

The Column: An Architectural Representation of Power

Note: This is a transcript, so formal in-text citations are not included. Please see the bibliography below for sources used for this multimedia project

By Lila Schaefer

When we think of columns, we often think of something strong and powerful, something able to withstand great force. Columns were first used architecturally as a necessary ceiling support in the middle of rooms. Later they became more ornamental and as they appeared in European architecture, their symbolism grew. Now columns are used for support and as decoration everywhere, from important government buildings, to monuments, as well as in homes. And while columns are associated with Greek and Roman architecture, the use of columns in public and private spaces did not originate in Europe.

The ancient Egyptians and Persians first used columns in architecture, specifically in their interiors. The design was likely modeled after the cylindrical bundles of sticks used to support roofs in villages along the Nile. We can see an example of this here with the Palm Column of Sahure, which dates back to the time of the Old Kingdom from around 2700 to 2200 BCE. You can see the details on this that resemble wood and vegetation, and this sort of design was common among the pharaonic columns in that era.

Despite this early use in Egypt and Persia, we associate columns with the Romans and Greeks because they developed the five orders in classical architecture: doric, ionic, corinthian, tuscan, and composite. These styles show most differences in the designs of the base and capital and do not reference the natural world in the same way that pharaonic columns did. The Romans and Greeks also developed the style of using columns not only for support, but also for decoration on the exteriors of buildings, at least more than the Egyptians had. The five orders are

the styles that we see often replicated in significant buildings and monuments in the United States today.

Columns appear not only in architecture, but also as standalone monuments dedicated to powerful leaders. Trajan's column in Rome and Pompey's Pillar in Alexandria, Egypt are good examples of this.

Trajan's Column, which still stands in the heart of Rome at a height of 38 meters, was dedicated in 113 AD to the Emperor Trajan after his victory over Dacia—modern day Romania. The column became the resting place for Trajan's ashes when he died in 117. In this 1666 depiction of Trajan's column, you can see how the figure on top of the column is elevated in an almost godly way above those on the ground. Pompey's Pillar is another example of the Roman "victory columns." It was erected in the late third century in honor of the Emperor Diocletian and to commemorate victory against uprisers on the Southern coast of the Mediterranean, in present day Egypt.

The design of these columns is such that they are erected in the middle of a public area or square so that their height is most impressive, so that when you look up at them from the ground you just see them towering over you. The columns are an enduring symbol of strength. The Romans, with their conquering history, turned the column into a symbol and reminder of imperial power. As America established itself as its own nation, this architectural style was popular in important government buildings and memorials for leaders. This parallels the way that the Roman Empire used columns in architecture as their power grew, as well.

Records show that columns were used in American architecture as early as 1728, when James Gibbs released his book "Three Designs for Columns, proper for public Places or

private Gardens.” We then see a real uptick in the applications of pillars in the East Coast, particularly in Washington, DC, after American independence came in 1776. Architects like Robert Mills– who designed the Washington Monuments in both Baltimore and DC– and Pierre-Charles L’Enfant—who was the planner for the initial designs for the National Mall– favored the use of columns, obelisks, and statues to pay tribute to the nation’s history and influential figures.

Many important buildings in Washington, DC, and other East Coast cities are designed in the Neoclassical style, which encompasses Federal and Greek Revival architecture. This became popular in the 1800s in the United States. The Architect of the Capitol website explains, “the U.S. Capitol’s designs, derived from ancient Greece and Rome, evoke the ideals that guided the nation’s founders as they framed their new republic.”

However, in the 21st century, these ideals are being challenged; powerful Countries in North America and Europe are being increasingly criticized for their colonial histories and/or patriarchal structure in a way that they were not in the past. The column, a symbol of strength, can also be seen as a symbol of all that is oppressive within a society. That perception is reflected in art that challenges the imperial ideals associated with columns from a standpoint focusing on gender, labor, and craft. Two examples of this are Adrian Paci’s *The Column* and Sarah Zapata’s *Towards an Ominous Time*.

In 2013, Albanian artist Adrian Paci first exhibited *The Column*. It’s a 25-minute long video installation depicting the process of a Romanesque column carved from a slab of Chinese marble during an ocean voyage to Italy, where it is to be delivered. The piece was originally created for the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris, but has since been shown at the 2014

Venice Architecture Biennale, Busan Biennale, and at the Architectural Association in London in 2014. Accompanying the video, the physical column that was produced lays horizontally, contradicting the typical vertical orientation and challenging the associations made between columns and overarching power. While the film is not available to view on the internet, the film stills and other videos about the project can be found online and will be included for you to check out. A video about the project, published on the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume's Vimeo account in collaboration with the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art page provides a visualization of Paci's process. In this video, Paci explains, "the stone becomes something else in this trip." The column is a symbol that transcends any one culture and can be analyzed as a symbol for globalization. The imagery of these Chinese men working on this column, a symbol of imperial, western power, makes us question the perceived separation of the east and west.

In an interview for the Louisiana Channel in 2013, Paci explained "*The Column* has its roots in a poetic intuition: an idea in search of form will only be able to develop at a distance from its origins, much like commercial goods are increasingly conceived in one place and manufactured in another through the elaborate and methodical exploitation of cheap labor, seen, in this case, on-board sweatshop ships... By the end, a factory boat which spends most of its time in international waters becomes inseminated with an idea, and delivers through intense labor an eastern copy of a western archetype." The labor shown in this video shakes up our typical premonitions about the column as a symbol of white, European power, while also commenting on the modern global economy. The fact that this column was entirely carved while out to sea makes us question: where does the column and its symbology come from? Who does it belong to? Who does it benefit? We associate the column with and credit it to the Romans and the Greeks, but really it originated with the Egyptians and the Persians.

It is also important to note the fact that in Paci's video, it is only men working on the column. The labor of carving with and working with stone is associated with the male gender, while other forms of labor, such as work with textile, is associated with the feminine.

Throughout this course, we have often talked about the often unspoken association of certain objects or actions with a particular gender, an association that we cannot think of a word for.

We can use the work of Paci and other artists like Sarah Zapata—a Texas born artist currently living and working in New York City—to analyze and dismantle the systems of power associated with these architectural monuments that often enforce colonial and patriarchal ideals.

When visiting the “Threads: Artists Weave their Worlds” exhibition at Bowdoin College, I was struck by Sarah Zapata's piece, called *Towards an ominous time*, because of its ability to be colorful, soft, and playful while also conveying a deep meaning. While it is not specifically related to the Mediterranean region, the work lends itself to the themes of power, labor, and gender that we are thinking about with these columns. This textile, created by Zapata and displayed around a rectangular wooden pillar, is gendered in the eyes of viewers as female. This is because of the textile medium, the soft, playful color choice, and the fabric protrusions that come off of the pillar in shapes that resemble an udder or a breast. This is resonant with how through popular media, we see countries on the southern and eastern borders of the Mediterranean as being female gendered, or softer, going along with the stereotype of “the Orient” that is portrayed in popular media. On the other hand, the typical stone columns meant to convey power can be seen as male gendered. This is because of the cultural associations that we hold, especially in Europe and North America, with power, seriousness, and stability as being “male traits.”

By engaging with this assumption that working with textile or fiber arts is associated with women's work and having this textile portrayed in a columnar fashion, Zapata confronts these preestablished power dynamics. We associate columns, in an architectural sense, with rock—a cold, solid, unforgiving material—and in a symbolic sense, with power. Why do we associate this firmness with power? Would we feel the same sense of importance and strength in a building featuring columns adorned in textile like that in Zapata's piece?

Zapata's choice to display this soft fabric over this column creates an interesting dynamic that forces the examination of the role of women and their labor in the context of societal hierarchies and systems of power. By wrapping a column in this fabric, Zapata—a young, queer, woman of color—comments on and disrupts the patriarchal structures of the art world, and provides a commentary challenging traditional views of strength and power. While not related to Mediterranean history directly, this piece makes us think about art and societal structure through a feminist lens, which is what we are trying to do in our studies of the Mediterranean.

Both Paci and Zapata have created these works that challenge our ideas of power by using the symbol of the column. They prompt discussions of materiality, gender, and power that are essential to dismantling the societal systems that value and hold some people on a pedestal over others. Thank you for listening! I hope you have enjoyed this discussion and are able to take a good look at these resources and videos that go into more depth on the topics covered here!

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Palm Column of Sahure. ca. 2458–2446 B.C. Granite, Total H. at arrival: 665.4 cm (21 ft. 9 15/16 in.); total H. now: 630 cm (20 ft. 8 in.); Diam. at foot: 86.4 cm (34 in.); Diam. above ring bands: 80 cm (31 1/2 in.); capital: H. 168 cm (66 1/8 in.); abacus: W. 87 cm (34 1/4 in.). *Palm Column of Sahure* [10.175.137]. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.18565372>.

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