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**APELLES' PAINTINGS AS AN ELEMENT OF  
AUGUSTAN POLITICAL PROPAGANDA**

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Super omnis divus Augustus in foro suo celeberrima in parte posuit tabulas duas quae Belli faciem pictam habent et Triumphum, item Castores et Victoriā, posuit et quas dicemus sub artificum mentione in templo Caesaris patris [Above them all the divine Augustus placed in his forum, in the most prominent place, two paintings, one depicting the image of War and Triumph, the other the Dioscuri and Victory, and in the temple of his father Caesar he put up certain other pictures which I shall discuss when I take up the particular artists] (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* XXXV.27<sup>1</sup>).

Venerem exeuntem e mari divus Augustus dicavit in delubro patris Caesaris, quae anadyomene vocatur, versibus Graecis tali opere, dum laudatur, victo sed inlustrato, cuius inferiorem partem corruptam qui rectificare non potuit reperiri, verum ipsa iniuria cessit in gloriam artificis. Consenuit haec tabula carie, aliamque pro ea substituit Nero principatu suo Dorothei manu... [mirantur] Romae Castorem et Pollucem cum Victoria et Alexandro Magno, item Belli imaginem restrictis ad terga manibus, Alexandro in curru triumphante, quas utrasque tabulas divus Augustus in fori sui celeberrimis partibus dicaverat simplicitate moderata, divus Claudius pluris existimavit utrique excisa Alexandri facie divi Augusti imagines addere.

[In the temple of his father Caesar, the divine Augustus dedicated Venus rising from the sea, the so-called "Anadyomene", accompanied by Greek epigrams such that she is at once eclipsed and yet celebrated<sup>2</sup>. When the lower part was damaged,

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<sup>1</sup> Text quoted from the edition by E. Sellers, *The Elder Pliny's Chapter on the History of Art*, London 1896. Translation into English by Bruce MacQueen.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the following epigrams in the *Anthologia Graeca*: I.164.41; II.15.32; II.83.16; II.237; III.202.32.

no one could be found to repair it, but the injury itself redounded to the glory of the painter. The painting eventually decayed, and during his principate Nero substituted another, painted by Dorotheus. In Rome one may admire Castor and Pollux with Victory and Alexander the Great, as well as the image of War with its arms bound behind its back, while Alexander rides the triumphal chariot. Both of these paintings were dedicated by Augustus in his forum, in the most frequented places, with suitable modesty; the divine Claudius made bold to cut out the face of Alexander on both paintings and substitute that of Augustus.] (Ibid., XXXV.91, 93-94)

The “Aphrodite Anadyomene” (the model for which, according to one tradition was the famous *hetaira* Phryne; according to other sources, Pankaspe, one of Alexander the Great’s lovers) was painted by Apelles for the temple of Aesculapius on Cos. There it was purchased by Augustus for 100 talents and brought to Rome (Strabo, XIV.657). Since Ovid, who was exiled in A.D. 8, mentions the painting in his *Tristia* (II.257), it must have already been in Rome before that date. It is not known when the next two paintings, “The Dioscuri with Victory” and “Alexander the Great with Shackled War”, arrived in Rome.

At any event, Augustus put up all three paintings in the two most representative points in the Rome of his day: in the temple of his father, i.e. the *Templum Divi Iuli* in the Forum Romanum, and in his own Forum.

The Temple of the Divine Julius was erected in the Forum Romanum on the spot where the dictator’s body had been cremated. This site was originally marked with a column bearing the inscription “Parenti Patriae” (To the Father of his Country)<sup>3</sup>. In 42 B.C., Caesar was deified (the first time a deceased person had been deified in Rome), and the triumvirs (Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus) decided to build a temple to the honor of the new god, which was consecrated by Augustus on August 18, 29 B.C., as the *Templum Divi Iuli*. A speaker’s stand (*Rostra Aedis Divi Iuli*), decorated with the prows of Antony and Cleopatra’s warships, was made part of its podium, with an altar in the middle marking the spot where Caesar’s body had been cremated. In the cella was a statue of Caesar with a star above his forehead (*Sidus Iulium*), and to judge from the images of this sculpture we find on coins, he held a figurine of Victory in his hand<sup>4</sup>.

It was in this temple that Apelles’ painting was set up, depicting Aphrodite-Venus, the mythical grandmother of the *gens Julia*, and of the Romans. As we

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<sup>3</sup> This column can be seen on the relief decorating one of the sides of the altar of the Lares Augusti (Vatican Museums, Museo Gregoriano Profano, inv. 1115), erected in 12 B.C. (according to T. Kraus, *Das Römische Weltreich*, Berlin 1967, no. and fig. 180), or between 12 and 2 B.C. (according to T. Hölscher, *Historische Reliefs*, (in:) Kaiser Augustus und die Verlorene Republik, Berlin 1988, pp. 394-396, no. 223), or in 7 B.C. (according to P. Zanker, *Augustus under the Macht der Bilder*, Munich 1987, p. 222, fig. 177).

<sup>4</sup> After Caesar’s deification, a comet was seen in the heavens for seven days. “This was believed to be the soul of Caesar received to heaven. For that reason he was always thereafter depicted on images with a star above his head” (Suetonius, *Divus Iulius* 88). A coin depicting such a statue is reproduced by Zanker, fig. 25 a (a denarius of L. Lentulus from 12 B.C.).

know, one of the pillars of Augustan propaganda was to constantly call to mind the divine descent of the family to which Octavian had been added by adoption. In this he was certainly following in the footsteps of his great predecessor, who, in the Forum Iulium he founded, erected the Temple of Venus Genetrix, adorned with a statue made by Arcesilaus (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* XXXV.155), probably modeled on the statue of the same goddess sculpted by Callimachus towards the end of the fifth century B. C. (now known as the Aphrodite of Fréjus)<sup>5</sup>. Arcesilaus's statue presented the goddess dressed in robes, perhaps with only the left breast revealed (as in Callimachus' statue)<sup>6</sup>, and indeed full of dignity. Apelles' painting depicted her nude, at the moment of her birth from the sea foam<sup>7</sup>.

The idea of placing an image of Venus being born in juxtaposition to a statue of her deceased but deified descendant corresponds fully to Augustus' ideological premises. The two divinities, mythical grandmother and her distinguished descendant, gaze at each other, and continually look after the City entrusted to their care.

The Forum of Augustus, with the Temple of Mars Ultor vowed by Octavian before the battle with Caesar's assassins at Philippi (42 B.C.), was consecrated on the first day of the month of Sextilis (later "August"), 2 B.C.<sup>8</sup>, jointly by Augustus and his two grandsons, Gaius and Lucius Caesar, his designated successors.

Passing over the rich iconographic program of the decoration on the temple itself, or the statues of Aeneas, Romulus, and the kings of Rome set up in the exedras and porticos of the Forum, not to mention the images of *summi viri* found there, it should be noted for the present purposes that in the square hall (now known as the Sala del Colosso) built at the end of the left (north) portico there stood a colossal statue (probably of Augustus), of which all that remains is the base with a foot. It was in this area that the other two paintings by Apelles were put up.

The "Dioscuri with Victory" and the "Triumphant Alexander with War in Shackles" fully met the requirements of Augustus's cultural policy. One of its goals was to somehow recover ancient Roman piety and moral severity, and to recall important events, especially victorious battles, that took place in the past. What could be better than to depict the figures of the Divine Twins lending their support to the Romans? Castor and Pollux were many times the heralds of victory<sup>9</sup>,

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<sup>5</sup> On Callimachus and the Aphrodite of Fréjus, see Maria L. Bernhardt, *Sztuka grecka V wieku p.n.e. [Greek Art of the Fifth Century B.C.]*, 2nd edition, Warsaw 1991, p. 557, fig. 410.

<sup>6</sup> It may be, however, that she was entirely clothed, as on the relief from the Temple of Mars Ultor. There is a relief from Algier (Musée Nationale d'Antiquités) that would appear to be a copy of this statue; cf. Zanker, fig. 151.

<sup>7</sup> The problem of representations of Aphrodite Anadyomene in sculpture has been dealt with in Poland by B. Gąsowska, *Polycharmos z Rodos jako twórca pomnika Afrodyty Anadyomene [Polycharmos of Rhodes as the Creator of the Statue of Aphrodite Anadyomene]*, Wrocław 1971.

<sup>8</sup> This generally accepted traditional date is rejected by G. Alföldy, who believes that the consecration of the temple took place on May 12. Cf. G. Alföldy, *Gymnasium* 98, 1991, 289-324.

<sup>9</sup> Beginning with the Battle of Lake Regillus in 496 B.C., when they supported the Roman army, and then brought the news of the victory to Rome, in return for which a temple was built in their

and so it comes as no surprise that they are accompanied by the figure of the goddess Victory. In this way the picture recalls the great deeds of Roman arms.

Augustus never officially compared himself to Alexander the Great, though in fact, like many another, he was fascinated by this figure, as witness the opening of the grave in Alexandria, the gold crown placed on the head of the Macedonian king, whose body was then covered with flowers (Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 18), or the use of a seal showing a portrait of Alexander (*ibid.*, 50). Even so, a picture depicting the king, next to whom was the image of War in chains, proved to be absolutely ideal for Augustus's policy, touting the Pax Augusta, proof of which is above all the famous Altar of Peace (Ara Pacis Augustae), as well as the significant "public relations campaign" accompanying the closing of the Temple of Janus<sup>10</sup>.

Among the literary echoes of this event is the following fragment from the *Aeneid* (I.398ff.)

Aspera tum positis mitescunt saecula bellis;  
 cana Fides et Vesta, Remo cum fratre Quirinus  
 iura dabunt; dirae ferro et compagibus artis  
 claudentur Belli portae; Furor impius intus  
 saeva sedens super arma et centum vinctus aënis  
 post tergum nodis fremet horridus ore cruento

The passage of the epic quoted here refers to Augustus's first closing of the Temple of Janus on the Forum Romanum. The "War in Shackles" on Apelles's painting expresses the same idea: the end of wars and the reign of peace, in accordance with the ideology of the Augustan regime. By the same token, Augustus also compared himself indirectly to the Macedonian king, since like the latter, he has brought peace through his victory.

The parallel between Vergil's words and Apelles's painting was pointed out in antiquity, by Servius (*in Aen.* I.294): "in foro Augusti introeuntibus ad sinistram fuit Bellum depictum et Furor sedens super arma devinctus eo habitu quo poeta

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honor in the Forum Romanum (Livy, II.20; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, VI.13); later, they informed the Roman people of the victory at Pydna in 168 B.C. on the very day the battle took place (Florus, I.28; Plutarch, *Aemilius* 20; Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II.2.6, III.5.11; Valerius Maximus, I.8); finally, they proclaimed Marius's victory over the Cimbri at Vercellae in 101 B.C. (Florus, I.30).

<sup>10</sup> Augustus closed the Temple of Janus three times: in 29 B.C. after his victory at Actium; in 25 B.C., after the defeat of the Cantabri and Asturi, and in 8 B.C., after Tiberius's victory over the Germans. The most important occasion, however, was the closing after Actium, which marked the end of a long period of civil war.



dicat. [In the forum of Augustus, on the left side as you enter, there was a painting of War, and Madness seated on a pile of weapons, bound in the manner described by the poet.]” The similarity of this fragment of the *Aeneid* (written between 29 and 19 B.C.) to the content of Apelles’s painting, probably brought to Rome during this time, is probably not coincidental. Augustus could not have brought the painting to Rome from Greece before the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C., since to that time he was caught up in a struggle, not only for the throne, but also in a certain sense for his life, and was completely absorbed by that struggle. Since in the present author’s opinion we may assume with complete confidence that Vergil was influenced by the painting, it should therefore be inferred that it was already in Rome during the time when the *Aeneid* was being written.

The *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder was known in the Middle Ages in numerous codices and copies, which, though often replete with errors, inspired poets and artists. The *editio princeps* appeared in Venice in 1469, but in 1473 it

was superseded by a better Roman edition. From that time on translations began to appear: French (1546), Spanish and English (1559), Flemish (1611). This caused the influence exerted on artists by the text of the Roman Encyclopedist to be increased considerably. During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, numerous artists drew inspiration from the *Natural History*. A marvelous Baroque vision of Apelles' painting, created according to Pliny's rather terse account, can be seen in a tapestry entitled "The Triumph of Alexander", made in France in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, and now located among the holdings of the Czartoryski Museum in Cracow (Fig. 1)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Czartoryski Museum, Inv. DMNKCz 1531; height 2.92 meters, width 4.56 meters. Until 1936, the tapestry was kept in the Czartoryski Palace in the Wola Justowska district of Cracow, where it hung in the stairway.