sword, whose handle is decorated with an eagle-head motive.



Figure 1:

The Four Tetrarchs, Egyptian red porphyry, end of the III Century.
Venice, St. Mark's Square.⁸

The monument had a public value and was financed by the emperor Diocletian, the official patron, (284-305) to celebrate his new arrangement of the Empire called Tetrarchy (286-313).

If we analyze the socio-historical circumstances in which the work of art was made, we find a context that was not favorable to the imperial authority. Moreover, at the time of the Diocletian's reform, the memory of the recent disastrous reign of Valerian (approx. 193-260) must have been very vivid among the population. As reported by the historian Zosimus, Valerian was defeated by the Persians during a military campaign, kidnapped and publicly executed by the enemy (*Zos. Hist. Nov.*, I, 36, 2). This disgraceful event had thus a strong impact over the Roman population, provoking a sharp downturn of the imperial prestige and authority.

8 Photo: REES, Roger. "Images and Image: a re-examination of Tetrarchy Iconography", *Greece and Rome*, v. 40, n. 2, Pl. 2, 1993.

Among the new measures of Diocletian, there was the full restoration of the lost authority of the emperor through his deification, following the example of the Persian monarchy (see, for example, his despotic and arrogant attitude towards the population, mainly towards the Christian minority).⁹

These historical facts, which constitute the main environment of the artistic experience, are needed to understand the formal choices of the artists. First, we have to take into consideration the “raw material”, speaking in Dewey’s terms, chosen for the four statues. This is another crucial point of his theory that deserves to be considered:

With respect to the physical materials that enter into the formation of a work of art, everyone knows that they must undergo change. Marble must be chipped; pigments must be laid on canvas; words must be put together. It is not generally recognized that a similar transformation takes place in the side of ‘inner’ materials, images, observations, memories and emotions. They are also progressively re-formed; they too must be administered. This modification is the building up of truly expressive act [...]. Nor are there in fact two operations, one performed upon the outer material and the other upon the inner and mental stuff. The work is artistic in the degree in which the two functions of transformation are affected by a single operation. As the painter places pigment upon the canvas [...] his ideas and feelings are also ordered (*LW* 10: 81).

Since “the sculptor conceives his statue, not just in mental terms but in those of clay, marble or bronze” (*LW* 10: 81), the material used for the Tetrarchs gives us plenty of information about the inner qualities that the artists wanted to convey through their work. The material, in fact, is red porphyry, considered by that time, the most precious kind of marble and strictly reserved for the image of the emperor due to its chromatic resemblance with the purpura of the imperial robe and the divine garments. This element could be taken to highlight the desire of the patron to emphasize the sacred value of the representation.

Looking at the forms of representation, even the less trained eye can recognize the use of a schematic and anti-naturalistic language, that looks antithetical if compared to the early Roman imperial portraits. The four figures show particularly stylized and sketchy forms; their faces display the almost total renounce of face reading characterization and their pose looks mechanical. To grasp the nature of these artistic features we need to go back to our previous considerations: the four hieratic, fully spiritualized portraits mark a new distance between the sovereign and the subjects, through an artistic language that gets free inspiration from Persian and Middle Eastern cultures. Several iconographic elements, in fact, suggest a recasting of Persian models, like the now lost gems, originally used for the eye pupils, or the eagle-head handles of the swords.¹⁰

9 Ancient testimonies, like Aurelius Victor, describe Diocletian as an arrogant and despotic Persian king (*Ps.-Aur. Vic., epit.* 39, 2).

10 About the display in the sculptural group of Persian iconographic details see Zevi, 1966.

The second monument of this study is the well-known arch of Constantine in Rome (fig. 2). Built around the year 315, it was financed by the Roman Senate to celebrate the ten-year reign of the first Christian emperor in history. One of the main singularities of the arch is that most of its sculptures aren't original pieces of the IV Century, but belong to older monuments of Trajan (98-117), Hadrian (117-138) and Marcus Aurelius (161-180) (fig. 3). This peculiarity makes the arch of Constantine the first case of the reuse of antique *spolia* throughout Romanity.

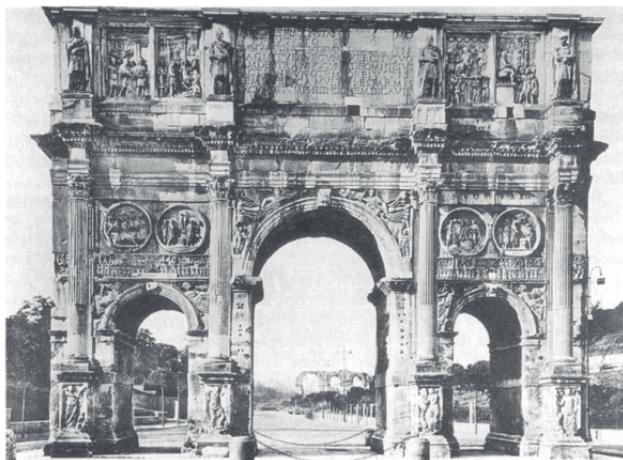


Figure 2: *Arch de Constantine*, mixed material, 315 a. C., Rome.¹¹

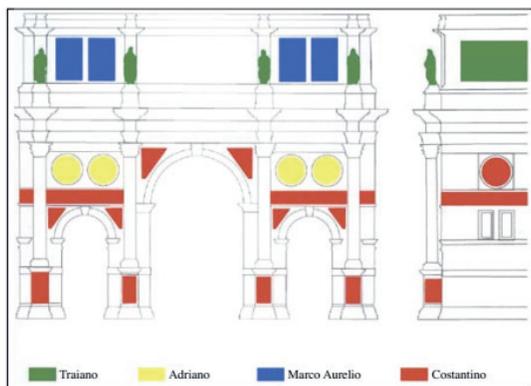


Figure 3: *Arch of Constantine*, dating of the reliefs.¹²

- 11 Photo: PEIRCE, Philip. "The Arch of Constantine: Propaganda and Ideology in Late Roman Art", *Art History*, v. 12, n. 4, f. 1, 1989.
- 12 Photo: SENA CHIESA, Gemma, "Ipsa Spolia Docent", *Antichità Altoadriatiche*, v. 74, f. 1, 2012.

Only six panels belong to the IV Century and display the most important moments of the civil war between Constantine and his western rival Maxentius (278-312) during the year 312. Constantine's victory had an absolute historical value since it marked a definite end to the tetrarchic experience in the Western half of the Empire. The cycle starts from the western side-wall with a panel representing the Constantinian army getting out from Milan (fig. 4), the old tetrarchic capital of the Western Empire. The sequence follows with two reliefs on the southern front of the monument: the first one represents the siege of Verona (fig. 5) and the second shows the main episode of all the cycle, the famous Battle of Milvian Bridge (fig. 6). On the eastern-side wall we can see the representation of the army's triumphal parade in Rome (fig. 7), actually the last narrative panel of the cycle. The last two scenes displayed on the northern front, the *Adlocutio* (fig. 8) and the *Congiarium* (fig. 9), are in fact merely representative.



Figure 4: *Arch of Constantine*, Departure of Constantine's army from Milan, Western wall.¹³

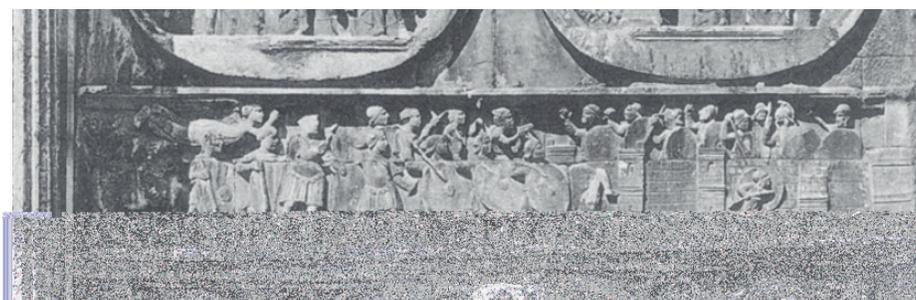


Figure 5: *Arch of Constantine*, Siege of Verona, Southern wall. Photo: PEIRCE 1989, f. 9.

13 Photo: PEIRCE, 1989, f. 20.



Figure 6: *Arch of Constantine*, The Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Southern wall.¹⁴



Figure 7: *Arch of Constantine*, Parade of Constantine's troops in Rome, Eastern wall.¹⁵



Figure 8: *Arch of Constantine*, Adlocutio, Northern wall.¹⁶

14 Photo: PEIRCE, 1989, f. 10

15 Photo: PEIRCE, 1989, f. 19.

16 Photo: ELSNER, 2007, f. 1.2.



Figure 9: *Arch of Constantine*, Congiarium, Northern wall.¹⁷

As seen before with the Tetrarchs of Venice, the historical background is again fundamental to grasp the significance of the work of art and the choices made by the artists. To understand the genesis of the work of art and the artistic choices, made especially in the six panels of the IV Century, we need to understand the complex relationship between the Roman Senate, that represented the feelings of the gentry, and a “popular” emperor like Constantine. This relationship has been excellently reconstructed by the German art historian Richard Krautheimer.

If, on the one hand, Constantine was the first emperor to embrace Christianity at the expense of the old gods, on the other hand, he never renounced to his divine glorification, following his forerunners, the Tetrarchs. He was, at once, the first emperor to give up the pagan sacrificial ritual in the Capitoline temple of Jupiter. Nevertheless, the construction of Christian buildings, which he funded throughout his reign, always occupied private lands far away from the pagan worship centers. In other words, despite his conversion, Constantine was primarily an intermediary between two cultures, the traditional paganism shared mostly among the powerful gentry, and Christianity which spread among the more popular classes. According to Krautheimer, despite his truthful Christian faith, Constantine “tried to be, if not even handed, at least not openly anti-pagan, and perhaps he was never as rabidly so as Eusebius would have us believe” (KRAUTHEIMER, 1983, p. 36).

The success of the Constantinian politics, particularly his skill to guarantee social peace between the two major religious and social factions, is reflected in the choice of lumping together original sculptures of the IV Century and older classical reliefs of the II Century. The last ones, in fact, belonged to three of the so called “good emperors”, Adrianus, Trajan and Marcus Aurelius.¹⁸ It seems clear that the Senate’s intention was to pay tribute to Constantine’s good action.

Nonetheless, there is another reason which accounts for the juxtaposition of sculptures of different periods. This can be explained looking at the stylistic choices. The explicit difference between the IV Century reliefs and the older ones aims to make clear that the new “golden age” was developing with a different sensitivity, that looked much more towards the culture of the middle-lower classes. It can be read, in other words, as a positive response of the Roman gentry to the prudent and wise politics of the emperor. The Senate, rather than flaunting an artistic vocabulary

¹⁷ Photo: PEIRCE, 1989, f. 8.

¹⁸ The phrase “good emperors” was originally coined by Edward Gibbon in the first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in relation to the reign of Nerva, Hadrian, Trajan, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius (96-180). Gibbon defines this epoch as “the period in the history of the world, during which the conditions of the human race [were] most happy and prosperous” (GIBBON, 1837, p. 43).

rooted in its greco-hellenistic culture, chose an openly “popular” style which clearly stressed the close relationship between the emperor and the middle-lower classes.

A typically plebeian design is evident particularly in the last two panels (figs. 8-9), characterized by the strong frontality of the figures, their symmetrical distribution, a general bidimensional rendering, the lack of a naturalistic perspective and the use of a purely symbolic one. The figure of the emperor is easily recognizable, due to his bigger dimensions, in all the panels of the Arch, except in the one of the *adlocutio*. There, Constantine is surrounded by the members of the Senate, all of them with the same dimensions and proportions as the emperor himself. According to Paul Zanker, this particular choice means that the Senate used to consider Constantine not as god but as a *princeps inter pares* (ZANKER, 2012, p. 48-55).

The following panel, finally, pays tribute to the popular essence of Constantine's power. The ritual of the *congiarium*, in which the emperor generously distributed coins and goods among the population, is represented here, inside the popular building par excellence: the circus.¹⁹

In summary, the nature of the artistic experience of the arch of Constantine can be explained in three points. Firstly, it shows a persistent glorification of the imperial authority, but in a smaller measure than the very mystic figures of the Tetrarchs. Secondly, the reliefs portray the support of the Roman Senate to the emperor, celebrated as a new Trajan but, at the same time, considered almost as a political peer. Finally, we must notice the choice of an artistic language typically popular, so evident in the forms of representation and in the iconographical options of the last panel, to underline the political (but not religious) closeness between the emperor and the popular classes.

The last work of art that we will analyze is the Sarcophagus of Helena (fig. 10). This is a controversial artifact for several reasons. Firstly, for its conservative style, which seems closer to the art of the early Empire than to the anticlassical tendency prevalent during the III and IV Centuries. Secondly, for the difficulties found in the reconstruction of the history of the monument and the relations between the patronage and the beholders.

19 A study of Claudia Pannestri shows that the representation of the *congiarium* was quite a common theme in the coins of the Imperial Age. Nevertheless, its representation in the circus is a hallmark of the IV Century. The circus, in fact, wanted to highlight two of the most important privileges obtained by the Roman *plebs*: the free access to the games and the public distribution of goods during them. (PANNESTRÌ, 1989, p 313-315).

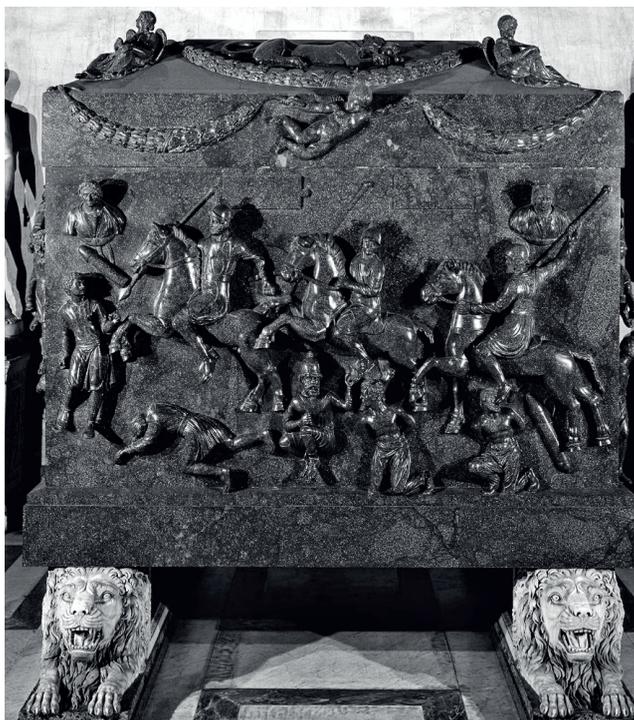


Figure 10:

Sarcophagus of Helena, Egyptian red porphyry, 327 a. C. Rome, Vatican Museums.²⁰

The monument has usually been bound to Saint Helena, mother of Constantine, who died in 327. This fact suggests a dating of the sarcophagus around the second decade of the IV Century. She was then buried in a mausoleum on the *Via Labicana*, in the Roman suburbia.²¹

The decoration shows, on the four sides, military scenes between Roman soldiers and barbarians and the material chosen is again red porphyry. According to Jas Elsner, both the main theme and the style of the representation look very close to the reliefs of the Antonine Column in Rome. If compared with the almost contemporaneous *adlocutio* reliefs in the arch of Constantine, the sculptures of the sarcophagus are intensely classical (ELSNER, 2007, p. 17).

Two questions automatically arise. The first one is: why was a military theme used for a Christian dead woman? The second one is: why was a classical style adopted for a IV Century work?

The first question can be answered following Mario Erasmo's hypothesis: it

20 Photo: VASILIEV, Alexander A. (1948), "Imperial Porphyry Sarcophagi in Constantinople", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, v. 4, f. 18, 1948.

21 The historical reconstruction of Saint Helena's biography and the genesis of the monument is mainly taken from a study by Mark J. Johnson (1992).

is possible that the original patron was Constantine himself. His mother's death coincided with the foundational date of the "New Rome": Constantinople. We can assume that, already in that date, the emperor could have decided to be buried in the new capital and left the sarcophagus to his mother (ERASMO, 2012, p. 53).

The answer to the second question can be found by looking at the aesthetic experience of the patron and his relationship with his environment. The sarcophagus was not a public artifact, it didn't convey a socio-political message that had to be understood by the whole population, like the two works analyzed above. It was an almost strictly private work of art, which reflected the personal taste of the patron, no matter if it was Constantine or his mother. Here the patron matches the beholder: it was the imperial family.

4 Conclusions: Dewey among Art Historians

We have analyzed three works of art of the same period (end of the III-beginning of the IV Century) following two of the main claims of Dewey's aesthetics: on the one hand, the concept of *detour*, that emphasizes the socio—cultural background of an art production; and on the other hand, the analysis of forms, whose roots are found in Albert C. Barnes' thought, and which deals mainly with the intrinsic elements of the artistic language.

Finally, we want to demonstrate the richness of the Deweyan conceptions if compared with the three main lines of study of late antique art (Formalism, Orientalism, and Marxism). What we aim to prove specifically is that Dewey's theories can overcome the tendency to reductionism of the other art historical lines.

The Formalism of Alois Riegl and the Vienna School reads the artistic changes between the III and the IV Centuries as the product of a new artistic will or, in the words of Otto Pächt "aesthetic urge", called *Kunstwollen* (PÄCHT, 1963, p. 191). A formalist approach is suitable when studying the formal and stylistic properties of the work of art, but it completely leaves aside the environment of art production. These limits of Riegl's conception have been acknowledged, from inside Formalism itself, by Pächt: "Riegl's objective was to refute or minimize the influence of all external factors so that stylistic changes could be explained in terms of an internal or organic evolution, as a relatively autonomous development" (PÄCHT, 1963, p. 189). Furthermore, Pächt criticized the concept of *Kunstwollen*, in terms that could have been well used by Dewey or Barnes:

Kunstwollen is an abstract concept put on legs and then, by a distinctly animistic procedure, endowed with a growth, imagined to be developing like other equally suspect collective personalities such as 'the spirit of an age' or the 'artistic genius of a nation.' All of these, we are told, are anthropomorphisms which are typical of pre-scientific mythological habits of mind and therefore, dangerous (PÄCHT, 1963, p. 192).

The concept of *Kunstwollen* fits the criticism that Barnes makes about certain theories of art which are "pre-eminently an affair of the emotions, engendered by the emotion in the artist and valuable in proportion to its efficiency to excite emotion in the observer". According to the famous art collector, only experience, "the type

of adjustment made possible by science, has been pre-eminently valuable because it has brought: the living being into a more intimate contact with his physical world, enabled him to lay hold with the realities actually there, instead of attempting to cope with mythological entities by magical means” (BARNES, 1940, p. 91).

This lack of interest in the aspects that surround the objects of art caused Riegl himself to date the sarcophagus of Helena at the II Century, only according to its style.

The orientalist line, developed from Josef Strzygowski's book *Orient oder Rom* (1901), reduces the artistic changes as the migration of cultural elements from the extreme Eastern provinces of the Empire, or from regions outside the Roman dominions, to the heart of the Empire. This approach is appropriate when it comes to the study of artifacts like the statues of the Tetrarchs, in which an oriental influence can be successfully traced. Instead, it turns out to be less effective with works such as the Arch of Constantine, which reflects feelings and hopes strongly linked to the Capital and its people.

The third line follows the thought of Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, an Italian archaeologist and art historian who interprets the artistic changes following a Marxist approach, so stressing the social movements of the III and the IV Centuries. For Bianchi Bandinelli, late antique art is the product of the growing influence of the so called “plebeian art”, a style which always existed outside of the classic official one (BIANCHI BANDINELLI, 1967). Starting from the III Century and following the growing importance of the *plebs* inside Roman society, the lower style came to replace the higher one in official works of art. This theory is fruitful when studying monuments as the Arch of Constantine, where there is an evident will of the Roman gentry to reach a kind of popular sensibility. This line would not seem to be the most suitable to analyze the four Tetrarchs, which instead displays a clear intention to create a deep split between the holy figure of the emperor and the rest of the population. This Marxist line would not be applicable either to the analysis of the sarcophagus of Helena, where the classic style reflects the conservative personal taste of the imperial family.

In conclusion, this work demonstrates that a historical and critical art approach based on Dewey's aesthetics can be successfully used for the interpretation of antique works of art and not only modern ones. In addition, we put Dewey's ideas at the center of the debate over late antique art. We have shown that his pragmatist approach, based on the key-points of the *detour* and formal analysis of art, is more fruitful than traditional historical art lines when it comes to tracing the origins of the stylistic choices made by the artists.

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