The Column and the Pediment: The Persistence of Values?

Areti Adamopoulou

University of Ioannina, Greece, aadamo@uoi.gr

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas

Part of the History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons

Recommended Citation


This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the CC-BY-NC-SA license.
I wish to thank Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Léa Saint-Raymond for encouraging me to publish this text. I am also grateful to Michael Fotiadis, Matina Geivanidou, Andreas Giakoumakatos, Elena Katerini, Titina Kornezou, Nancy Kyriakou, Petros Martinidis, and Evangelia Tsangaraki, for discussing with me various aspects of its content.
The Column and the Pediment: The Persistence of Values?

Areti Adamopoulou
University of Ioannina

Abstract
There is one icon dispersed worldwide and historically associated with higher values: the façade of a columnated building capped by a pediment. This simple vertical, horizontal, and triangular formation runs through the ages and is firmly associated with values and ideas stemming from Europe. It survived centuries of use and abuse, and served revolutions, nation-states, democracies, colonialism, totalitarian regimes, and commercial culture. It even reached the world of computer graphic symbols and still inspires artists. In this paper, I discuss this icon in terms of its diffusion and persistency and comment upon its link to Europe.

Résumé
Il existe une icône répandue dans le monde entier qui est historiquement associée à des valeurs supérieures, venues d’Europe: il s’agit de la façade d’un édifice à colonnes coiffé d’un fronton. Cette simple formation a survécu à des siècles d’usage et d’abus; elle a été mise au service des révolutions, des États-nations, des démocraties, mais aussi du colonialisme, des régimes totalitaires et de la culture commerciale. Elle a même atteint le monde des symboles graphiques en informatique et inspire toujours les artistes. Dans cet article, j’examine la diffusion et la persistance de cette icône et je commente ses liens avec l’Europe.

Areti Adamopoulou is Professor of Art History at the University of Ioannina, Greece. Her publications, in Greek and English, focus on post-1945 art and national identity, Cold War exhibitions and public diplomacy, art history’s history, contemporary art, and the art market.
“It is still deemed civilized to believe in European civilization.”

Images and symbols of the past follow us incessantly in Europe. I thought about this when a spate of political cartoons appeared in the press and media illustrating the dire condition caused by the Greek debt crisis of the 2010s and commenting on its handling by and impact on the European Union. Most cartoonists used façades of ancient temples, especially the Parthenon (Fig. 1, a-b). The references to ancient Greek art were expected, since the image of an ancient temple is stereotypically linked to Greek culture, and still follows (though not without debate) the modern Greek state. Classical architecture is, after all, a global trademark of fifth-century BCE Athenian culture and its values. But weren’t the cartoonists’ tumbles of ancient buildings also an allusion to the precariousness of a united Europe, now threatened by the chances of a messy “Grexit”? And would not, in that case, the notion of a common European cultural heritage rooted in classical Greece be called into question? Starting from this, I began searching for images that, by virtue of their historical associations, would, more or less straightforwardly, point to Europe and its cultures.

But we must backtrack a little. The notion of a common European culture gained prominence after 1945 when political necessities called for a unification of Western Europe. It was then that “for the first time in history the idea of Europe was institutionalised in a political framework.” In that frame, important efforts were made to develop narratives about a common cultural heritage. Such narratives were to forge a common present and future for Europe (but remember that the term at the time included only half of the continent). In the 1950s politicians, scholars and diplomats strived to define what was “European” about “European” culture. Vaguely described principles could be traced, but specific qualities could only be found in the eyes of “Others”.

Although a common “European culture” (or, more accurately, a Western European culture) eluded definition, its promotion was one of the priorities of the Council of Europe, an institution founded in 1949. All of the Council’s actions, especially in the early Cold War period, concentrated on that aim. Writing in 1957 for a report commissioned by the Council, the Swiss philosopher and writer, Denis de Rougemont (1906‒1985), a fervent supporter of the idea of a unified Europe, formulated this quest insightfully:

> it is only necessary to go away from Europe, in any direction, to feel the reality of our cultural unity.

In the United States already, in the Soviet Union

---

4 For a geopolitical contextualization of de Rougemont body of work and of his ideas about a European Union see: Mary Jo Deering, *Combats acharnés: Denis de Rougemont et les fondements de l’unité européenne* (Lausanne: Fondation Jean Monnet pour l’Europe; Centre de recherches européennes, 1991).
without hesitation, and in Asia beyond all possible doubt, Frenchmen and Greeks, Englishmen and Swiss, Swedes and Castilians are seen as Europeans. There must be some reason for this and looking at it from all sides, I can see no better reason than this celebrated community of culture which so easily escapes our definitions, but it is so difficult to conceal from other peoples.⁵

The emphasis on culture and on community is a recurrent theme in texts from the 1950s and 1960s. One statement, popular in the 1980s, at least among French politicians, was a phrase attributed to Jean Monnet (1888‒1979), one of the founding fathers of the European Union. With regard to the project of European integration, Monnet allegedly proclaimed: “If we were to do it all over again, we would start with culture.”⁶ Even if Monnet never uttered the exact phrase, its subsequent popularity speaks volumes about the importance of culture and values in post-1945 Europe. Politicians today still adopt the same “airplane” view, as they argue about European integration. In 2013 Joachim Gauck, the German President (2012‒2017), cited the above passage by de Rougemont in his speech on the future of the European Idea in the Bellevue Forum and added a contemporary anecdote:

Some young guests visiting Bellevue recently confirmed to me something that is probably familiar to many in this room: ‘When we are out in the big, wide world, we feel European. When we are in Europe, we feel German. And when we are in Germany, we think of ourselves as Saxon or from Hamburg.’⁷

Perhaps in recent times, Europeans have perceived their collective cultural identity in the same way the founding fathers of the EU did.

Since 1954 the Council’s art exhibitions promoted narratives of each “Western” country’s contribution to a common “European” culture, with former “Eastern” European countries being included in the exhibitions after 1991. Although “influences”, “loans” and “local adaptations” or “versions” were detected in the early Cold War exhibitions, each hosting country favoured the presentation of its own cultural heritage. Perhaps Western Europeans could not present themselves as seen through the eyes of “Others”. Or perhaps the desired common elements were perceived in different ways by each country’s national imagination. The “airplane view” of Europe, through which the founders of the EU could trace cultural unity, was never highlighted in exhibition narratives. After all, the larger portion of art history was—and still is—about national or regional production. As a European art historian, it is easier for me to trace and understand the time- and site-specific elements of images produced in different parts of Europe than to see the larger picture de Rougemont and others argued for. After centuries of analysing paintings, sculptures, and buildings through the lenses of national art histories, is it possible to detect visual elements that are common, that the “Others” perceive as “European”, to escape local trends and characteristics and highlight the “brand” images of “European” culture?

Such questions raise complex issues with long, convoluted histories. They need to be more narrowly focused before they can serve historical research. For example, one might ask whether national stylistic or thematic preferences contrast with broader European ones. The British sociologist Gerard Delanty disagrees with the current EU’s motto, “unity in diversity,” arguing instead that “the specificity of the European dimension of culture is in the entanglement of [national] cultures.”⁸ In his opinion, cultural plurality should not be mistaken for multiple divisions. Nor are national narratives to be pushed aside. They are rather the best way to understand the “European.”

What image or icon could, then, be unequivocally recognised as “European” around the globe? Europa,

---

⁶ Monica Sassatelli, Becoming Europeans (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 46.
the Phoenician maiden riding Zeus transformed as a bull, is a telling symbol, a myth connected with the very name of the continent, an iconographic type that still appeals to artists. Benevolent and malevolent gods, semi-gods, and heroes can also be suitable candidates. They were common elements of European cultures, both in myths and iconography, long before the homogenization that mass media and pop culture brought along. But there is one figure dispersed worldwide and historically associated with Europe: the façade of a columnated building capped by a pediment. This simple vertical, horizontal, and triangular formation runs throughout the historical period and is firmly associated with values and ideas stemming from Europe. Its symbolic power for European cultures exceeds by far any single element of the various stylistic –manias (e.g., Egyptomania, Cretomania) that have seized the continent at different times. The interesting point is that, unlike other icons appropriated from past cultures, the column-and-pediment façade acquired both positive and negative associations, a point to which I shall return below. After all, its near-global distribution is an effect of Europe’s colonial practices from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.10

The Successive Uses of the Column and the Pediment in European Architecture

The column and the pediment icon originated in early Greek architecture, as the façade of Archaic temples (c. 700-480 BCE). However, it gained reputation in its classical, refined versions. The most familiar example is no doubt the Athenian Parthenon (447–432 BCE). Visualizing the metron in geometric proportions, the classical temple was closer to a sculptural creation than to architecture. Aesthetically it was the product of philosophical principles, while politically it was linked to the ethos of the autonomous, democratic city-states.11 Gradually, all the important public buildings in Agoras (fora) acquired a columnated façade culminating in a triangular pediment.12 The Hellenistic rulers disseminated this fashion throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and Egypt.13 The vertical-horizontal-triangular composition became the rule in Hellenistic kingdoms and, thus, a common setting of everyday life in Eastern Mediterranean cities. Its connection with divinity, fair civic rule, justice, and morality, virtues a citizen ought to respect and pursue, became commonplace. Moreover, in the same period, a connection of the composition with honouring the dead was forged through its use for façades in rich burials, the Macedonian tombs.14 Erecting temple-like buildings for heroized members of the society became common practice for several centuries thereafter (Fig. 2a).

through the Greek colonies in South Italy and Sicily. They adopted the column-and-pediment façade and applied it to almost every public building. As the Empire in its zenith extended from Britain to North Africa and from Iberia to Mesopotamia, Roman architecture spread throughout the European continent and beyond (Fig. 2b), becoming the first pan-European style in architectural design and masonry. The emperors realized the power of symbolism in art and concerned themselves with the messages they conveyed to their subjects.²⁵ Strength and sovereignty, piety and order were among the values that were to be revered, along with all the positive values conveyed by classical philosophy, science and art.²⁶ Architecture was to convey such principles, and the column-and-pediment façade, already an established form in the public domain, proved essential in such efforts.

Hellenistic and Roman rulers may have strengthened their authority by patronizing the arts, but the practice also had side-effects. A dominant style, supposed to convey higher values, can also be a symbol of oppression and subjugation. Local elites emulated the iconography and style of the conquerors, thereby stressing their affiliation with power, but what would a peasant, a merchant, or the man of letters feel when viewing a pedimental façade in Egypt, Persia, Britain, or Iberia? Riots were not rare in antiquity and symbols of power were the first to be destroyed by angry crowds in such circumstances. Consider also the extensive destruction of ancient temples after Christianity prevailed as a state religion in the fifth century CE.²⁷

The use of the column-and-pediment composition became universal in the Roman Empire, and its link to positive cultural values was firmly established. However, as it transformed into a symbol legitimizing political and military power and subjugation, several additional interpretations came along. In short, the figure began its multifaceted career as a polysemous symbol in antiquity and has retained aspects of its power since. With each new appropriation, however, its connection to the culture that generated it became weaker, as new symbolisms amalgamated with, or overshadowed, those of the Greco-Roman prototypes (see below).

Since the Middle Ages, every “European” “Renaissance” referred passionately to Greco-Roman antiquity.\(^\text{18}\) The most famous of them, the Italian Renaissance, revisited not only values, modes of thought, poetic and philosophical texts, but also art and aesthetics. Especially in architecture, the ancient proportions and rhythms were studied in detail, through close observation of the ancient monuments of Rome. A new design vocabulary *all’antica* developed, in which harmony and simplicity of proportions reigned, while arches, vaults, domes and many classical sculptural motifs (e.g., anthemia, acanthus leaves, bead and reel or egg and dart bands, meanders) decorated secular and religious buildings.\(^\text{19}\) The column-and-pediment form made a triumphant re-entry, was much admired and reproduced, both in modelling façades and as an ornamental element framing openings and adorning the top of architectural features. It spread from Italy to the North and, by the sixteenth century, it dominated Europe for the second time in history. In marked difference with the past, its use was now embraced by the church as well. A Christian temple that looked like a pagan one indicated a significant turn in the European spirit after the Middle Ages. The reverence for antique ruins and the direct reference to their aesthetics were visible not only in contemporary architecture but also in literature and painting as well. Consider Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506), to mention but one, who placed his saints among crumbling pillars, columns and entablatures, depicted nonetheless with great accuracy and appreciation.\(^\text{20}\) Needless to add, such visual references were not to be taken literally, but were metaphors for the triumph of Christianity over paganism.

The treatises of Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) followed the ancient Greco-Roman authors and propagated ideas about the importance of proportions and symmetry in architecture, based on the proportions of the human body.\(^\text{21}\) Alberti’s writings and work contributed significantly to the spread of the column-and-pediment façade and its use in public buildings, secular and religious. He opted for columns and pediments as structural or ornamental elements for the façades of every building he designed or renovated: the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini (1453–1460), the Palazzo Rucellai in Florence (1446–1451), San Sebastiano (1448–1470) and Sant’Andrea (1471) in Mantua. In the sixteenth century, Andrea Palladio (1508–1580) refined and standardized Alberti’s principles and facilitated their dispersal in both the continent and the colonies.\(^\text{22}\)

The turn of the Renaissance to Greek and Roman architectural forms related to new types of citizens and leaders, significantly different from medieval subjects and kings. New cathedrals and public buildings emphasized civic pride, the political culture and ethical virtues of the governing bodies, the return to the principles of Humanism and democracy or to the grandeur of Roman Caesars. Again, political agendas were driving the favoured references to antiquity, as elite groups and persons in power vied for cultural capital.\(^\text{23}\)

\(^{18}\) Although there had been returns to the texts and styles of classical Greece already during the Hellenistic and the Roman periods, the term “renaissance” refers to large-scale re-visitations of the Greco-Roman world from the Middle Ages onwards. For example, the return to ancient forms and texts in medieval kingdoms of the eighth and ninth centuries or the Palaeologan appreciation of classical iconography and literature, have been branded as “renaissances”. The best-known example is the Carolinian Renaissance. G.W. Tromp, “The Concept of the Carolingian Renaissance,” Journal of the History of Ideas 34, no. 1 (January-March 1973): 3–26. Kenneth John Conant, Carolingian and Romanesque architecture, 800 to 1200 (Harmondsworth, New York: Penguin, 1987). Richard E. Sullivan, “The Carolingian Age: Reflections on Its Place in the History of the Middle Ages,” Speculum 64, no. 3 (March 1989): 267–306.


\(^{20}\) As a Christological symbol, the column or the pillar standing alone appeared in Paleochristian art and developed in parallel in Byzantium and in Medieval Europe. It is a complex, sophisticated symbol, with multiple levels of meaning, associated with the Incarnation of the Word and, by extension, with Virgin Mary. The column may form a base on which Christ’s Cross stands, and it appears in various scenes, such as the Flagellation, the Annunciation of the Virgin, the Visitation or the Presentation to the Temple. Saints and martyrs are also shown tortured tied on a freestanding column.


\(^{22}\) Palladio’s influence was so extensive that the term “Palladianism” describes the architectural style, dominant in mid-eighteenth century especially in Great Britain, in which architects adapted Palladio’s designs to contemporary conditions. Palladio was considered the most reliable guide to the values of classical architecture. Robert Taunton, Palladio and Palladianism (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

The Baroque retained many of the formal elements of the Renaissance, enriching them with opulence and magnificence. Theatricality in architecture served both the principles of Counter-Reformation in the Church and the secular power of mighty monarchs. The column-and-pediment form was a common, beloved icon that conveyed a message of stability, security, and sovereignty. On the other hand, its connection with democracy, justice and fair civic rule, dating from the Greco-Roman world, allowed local elites in Protestant North Europe to legitimize their power. In short, the composition had the capacity to carry variable, often contradictory messages and serve alternative uses, from a symbol of democratic virtues to a token of princely grandeur.

The Globalization of the Column-and-Pediment Façade

Widespread in Europe in antiquity and again from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the column-and-pediment became indeed global in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Soufflot’s Ste-Geneviève (now Le Panthéon, 1755–1790) clearly draws from the study of earlier buildings and styles (e.g., St Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, St Paul’s Cathedral in London and the Hôtel National des Invalides in Paris) and adopts the clarity and simplicity of ancient Greek architecture for the façade. The building’s long-term ambivalent status, as a Christian temple or as a secular hall of fame, or serving both functions, is a sign of yet another turn in Europe and the emergence of a novel spirit of belonging. The references to antiquity in architecture echoed an idealized political and social ethos, one that had been lost and was now regained. Starting from France, Classicism swept through Europe and the British Isles. The column-and-pediment, flexible and capable of accommodating multiple uses, began its new career, this time in the world. For example, James Gibbs (1682–1754) popularized Palladio’s classical mode for use in various kinds of buildings. His work and publications [Book of Architecture (1728) and Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture (1732)] served as guides for architects and builders throughout the British Isles and the American colonies.

Classicism’s revolt against Baroque flamboyancy and extravaganza followed the ideas of the Enlightenment and was in line with the principles of the French Revolution, especially with civic duty, justice, freedom, and democracy. Neoclassicism became a sweeping fashion in Europe, and, through Europe’s colonies, it conquered the world. Consider the many neoclassical buildings in India, South-East Asia, Australia, and Canada, which manifest to this day the cultural imperialism of the period. The column-and-pediment façade became the dominant form in every inhabited continent, not so much for Christian as for secular buildings: palaces, mansions, administration and parliament buildings, justice courts, theatres, and universities. One simply cannot miss them in almost every city in Europe and its colonial capitals around the globe. Indeed, I cannot think of a more powerful symbol of colonialism. The new connections with civic virtues, state authority, and colonial status rendered the column-and-pediment figure suitable for incorporation, at various scales, in diverse projects. Nation building was one of them.

Even before the establishment of nation-states, the heroes and traditions of motherlands (or fatherlands) were promoted through neoclassical forms. Ludwig I of Bavaria, the par excellence classicist king in Europe, the one who dreamed of transforming Munich into Athens by the Isar, conceived as early as 1807 the idea of a Germanic Pantheon. Leo von Klenze’s Walhalla was modelled after classical Greek temples, but it did not honour the ancient Greco-Roman heroic past (Fig. 3a). Instead, it was dedicated to generals, politicians, sovereigns, scientists, philosophers, artists and poets of the German

---


Klenze’s choice of style was guided by his conviction that ancient Greeks and Germans shared a common racial origin. Ludwig, on the other hand, maintained that he commissioned the building in hopes that German visitors would leave Walhalla feeling more German and better men than before. Perhaps nationalism and moral improvement were never combined so clearly as in this building, which welcomed its visitors with a columnated and pedimented façade.

It is also noteworthy that Ludwig’s reverence for the neoclassical style of the nineteenth century shaped the architecture of the land that was regarded as its birthplace. An independent state since 1830, Greece welcomed her first king, who was no other than Ludwig’s underage son, Otto I. Many German architects worked to embellish the newly established Greek capital, Athens, with buildings in which a pedimented façade seems to have been a prerequisite. The Royal Palace (1836–1862, now the Parliament building) designed by the director of the Munich Academy of Arts and official architect of the Bavarian court, Friedrich von Gärtner, and the “Athenian Trilogy” [i.e., the National Library (1888–1902), the University (1839–1841), and the Academy (1859–1885)] by Christian and Theophil Hansen, both now in the centre of the city, are among the most prominent examples of Greek neoclassical architecture.

Neoclassicism was the style modern democracies favoured and adopted without hesitation. American architecture loved to symbolize its new democratic ideals through the column-and-pediment façade. Among the earliest examples is the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond (1785–1788). Conceived by Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), it was modelled in part after the Maison Carrée, the first-century Roman temple in Nîmes. French Neoclassicism was the preferred style in the early years of the federal state. Jefferson was also involved in the design of both the White House (1792–1800) and the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. (began in 1793), all edifices that stand as the Enlightenment’s monuments to the power of reason and the virtues of equality, justice, and freedom. Keep in mind that these were the ideals of the dominant, of European origin, white, male and pro-slavery population. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, new arrivals in the public domain were established and became characteristic of urban design. The bank, the stock market, and the museum are some of them. Because banks and stock markets competed for clients, they recognized the value of an architectural image that would appeal to investors. They adopted chiefly classical architectural forms that expressed wealth, integrity, endurance, and confidence.

---

Figure 3. a. Leo von Klenze, Walhalla Gedenkstätte, 1830–1842, Donaustauf, Regensburg, Germany. Photo: Andreas Giakoumakatos. b. Friedrich von Gärtner, Greek Royal Palace (since 1935 the Greek Parliament Building), 1836–1862, Athens, Greece. Photo: Chrysi Deliou.
early headquarters of the Bank of England in London (1788–1833), the Royal Bank of Scotland in Edinburgh (1831), the First Bank of the USA in Philadelphia (1795–1797), the Bank of Montreal (1847), the National Bank of India in Bombay (1860s), the Bank of the Argentine Nation (1940–1955) are but a few examples (Fig. 4a-d). The same preference for columnated-and-pedimented façades can also be observed in nineteenth-century museum design. In this case, the significance of the collections and the role of the institutions, as arcs that preserve the art and knowledge of the past, led to the choice of a prestigious architectural form. 34 Examples include the Glyptothek in Munich (1816–1831), the British Museum in London (1823–1857), the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin (1861–1875), the National Museum in Poznań (1857) and the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg (1896–1897) (Fig. 5a-d).

Romanticism in the nineteenth century favoured different “revivals” of past styles. Competing with Neoclassicism, various formal references to, e.g., the Gothic, the Rococo, the Byzantine, or folk art, became fashionable in European architecture. They usually fell in line with regional/national narratives. In the twentieth century, the column-and-pediment schema was not abandoned. However, it became less and less prominent in Europe’s public architecture. Art Nouveau and Art Deco incorporated it in eclecticist façades and modernism referred to it schematically. In the interwar period, totalitarian regimes paid dues to the austerity of classical architectural forms. In Fascist Italy, “monumental

34 Irwin, Neoclassicism, 340–346.
"classicism" was one of the styles employed, but the regime in general favoured pluralism in art. In Nazi Germany, the pediment was not favoured. Oversize columns and pillars, freestanding or in rhythmical arrangements (e.g., Albert Speer’s Zeppelintribüne in Nürnberg, 1936) created a more robust effect, while referencing imperial styles of the past (e.g., Egypt, Babylon, Rome) would better serve Hitler’s ideology of grandeur. In the late twentieth century, post-modernist architects did not value the column-and-pediment more than other forms from the past. Still, they proposed innovative ways of relating to Europe’s classicist past.

Though not favoured by today’s architecture, the age-old figure continues its career in our world, as countless structures built from antiquity up to the nineteenth century are preserved and remain in use, whether as sites of cultural heritage or as functional buildings. They form a visual backdrop to people’s everyday life. As a symbol, the column-and-pediment form also lives in the collective imagination, as the cartoons mentioned earlier and other occurrences, which I will discuss further on, demonstrate.

The Column-and-Pediment Icon in Contemporary Contexts

In our days, after decades of deconstructing national narratives, histories and ideologies, after articulating all kinds of “post-“discourses, is there room for this icon in the public domain? There is, indeed, in commercial culture. This, after all, is the main cultural area actively promoted and developed enormously since the 1940s. And, as many times before, the column-and-pediment’s place in the public sphere reflects dominant values of societies.

From the design of the front of Rolls-Royce cars to the Coca-Cola advertisement that supported the candidacy of Atlanta for hosting the Olympic Games in 1992, one can find many examples of its use in our globalized economy. A routine internet search returns a slew of advertisements by companies worldwide that sell virtually anything, objects or services. The stereotypes advanced by the media early in the twentieth century linked a columnated façade topped by a pediment to higher values and participation in an advanced civilization. Marketing campaigns have since used it as an easy reference to high-quality products and refined experiences.

The use of the column-and-pediment icon in commercial enterprises has not deprived it of its symbolic charge in other contexts. In today’s world, the column-and-pediment icon can be traced in matters of economy, politics, cultural institutions, art, always connected with positive, European-flavoured values. Banknotes and coins often depict prestigious columnated buildings with pediments. Consider, for example, the US 10-dollar bill featuring on the verso the Treasury Building in Washington, D.C., or the 50-, 20- and 10-cents Euro coins from Germany, that depict on the verso the Brandenburg Gate. Are the depicted buildings chosen because they are famous landmarks in urban spaces or because they symbolize significant moments in history? Do they stand for values and beliefs that characterize the societies that employ them? Perhaps the latter, for such buildings appear in public political imagery as well. Political parties need easy references to visually diffuse their ideas and gain support. Let’s focus on a recent case. On 12 and 19 June 2022, legislative elections were held in France to elect representatives to the National Assembly. The Pirate Party circulated a poster produced for the occasion (Fig. 6). The slogans in the poster called for the return to collective values and of power to the voters, slogans reminiscent of the fraternity and equality principles of the French Revolution. The inclusion of the French Parliament building in the poster, blurred and pixelated, nevertheless easily discernible, visually redoubled the party’s call for a return to the lost values in French society.

Apart from targeted commercial or political uses, after 1945, the column-and-pediment façade became the favourite emblem of international organizations for culture. Telling examples include the logo UNESCO adopted in 1978 (Fig. 7a) and the logo for policy objectives for EU-funded programs. Moreover, accessible as it is worldwide through the internet and in the public domain, the column-and-pediment icon now continues its career in the digital world, still associated with positive values. Elegant and linear, a basic visual reference to the architectural style that once was, it has reached computer graphics and visual communication symbols. In the USA internet semiology is primarily linked to law and justice, and in Europe to culture (Fig. 7b-c).

Contemporary artists continue to be inspired by the column-and-pediment’s symbolic power. The Parthenon of Books by the Argentinian Marta Minujín

---

(1943-) was presented in documenta 14 in Kassel in 2017, in front of the Friedericianum (Fig. 8). The two buildings, the latter emblematic of documenta events, designed and operating as a museum since 1779, the other an ephemeral contemporary structure, stood topographically at the heart of the event, a positioning not accidental at all. The main theme of documenta 14 was “Learning from Athens,” and part of the exhibition was staged in the Greek capital. The references to the Greek debt crisis were more than obvious. In a way, Minujín’s work presented in Kassel a reminder of the positive values of the Athenian classical culture. However, she did not conceive the work for documenta 14. In fact, the Parthenon of Books was an older work, originally constructed in 1983, and was replete with symbolism. It was a monument to the restoration of democracy in Minujín’s native country. The project was inaugurated in the centre of Buenos Aires on December 19, 1983, only a week after the restitution of democracy in the country. As its title indicates, it was a structure made of books and it celebrated the abolition of
censorship. The metallic core, 30 x 15 x 12 m., was filled with books banned during the Argentinian dictatorship (1976–1983). Conceived as a participatory work, it was dismantled on December 24, 1983, and the books were distributed gratis to the public, the structure having been laid on its side by a crane to facilitate access to its pediments. Similarly, in Kassel, the structure was dismantled, and the books were randomly distributed to visitors. Minujín clearly referred to ancient Greece with her work. However, how was the relation between ancient Athens and democracy popularized in Argentina, if not through European colonialism? Could it be that the nineteenth-century neoclassical style in her country, despite its colonial content, also conveyed a respect for higher humanistic values, difficult to be tied to any specific historical period? To return briefly to documenta 14, what trains of thought would the proximity of the two pedimental façades evoke in the minds of its highly diverse international audience? Which period of the European culture would they connect with?

**Conclusion**

As the above summary shows, the column-and-pediment figure has had a long career during which it spread from its fountainhead, the classical Greek and Roman worlds, to every corner of Europe and, from the eighteenth century on, to the rest of the globe. Now it lives a new life in the digital world. But the perseverance of the figure through multiple centuries cannot be explained merely on aesthetic grounds. The endurance of the classical in European history is a puzzle difficult to solve. A possible explanation could be linked to Michael Herzfeld’s notion of *structural nostalgia*, i.e., the longing for a prelapsarian state of the human world. For history-minded Europeans, classical antiquity, with Athens as its pinnacle, has stood through time as that Edenic state. Following Salvatore Settis’ argumentation, the fall of the Roman Empire was a collective cultural trauma, which led to the European obsession with cultural decay and ruins and, thus, to a constant reference to a “classical” past, a past that every age has to re-invent.

The semiotic ambiguity characteristic of imagery and materiality rendered the column-and-pediment figure suitable for accommodating novel interpretations, often far removed from the original ones, even at odds with them. Depending on historical context and the status of the subject-viewers, the messages emanating from the figure have, as a rule, been enmeshed in aesthetics (well before the latter was acknowledged as a domain on its own in the eighteenth century) and, above all, in politics, progressive or regressive. I imagine folks unfamiliar with ancient history (probably zillions today) are likely to consider—not entirely without justification—the Bank of England or the British Museum and its numerous clones rather than Greek temples and Roman fora as the prototypes.

The column-and-pediment figure survived centuries of use, misuse, and abuse and served revolutions, democracies, colonialism, totalitarian regimes, Cold War ideologies, and commercial culture. This simple yet sophisticated icon has proved a durable shell that served every content assigned to it. Is the column-and-pediment icon today a weary fetish, a hollow shell, which embeds difference and hierarchy? Does it represent a connection with a glorious past, which the European states, the European Union, or even the USA have capitalized upon to this day? Could it be that it still stands for higher values, such as education, cultivation, refined taste, democracy, justice, equality, and the like, for which contemporary societies crave? Is it still connected with horrid colonial practices in the minds of people around the globe? Even so, it still recalls significant values of human societies.

One of the commonest images in the public domain, physical and digital, this “brand” icon of European culture, apart from all symbolisms it incorporates, is the simplest image for shelter and protection.

---


From antiquity and for millennia, as scholars from Vitruvius to Laugier⁴¹ tried to explain its origin, they drew two plain vertical elements supporting a triangular roof and referred to it as an archetypically hut, house, or refuge.⁴² This is too how children in today’s “Global West” depict their house (but the practice might have a deeper past). Could it, then, be a comforting image to the human eye, linked with protection, security, and care—an image with significant psychoanalytic dimensions and multiple associations in collective memory?

Europe has a long history of inventing and reinventing herself and presenting a new face to the world. In current times, political necessities call again for strong bonds between the European countries, perhaps even more now than in the early Cold War period. And these bonds, as maintained in the 1950s, can be stronger when they are based on cultural community and not only on political or economic interests. Is there a reason to search for common cultural elements in Europe’s past and present? Are there any common “European” values? Perhaps. But, in any case, a turn to the positive values and to the feelings of comfort and protection the column-and-pediment brings about could still provide humanity with an intellectual soothing ground, a starting point to think through a superficial, social media-saturated world.