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Whose Triumph?

The Reception History of Bertel Thorvaldsen's Frieze '*Alexander the Great's Entry into Babylon'* (1812)

Fig. 1: Portrait of Bertel Thorvaldsen with the Alexander Frieze in the background. Painting by C.W. Eckersberg, 1814, oil on canvas, Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen. Eckersberg was a pupil of Jacques-Louis David in Paris before he went to Rome in 1813.

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Abstract

The Neoclassical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen's (1770-1844) art has rarely been examined in a political context although his lifetime was characterised by major political upheaval and societal change in which art played an important role. Several reasons can help explain this negligence such as the modernist dismissal of the Neoclassical style as well as the conflicted view of Romanticism and politics, especially in Germany. In this dissertation, I'll examine one of Thorvaldsen's most famous works, the *Alexander Frieze,* and its reception history until c. 1850. The plaster frieze was commissioned in 1812 by Napoleon and installed the same year in the Quirinal Palace, the former papal residence, now the new imperial palace. I aim to show how the frieze reflects the relationship between art and power in the period and how this relationship evolved during the dramatic decades of Thorvaldsen's lifetime.

Thorvaldsen had a conflicted relationship with Napoleon and was generally critical of monarchical power, an attitude which was probably cultivated both by his education and by his social circle which consisted of liberal intellectuals such as Wilhelm and Caroline von Humboldt and Friederike Brun, a close friend and confidante of Madame de Staël. Apart from the frieze itself my source material is comprised of a variety of text genres such as letters, diary entries, poems and newspaper articles concerning Thorvaldsen and the frieze.

This material will in the first chapter enable an inquiry into whether Thorvaldsen may have expressed criticism of Napoleon in the frieze as claimed by some contemporaries. In the second and third chapters I will delve into the reception history of the frieze. This will uncover how various factions perceived and used the frieze as part of their political communication and what this reveals of the political conflicts and mentalities of the era.

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Introduction

The Danish Neoclassical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen's (1770-1844) plaster frieze *Alexander the Great's Entry into Babylon* [fig. 2.-5.] (Henceforth the *Alexander Frieze)* secured its author fame throughout Europe. The frieze was commissioned by the French court to decorate the Quirinal Palace in Rome in honour of emperor Napoleon I's eventually cancelled visit to the 'Eternal City' in 1812, where it is still on display. The artwork is a testimony not only to the French emperor's insatiable appetite for palaces and lavish decorations, it is also highly revealing of the evolving relationship between power and art in the period in general.

The relationship between art and power and between artists and patrons presents a useful and sometimes overlooked source material in our understanding of political, social, and cultural history. Historians such as Hugh Trevor-Roper as well as Peter Burke have thoroughly analysed these relations at the Habsburg court in the 16th century and in Louis XIV's France. As exemplified in their research, a proper understanding of these relationships sheds much light on our understanding of societal conflicts in various polities and eras. In more modern times, the totalitarian regimes of the Soviet Union and Nazi-Germany are poignant examples of art's enduring political role.

In the decades following the French Revolution, social change swept over Europe, a change reflected in the relationship between art and power. The history of the *Alexander Frieze* is an illustrative example of this. Bertel Thorvaldsen had an ambiguous relationship with Napoleon, and the primary source material indicates that the frieze could be interpreted as more than a mere tribute to the French emperor. Numerous copies were produced, and the frieze became part of the political communication in Europe in the subsequent decades. By creating the frieze Thorvaldsen found himself in the middle of the most intense political conflict of his time, between absolute and constitutional monarchy, between Germanic and Latin culture, and between the old world and emerging modern society.

However, the literature on the *Alexander Frieze* in particular, and on Thorvaldsen's art in a political context in general, is rather limited. Neither the political circumstances concerning the commissioning, execution and display of the frieze, nor the frieze's reception history have scarcely been examined in depth. It is my intention to explore how the *Alexander Frieze* and the contemporary reception of the artwork can illuminate the change Europe underwent during those crucial years after the French Revolution. This dissertation will begin with the historiography of the period in general and of Neoclassicism and Thorvaldsen in particular, before turning in the first chapter to Thorvaldsen's own political convictions and affiliations and, in the second and third chapters, the reception history of the frieze, first in Thorvaldsen's immediate social circle, then more broadly in German and Scandinavian society until c. 1848.

Historiography of the *Alexander Frieze*

Several factors can help explain why the *Alexander Frieze* has only received limited attention in scholarship. There has, from the last part of the 19th century and until at least the middle of the 20th century, been a strong tendency among scholars to discard Neoclassicism as a dull and tedious reproduction of antiquity.[1] The judgement of Bertel Thorvaldsen and his art has come to suffer from this distorted view, which is neatly summed up in the following quotation by the American art historian Robert Rosenblum (1927-2006): "*Contemporary taste has been harsh in its judgment of Neoclassicism. Prizing originality, we are critical of a style which was willing to pay homage, at times even servile homage, to a past considered greater than the present. (…) Even such great masters as David and Canova are often discussed in a manner which implies that their veneration of antiquity was an unfortunate, if inevitable handicap dictated by the taste of their generation; and lesser figures like West and Thorvaldsen are not infrequently dismissed by art historians with little more than a tolerant smile.*"[2]

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[1] For a concise definition of Neoclassicism see D. Irwin: *Neoclassicism*, (London, 1997)

[2] R. Rosenblum: ‚Review of Klassizismus und Utopia; Interpretationen zu Werken von David, Canova, Carstens, Thorvaldsen, Koch' by Rudolf Zeitler. The Art Bulletin, Mar., 1955, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 70-74.

But to describe the work of David, Canova, or Thorvaldsen as a 'servile homage' is a biased reading of their work. It bears witness to Rosenblum's modernist stance which in 1955 preferred other 'original' artistic styles such as abstract expressionism. This modernist dismissal led to a neglect of the study of Neoclassicism and its political and social impact on society.

Another important factor in the negligence of Neoclassicism as a political artform has probably been the conflicted view in the 19th and 20th centuries of Romanticism's[3] relationship with politics, especially that of German Romanticism.[4] Except in Arnold Hauser's work *The Social History of Art* (1951), Neoclassicism has also tended to evade the interest of social art history. Hauser's work has been criticised, although Peter Burke has recently argued for the relevance and revival of social art history.[5] As exemplified in Tim Blanning's book *The Culture of Power and The Power of Culture* and to a lesser degree *The Romantic Revolution*, the social history of art is difficult, if not impossible, to separate from politics. This underlines the need to re-examine Neoclassicism in its social context to help illuminate its political influence on historical developments in the early 19th century.

These various factors have resulted in negligence or misreading of important source material for both historians and art historians. The social and political impact of Neoclassical art was thus not properly recognised for a long time, which has also influenced the judgement of Thorvaldsen and his art. This omission has led to several important characteristics being missed. First and foremost it was, in the words of the 'father of art history' Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the job of the Neoclassical artist to imitate – not copy – antiquity.[6] Second, Neoclassicism might have been inspired by antiquity, but it was also a

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[3] For a thorough discussion of the term 'Romanticism' please see Blanning, T.C.W.: *The Romantic Revolution – A History*, (New York, 2010) and I. Berlin: *The Roots of Romanticism – The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 196*5 – The National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, (London, 1999)

[4] F. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism – The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800*, (Harvard, 1992) pp. 85, 222-7 and S.L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus – Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany 1750-1970*, (Princeton, 1996) pp. 3-7.

[5] P. Burke, 'The Social Histories of Art' in P. Cohen, *The Art Market in Rome in the Eighteenth Century: A Study in the Social History of Art*, (Leiden, 2018) p. 28.

[6] For a thorough discussion of Winckelmann's thoughts on Neoclassicism and 'Imitation' please see James L. Larson's article: 'Winckelmann's Essay on Imitation' Eighteenth-Century Studies, Spring, 1976, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Spring, 1976), pp. 390-405.

response to contemporary problems. Discarding Neoclassical artists' preoccupation with antiquity as 'unfortunate' thus ignores important, artistic messages. David, whose painting *'The Oath of the Horatii'* [fig. 6] from 1784 was instrumental in defining the Neoclassical style, was hardly a 'servile homage' to the past. Rather it was an active political stance on the present as it conveyed revolutionary messages, as argued by, among others, Thomas Crow and Kenneth Clark.[7]

The Neoclassical artists David and Canova each represent two important aspects of political art in the period. Whereas David was a 'court' artist who after the revolution solely served the regime in power, (the revolutionary French state and later Napoleon) the Italian Neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova's political role was different.[8] David promoted the ideals of a certain regime, while Canova in a more subtle way promoted the ideals of a free and independent art, although he still adopted a necessary, pragmatic approach to patronage. Canova managed to navigate the highly complicated and dangerous political landscapes in Italy around 1800 while maintaining his precious artistic independence (by having various patrons) as argued by his biographer Christopher Johns.[9]

This pragmatic approach has since led to some confusion among scholars, who have mistaken Canova's pragmatism and the ambiguous themes in his art with an unpolitical stance compared to, for instance, David's more overt political motifs.[10] Ambiguous messages and/or embedded criticism has been an important component of panegyric (which is also adaptable to visual art) ever since antiquity, which both patrons and audiences exploited.[11] It is therefore crucial to note the differences in political mentalities between now and then. The political systems in Europe in the 19th century mostly prohibited overt political statements, at least if they worked against the ideology of the regime. 19th century art containing

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[7] K. Clark: The Romantic Rebellion – Romantic versus Classic Art, (London, 1973) p. 21.

[8] Please see Christopher M. S. Johns book *Antonio Canova and the Politics of Patronage in Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe*, (London, 1998) for a thorough examination of Canova's role in politics and his relationship with Napoleon.

[9] Ibid. pp. 1-2.

[10] Ibid. p. 4.

[11] F. Ahl: 'The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome' in The American Journal of Philology, Vol. 105, No. 2 ((The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 1984), pp. 174-208.

messages with subtle criticism of a ruling regime are thus easy to overlook from a modern perspective. Artists' political agency can be complicated to discern in an authoritarian society as outspoken critique of a ruling regime would often have been either censored or outright punished. This was certainly the context in which the art of David, Canova and Thorvaldsen was installed.

The modernist negligence of Neoclassical art or the complicated view of Romanticism and politics cannot alone explain why political elements in Thorvaldsen's art particularly have been ignored by succeeding generations, unlike in the work of Canova and David. First, Thorvaldsen belonged mostly to a German culture and context, which might have been overlooked in the French dominated scholarship of Neoclassicism.[12] In Scandinavia, the view of Thorvaldsen as a Danish national icon is dominant in the existing scholarship. This view has probably been the most consistent Danish view of Thorvaldsen, overshadowing the cosmopolitan, European nature of his art. This nationalistic emphasis on Thorvaldsen's art has tended to blur the understanding of and the context in which his art came into being. Thorvaldsen's first biographer in particular, the civil servant Just Mathias Thiele (1795-1874) effectively shaped the following generations' nationalistic view of Thorvaldsen.[13]

Even though Thiele's diligent and careful collection and preservation of documents related to Thorvaldsen has been vital for later generations of Thorvaldsen scholars, he purposely omitted elements from Thorvaldsen's life and work if he deemed them inappropriate for the public eye.[14] This included aspects of Thorvaldsen's private as well as professional life if there was a risk of Thorvaldsen's reputation suffering any stains. To be fair, Thiele wrote his biographies in the 19th century in an authoritarian society, which often hindered more overt statements. Emphasising political motifs in Thorvaldsen's art might, in Thiele's eyes, have jeopardised his public reputation in times when the political landscape was very

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[12] Johns, p. 4, and David d'Angers, 'Lettre sur Thorwaldsen', Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, Småtryk 1856.

[13] Thiele, J.M.: 1832: *Den danske Billedhugger Bertel Thorvaldsen og hans Værker, Anden Deel, tekst- og planchebind*, (Copenhagen, 1832) and Thiele, J.M.: II: *Thorvaldsen i Rom. 1805-1819*, (Copenhagen, 1852).

[14] See for instance Busk-Jepsen, K.: 'The Artists' Friendship between Bertel Thorvaldsen and Maria Szymanowska', arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk, 2019.

complicated and finding itself in a transitional phase between absolute and constitutional monarchy. Overt political opinions could, for instance, have risked the inauguration of the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen, which symbolically took place in the revolutionary year of 1848. Ultimately Thiele's work exerted heavy influence on later scholarship in the 19th and 20th centuries.

A good example of this influence is found in Bjarne Jørnæs' Thorvaldsen biography *The Sculptor* (1993, English 2011) where the author is generally of the opinion that it was Thorvaldsen's 'unpolitical' attitude which secured him commissions from all over Europe and from different political factions, defining his legacy as a popular but politically uncomplicated artist. Ultimately, Jørnæs reiterates the view of Thorvaldsen as a genius with a child-like, naive mind, raised above petty political issues. Indeed, this view seems to be prevalent among scholars, with many not even attempting to examine Thorvaldsen in a political context. Stefano Grandesso's biography *Bertel Thorvaldsen* (2018) is another example of this trend, focusing on Thorvaldsen's relationship with the older contemporary Antonio Canova, but without addressing the political issues of the era. David Bindman's book on Thorvaldsen and Canova *Warm Flesh, Cold Marble* (2014) does a better job of pointing to the importance of Kant's aesthetic theory in Thorvaldsen's artistic oeuvre, but still without linking his art directly to the political developments of the age.

Not all scholars, however, have overlooked this important aspect of Thorvaldsen's art. The art historian Jürgen Wittstock contributed substantially to the knowledge of Thorvaldsen and politics in his doctoral thesis (Habilitationsschrift*) Geschichte der Deutschen und Skandinavischen Thorvaldsen-Rezeption bis zur Jahresmitte 1819* (1975). He notes as well that Neoclassicism for much of the 20th century was seen as a 'foreign body' between the 'true' artistic styles of Rococo and Impressionism, regrettably leading to a lack of appreciation of how Neoclassicism was used in a political context.[15] Wittstock recognises the political ambiguity in the reception of the *Alexander Frieze,* but is himself ambiguous when concluding how

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[15] J. Wittstock, *Geschichte der Deutschen und Skandinavischen Thorwaldsen-Rezeption bis zur Jahresmitte 1819*, (Hamburg, 1975) p. 14.

difficult it is to assess Thorvaldsen's own political opinions.[16] Most eminently, the research project 'The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives', which ran from 2006-2021, has taken important steps to uncover and examine primary sources such as letters, diary excerpts, poems and newspaper articles which point in the direction of forgotten and/or ignored political dimensions in Thorvaldsen's art.[17]

When it comes to scholarly literature concerning the *Alexander Frieze* specifically, the amount of written work is surprisingly modest considering that the frieze is among Thorvaldsen's most renowned works. Apart from a few articles the monument often receives little more than passing mentioning in the Thorvaldsen literature alongside his other works. Bjarne Jørnæs' article, 'The Triumph of Alexander' mainly describes the history of the frieze's commission and execution and states that the frieze's connection to Napoleon was probably soon forgotten and that Thorvaldsen's own political point of view is difficult to determine.[18] The Swedish historian Fredrik Thomasson examines the frieze in his article 'Art, nationalism and politics during occupation and Restoration Rome' from 2015. But he states that it is 'improbable' that the frieze should contain political messages critical of Napoleon and points to the fact that the claim has been rejected by most later art historians.[19]

The art historians Thomasson refers to are Peter Calmeyer and his article 'Die Orientalen auf Thorvaldsens Alexanderfries' from 1990. Calmeyer again refers to Wittstock's doctoral thesis from 1975. But as mentioned, Wittstock is ambiguous when concluding to what an extent Thorvaldsen placed anti-French themes in the frieze. Wittstock states that it is hard to make any final assessment of Thorvaldsen's motives but without rejecting the possibilities of Thorvaldsen's anti-Napoleonic intent outright.[20]

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[16] Ibid. pp. 105-9.

[17] See for instance the articles: N. Kronberg Frederiksen, 'Christian 8.'s Loan from Thorvaldsen', arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk, 2014, E.J. Bencard, 'Thorvaldsen's Continuance in Rome 1803-4', arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk, 2009 H.E. Havsteen, 'An Ambiguous Monument', arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk, 2017.

[18] B. Jørnæs, 'Thorvaldsen's triumph of Alexander', Analecta Romana Instituti Danici, 1989 p. 40.

[19] Thomasson, F. (2015) Art, nationalism and politics during occupation and Restoration Rome: "Che razza infame, quella dei leccaculi!" In: Stefano Fogelberg-Rota & Sabrina Norlander Eliasson (ed.), The city of the soul: The literary making of Rome (pp. 169-183). Rome: Svenska institutet i Rom Suecoromana. Studia Artis Historiae Instituti Romani regni Sueciae pp. 172 & 175

[20] Wittstock, p. 104.

Calmeyer's work misses the point when he concludes that the frieze 'was no fiery statement' for either political side and thus not 'properly' political. He fails to accurately analyse the meaning of the frieze and the time and context in which it came into being.[21]

The most recent comprehensive treatment of the *Alexander Frieze* is found in Tabea Schindler's book *Celebrity – Visualisierung eines Künstlerkults im frühen 19. Jahrhundert* (2021). Schindler notes with accuracy that Thorvaldsen's relationship with Napoleon was most likely a conflicted one. She observes that he was socially connected with the anti-Napoleonic opposition while at the same time producing a bust of the late emperor in 1830, which she interprets as a pro-Napoleonic move by Thorvaldsen.[22] Schindler also concludes that it is questionable whether the frieze should be interpreted as a 'subtle critique of the French emperor'.[23] Schindler, however, does make an important contribution to our understanding of the cult surrounding Thorvaldsen in her laudable recognition of Thorvaldsen's marketing talent which includes the *Alexander Frieze*. This aspect is crucial in understanding not only Thorvaldsen but also how the public viewed and judged his art.

Most literature on the frieze thus either abstains from assessing whether political motifs can be found in the *Alexander Frieze* either due to neglect or to perceived uncertainties and/or concludes that Thorvaldsen held no political opinions. Furthermore, it is a general rule that the scholarly literature lacks a thorough analysis of the frieze's political impact on European society in the decades that followed its execution in 1812 and until the revolutions of 1848.

Sources and Methods

The cautious approach of earlier scholarship is understandable, but the availability of a more comprehensive body of source material today enables a thorough and bolder re-examination of the frieze

[21] O.P. Calmeyer, 'Die Orientalen auf Thorvaldsens Alexanderfries', in Achaemenid history 5. Eds. H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg & J.W. Drijvers, Leiden 1990, p. 113.
[22] T. Schindler, *Bertel Thorvaldsen – Celebrity: Visualisierungen eines Künstlerkults im frühen 19. Jahrhundert,* (de Gruyter, 2021) pp. 77-8.
[23] Ibid. p. 80.

and the history surrounding it. I must emphasise that my approach will be that of a historian rather than an art historian. Visual sources will be examined in conjunction with written sources, predominantly found among The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives' digital collection of more than 10,000 documents, all easily accessible regardless of their physical location across Europe. This variety of text genres (letters, diary entries, contracts, newspaper articles and poems) will be augmented by a few other printed sources (mostly letters) located outside this archive. My approach will draw upon art, political, cultural, and social history, comprising of what might be labelled as an approach searching for a 'total history' of the frieze, to unearth how the history of it might reflect long term societal change in Europe. Drawing on the methodologies of these disciplines will strengthen the foundation on which the historical source criticism is based.

Several questions can be asked when examining existing scholarship and the primary body of material available today. First, how might Thorvaldsen himself have shown political agency? The odds at first seem to be against this approach. As noted, most of the scholarly literature on the subject has rejected the idea of the *Alexander Frieze* as a political statement critical of Napoleon, and no direct political statements exist from Thorvaldsen's own hand. However, material such as letters and diary excerpts from Thorvaldsen's social circle do exist and could shed light on Thorvaldsen's political opinions. This will be examined in the first chapter of the dissertation.

In the second and third chapters, the artwork itself, as well as reactions to it and reception of it will be examined, released from the intentions of the artist. What kind of people reacted to the frieze, where did they see it, how did they react and what kind of meaning did they derive from it? To what an extent can the *Alexander Frieze* and its reception history be seen to reflect the political and societal change of the first half of the 19th century? And which patterns of communication can be found in the discussions revolving around the monument?

The work will mostly expand on the work of the research project 'The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives' and Jürgen Wittstock's doctoral dissertation and it will challenge the popular notion that the *Alexander Frieze's* conception and reception was detached from a political context. However, whereas Wittstock concludes his work on Thorvaldsen's *Alexander Frieze* in the year of 1819, this dissertation will proceed until the 1840's primarily due to two reasons. First, Thorvaldsen's fame reached unprecedented heights in the years leading up to his death in 1844 and, secondly, the political situation sharpened in Europe in the years before the revolutions in 1848, both of which are reflected in the reception of the frieze. The *Alexander Frieze* was installed in several other locations apart from its original display in the Quirinal Palace in Rome. I have chosen to lay the focus predominantly on the German and Scandinavian reception of Thorvaldsen and his Alexander Frieze (but with the inclusion of occasional French and Italian sources where relevant). This is not because the Italian or French contexts are without interest, but political Neoclassical art has been more thoroughly examined in these polities through David and Canova's art, whereas political Neoclassical art in Germany and Scandinavia and Thorvaldsen's art has, as shown, received far less attention.

Chapter 1: Patrons and Political Artists

Political Neoclassicism

Jacques-Louis David's (1748-1825) painting *The Oath of the Horatii* [fig. 6] caused an uproar in a crisis-ridden French society when it was exhibited in 1784 in the famous Paris Salon. The royal family and aristocracy enjoyed lavish luxury at the expense of an impoverished population, which might be one of the reasons why the Parisian public reacted so intensely to its themes of austerity and civic patriotism.

The painting replaced Rococo with Neoclassicism as the new dominant artistic style and it is an overt and thus illustrative example of art which influenced public, political opinion of the era.[24] Political,

[24] A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art, Vol. 3 – Rococo, Classicism and Romanticism*, (London, 1951) pp. 134-6 and T.C.W Blanning, *The Power of Culture and The Culture of Power*, (Oxford, 2002) pp. 435-7.

representational art, however, was not a novel thing. Art had since antiquity played a crucial role both in political and religious contexts (which were often tied closely together). But if David's art is compared to the representational art of, for instance, Le Brun (1619-90) during the reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715), there are crucial differences. Whereas art had earlier served to uphold the tradition and authority of the ruler, it could now be used to directly attack churches, courts, and the aristocracy. (Neoclassical) art (in principle) was no longer a tool reserved to preserve the power of the elites.[25]

The societal role of the artist was evolving dramatically in the decades around 1800, just as all parts of Western societies were. Until the 18th century the artist's role had generally been that of a servant, rarely being able to choose clients or motifs freely (with the 17th century Netherlands as a possible exception).[26] That situation changed gradually over the course of the 18th century with the Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91) being one of the first examples of an artist working 'free-lance'.[27] Antonio Canova (1757-1822), the great sculptor from Venice, and later Thorvaldsen's rival and friend, is another who always aimed to work for various patrons, regardless of their political affiliations.[28]

This development occurred alongside the emergence of a 'public sphere' across Western Europe in particular.[29] In France, for instance, a class of paying customers were able to exert influence on the debates in society, challenging the cultural monopoly that had been established by Louis XIV and which by the end of the 18th century appeared much out of fashion, especially seen from the emerging Salon culture.[30] Paradoxically, and as argued by Peter Burke, Louis XIV and the efforts of his propagandists in late 17th/early 18th century might inadvertently have contributed to the creation of a public opinion in the first place, sealing the fate of absolute monarchy later in the century.[31] The French monarchy failed to

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[25] Hauser, pp. 143-44.
[26] H. Trevor-Roper, *Princes and Artists: Patronage and Ideology at four Habsburg Courts, 1517-1633*, (London, 1976) p. 8.
[27] Blanning, *The Power of Culture* p. 91, Hauser, p. 77.
[28] Johns, pp. 9-11.
[29] Blanning, *The Power of Culture* pp. 181-2. For a further discussion of the term 'public sphere' see pp. 5-15.
[30] Ibid. pp. 3-4.
[31] See P. Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, (London, 1992) p. 152 and R. Milano: *The Portrait Bust and French Cultural Politics in the Eighteenth Century* in Brill's Studies on Art, Art History, and Intellectual History General Editor Walter S. Melion (Emory University) Vol. 8, (Leiden, 2015) p. 14.

reform its cultural representation, and the situation changed dramatically in 1789 when the French Revolution erupted, and a flood of political unrest and change swept over Europe.

This development was widely felt in the artistic sphere. A new generation of highly individualistic artists came not only to represent the new revolutionary world but were also expected to help shape and define it.[32] This artistic movement had been in the making since at least the 1770's, but the events in France helped to radicalise it many places in Europe. The German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) even went so far as to recognise the artist as an important political force, equal to both princes, priests, and philosophers.[33] Schiller himself longed after a world in which he was no longer bound by princely patrons, but could express himself freely, answering only to the public: *"I write as a citizen of the free world who serves no prince (…) from now on all my ties are dissolved. The public is now everything to me – my preoccupation, my sovereign and my friend".*[34]

Not only did the preferred artistic style shift from Rococo to Neoclassicism, but the conception of the *artist* changed too. A new world view began to take hold in the 1790's, especially in Britain and Germany, partly inspired by and partly provoked by the events in France. Kenneth Clark and Tim Blanning have dubbed this new world view the 'Romantic Rebellion' or the 'Romantic Revolution' respectively. The romantic idea of the artist as a profound, revolutionary force was born. It was into this context Thorvaldsen entered when he arrived in Rome in 1797. As a young student it is highly likely that he had already encountered some of these revolutionary ideas in Copenhagen when he was a member of the progressive literary society *Borups Selskab*. It might seem confusing to label Thorvaldsen both a Romantic and Neoclassical artist, since the two categories are often (erroneously) described as contrasts to one

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[32] See T. Crow's book Crow, T.: *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France*, (London 1995) for a thorough discussion of the impact of David and his pupils on French Revolutionary Politics.
[33] F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters – English and German Facing*, Wilkinson E.M. & Willoughby L. A. (eds.), (Oxford, 1967) p. 57-61.
[34] Translation from German by Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution* p. 108. Please note, all translations into English are my own, unless otherwise stated.

another.[35] But it must be stressed that whereas Neoclassicism is a distinct artistic style, the term Romanticism does not describe a recognisable artistic style in the visual arts.[36]

Even if Thorvaldsen was criticised and seen to belong in the periphery of European art history in the last part of the 19th century and well into the 20th (albeit less so in a Danish context), it is important to stress the fact that he attained an incredible level of stardom in his own lifetime, reflecting the contemporary artistic ideal.[37] This was especially the case in the German speaking part of Europe, but also in Italy, where he was dubbed the 'patriarch of the bas-relief' after his work on the *Alexander Frieze*.[38] The German composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's words of him in German in 1831 are telling: *"It is after all incredible, that Goethe and Thorwaldsen are still alive, that Beethoven only died a few years ago, and that Hotho* [Heinrich Gustav Hotho, German art historian ed.] *then claims that German art is dead as a mouse"*.[39]

Thorvaldsen was seen to belong at the centre of this German group of artists and intellectuals and at the same artistic level as Goethe and Beethoven. He was often even considered to be a 'German' artist despite his Danish upbringing and education. Madame de Staël for instance erroneously states that he was German in her book *De l'Allemagne* (1810).[40]

Thorvaldsen was in other words considered to be a member of the very elite of German artists by his peers, an artistic elite whose political affiliations has been the subject of much debate in the 20th century. The 'unpolitical' nature of the German *Bildungsbürgertum* was intensely scrutinized following the debacle of the Second World War. Schiller's letters on aesthetics for instance, have been branded his 'flight from politics' following the war.[41] Another important figure (and a close friend of Thorvaldsen), Wilhelm von

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[35] For a further discussion of Thorvaldsen as either a Neoclassical or Romantic artist please see the catalogue 'Bückling, M. & Mongi-Vollmer, E. (ed.): Schönheit und Revolution: Klassizismus 1770-1820 (Katalog), Städtische Galerie im Städelschen Kunstinstitut Frankfurt am Main, (Munich, 2013).

[36] H. Honour: *Romanticism*, (New York, 1979) p. 15.

[37] Wittstock, p. 7.

[38] C.G. Grass, ‚Korrespondenznachrichten', *Morgenblatt für Gebildete Stände*, nr. 254, 22.10.1812. p. 1015-1016.

[39] F. Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Sämtliche Briefe in 12 Bänden, vol. 2,* Loos, H., Seidl, W. (eds.): (Kassel, 2008) Brief 7. Mai 1831. p. 267.

[40] Madame de Staël, *De l'Allemagne* (1814, Paris), pp. 377-8

[41] Beiser, p. 85.

Humboldt has also been described as unpolitical and the German Romantic preoccupation with education (Bildung) has since been interpreted as lack of political interest. This however has been refuted by among others Frederick C. Beiser who stresses the political nature of the German Romantic *Bildungsideal,* which strived to improve society and cultivate its citizens through proper education, emphasising above all the political importance of arts and aesthetics in Romanticism.[42] The Romantic artists were supposed to be the pioneers in this comprehensive political and societal revolution.

Thorvaldsen's Formative Years

It was far from a given thing that a figure like Mendelssohn would one day name Thorvaldsen among great artists such as Goethe and Beethoven given that Thorvaldsen was born into poverty in the Dano-Norwegian capital of Copenhagen in 1770. Social mobility was not the foremost characteristic of the hierarchical 18th century, although there were examples of lowborn individuals who progressed in society and attained fame and wealth as artists, such as the Austrian composer Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) and Antonio Canova.[43]

Thorvaldsen's talent was quickly recognised by his professors at the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. In 1796, he gained a scholarship and went to Rome. The stipend was to last for around three years with the option of prolonging it, but ultimately Thorvaldsen ended up staying in Rome for more than forty years, rather than returning to the service of the Danish king. His unwillingness to return to the provincial Danish capital and only serve one patron after having experienced the artistic world-centre of Rome might have been inspired by the German-Danish painter Asmus Jacob Carstens (1754-1798), who was one of Thorvaldsen's closest acquaintances during his first year in Rome.

In 1796 Carstens famously rejected repeated requests from the Prussian minister of Education to return to Prussian service, which had originally been the agreement when he set out to study on a scholarship

[42] See Beiser, pp. 84-140 for a discussion of the political nature of German Romanticism.
[43] Johns, p. 15.

in Rome.[44] Ever since his own decision to stay in Rome in 1803-4, the idea of personal and artistic autonomy appeared to have been of great importance to Thorvaldsen as well.[45] However, the complicated political circumstances in Europe in first half of the 19th century, would often require a good deal of diplomatic balancing from the artist. It is therefore not always easy to assess Thorvaldsen's relationship with monarchy and to politics in general.

Thorvaldsen was not, unlike many other artists of the time such as Carstens or Canova, known for his written eloquence. This lack of expressiveness when it came to writing has often been explained quite straightforwardly: Thorvaldsen was dyslexic and had difficulties writing. Although this may have hampered his abilities to communicate, it wasn't impossible for him to write and he was able to read as well, to which his vast library bears testimony.[46] When he could afford it, he would normally not write letters himself, preferring to dictate them.

Countless reminders from clients, friends and lovers testify to Thorvaldsen's unwillingness (or forgetfulness) when it came to replying to letters, but at times he responded instantly. To use a modern phrase, *he was simply bad at texting*, but apparently only when it suited him. What truly complicate matters wasn't Thorvaldsen's dyslexia, but rather that few (if any) direct political views are expressed in his existing correspondence. His dyslexia, apparent lack of academic skill as well as the absence of clear political views may have suited artistic ideals later in the 19th century. It foisted a cliché of an artist who almost only by force of nature, unpolluted by human education and oblivious to his worldly surroundings, rose to the highest spheres of society, a paradox since this view of the artist is ultimately derived from Romanticism itself. This cliché has clouded the scholarly view of Thorvaldsen for a long time.

But how is it then possible to assess Thorvaldsen's political beliefs if he wasn't simply unpolitical as has so often been claimed of him? This question constitutes a methodological challenge, but far from an

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[44] Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution,* p. 20.
[45] Bencard, 'Thorvaldsen's Continuance in Rome 1803-4'.
[46] Kofoed, K.: 'Thorvaldsen's Spoken and Written Language', arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk, 2009.

insurmountable one. Although political utterances are missing from Thorvaldsen's own hand, documents from Thorvaldsen's social circle confirm in abundance that he held political views as well as political and personal prejudices.

Thorvaldsen's Political Views According to His Social Circle

The Danish actress Johanne Luise Heiberg (1812-90) describes Thorvaldsen as taciturn but with a dry sense of humour. She notes that his repeated refusals of dinner invitations from the Danish king Christian VIII (1786-1848, reigned from 1839) had nothing to do with political naivety and disregard of social conventions as claimed by some observers, but was rather a clear sign of Thorvaldsen's egalitarian dispositions.[47] To refuse an invitation from such a prestigious host was generally unheard of at the time. One further anecdote illustrates Thorvaldsen's preoccupation with egalitarian values. During his way back to Copenhagen after a trip to Rome in 1842, when his stardom had been cemented, Thorvaldsen was celebrated in every city he passed through. On one such celebratory occasion in Altona, after dinner, Thorvaldsen shook the hand of every person present: Not only the gentlemen, but the women and children too, and most important of all: the servants in the kitchen.[48] This gesture caused sensation in the hierarchal society of the day. He was labelled *Paradigmata der Menscheit,* and the story was widely disseminated thereafter.[49]

In general Thorvaldsen seemed to have had an ambiguous relationship with the Danish monarchy and Christian VIII in particular. Thorvaldsen had relied on financial support from the Danish monarchy during his early years in Rome and he seemed to have personally liked Frederik VI, feelings he never

[47] J.L. Heiberg, *Et Liv gjenoplevet i Erindringen af Johanne Luise Heiberg*, København 1944 (first published 1891-92), Friis, A.: (ed.), vol. 2, p. 29-33.
[48] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, m26 I, nr. 57, Giuseppe Mugnoz: Earliest 14th of August, latest 1st of December 1831. Letter to Bertel Thorvaldsen & Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, m30 II, nr. 78a, Steinheim, S.L.: 'Ein Zusammentreffen mit Thorvaldsen auf der Lüneburger Heide', in: *Telegraph für Deutschland* November 1842, Nr. 188, p. 749-752 & C. Stampe, *Baronesse Stampes Erindringer om Thorvaldsen*, Rigmor Stampe (ed.), København 1912, p. 179-180.
[49] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, m30 II, nr. 78, Johanna Steinheim: 29th of October 1842. Letter to Raphael Hanno.

showed his successor, Christian VIII.[50] Ever since Christian (then as crown prince) had borrowed a hefty sum of money from Thorvaldsen during his grand tour around Europe in 1821, their relationship seemed to have been somewhat strained. The young prince had spent most of his allowance and was forced to rely on financial help from the Danish sculptor when he reached Rome. It probably suited the sculptor well that he repaid some of his old 'debts' during his early student years, thus balancing an otherwise uneven relationship with an absolutist prince.[51]

An interesting letter to Thorvaldsen, which concerns his relationship to the concepts of monarchy and liberty, is probably written in the summer of 1842 by Marie Lehmann (1821-49) who was married to the prominent Danish liberal politician Orla Lehmann (1810-70). The Thorvaldsen Museum was then under construction, and Marie claims that her mother risked causing political trouble when she hoisted the French tricolour over the unfinished museum. Marie, however, thought this political statement to be fitting since it was obvious to her that Thorvaldsen's art represented the concept of freedom, and that the museum as such should be free of any royal or state interference.[52]

So, although Thorvaldsen hardly made any direct political statements in writing, his actions, actions made on his behalf, comments on his behaviour and opinions made by those around him, indicate a political stance which at the very least can be said to be critical towards the existing power structures in society, seriously challenging the claim that Thorvaldsen was an 'unpolitical' artist. Thorvaldsen's own life, work and way of behaving came to be seen as the embodiment and synthesis of the revolutionary ideal.[53]

The Pragmatic Artist

[50] Heiberg, p. 29-33.
[51] Kronberg Frederiksen, N.: 'Christian 8.s Loan'.
[52] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, m24 1842, nr. 63, Marie Lehmann: Summer of 1842. Letter to Bertel Thorvaldsen.
[53] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, m26 I, nr. 57, Giuseppe Mugnoz: Earliest 14th of August, latest 1st of December 1831. Letter to Bertel Thorvaldsen.

Was it hypocrisy that made Thorvaldsen sympathise with the liberal cause and egalitarian values on one hand while on the other accepting commissions (and money) from conservative princes? It may appear contradictory that Thorvaldsen should do both, but although the sculptor may have been politically progressive, he still relied on the support of conservative monarchies in Europe, not only for income but also simply to receive permission to work.

A poignant example of this concerns Thorvaldsen's presence at the Conference of Troppau in October 1820, where the conservative powers of Austria, Prussia and Russia convened to discuss an intervention against the democratic revolution in Naples, which had taken place in the summer of 1820. It would seem bizarre that Thorvaldsen showed up at a conference destined for crushing democratic movements.

But Thorvaldsen had, back in 1817, been commissioned to execute a monument [fig. 7.] of the Polish national hero Prince Poniatowski who had fought for Napoleon and fell in the battle of Leipzig in 1813. Poniatowski's old enemy, the Russian emperor Alexander I (who now also ruled Poland as king) had initially agreed to the installation of the monument. But it was a delicate matter and the monument remained to be executed and installed in 1820.

Shortly before the Conference in Troppau Thorvaldsen modelled a bust of Alexander I in Warsaw [fig. 8]. A submissive letter from Thorvaldsen to Alexander notifying the emperor of the finished artwork, in which Thorvaldsen wrote in French: *"It will forever be the happiest time of my life, when I had the chance to contemplate the greatest monarch on earth up close"*.[54] This formal expression indicates that Thorvaldsen was hugely aware of the importance of accommodating the whims of powerful sovereigns. The letter was written by Thorvaldsen's friend Peter Ole Brøndsted, who was an experienced diplomat and the Danish agent at the papal court (only the signature belongs to Thorvaldsen personally), which also underlines

[54] Moscow, Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiskoi Imperii, Bertel Thorvaldsen: 24th of May 1822. Letter to Tsar Alexander I.

Thorvaldsen's proximity to professional Danish diplomats. They may have emphasised the importance of diplomatic etiquette in Thorvaldsen's dealings with princely clients.

The history behind a monument to Frederik VI in Skanderborg, Denmark [fig. 9] reflects the same themes. Thorvaldsen was commissioned in 1840 by several prominent liberal Danish citizens to execute a monument commemorating the late king Frederik VI. When examining the primary sources at hand, it is evident that the apparent tribute to Frederik VI was only part of the message the patrons wished to communicate. Applauding the late conservative king for his (few) progressive reforms, but emphasising that the monument was a *memorial* rather than a monument of *liberty* (which wouldn't be erected until the king had accepted a free constitution) effectively put a lot of pressure on the new king Christian VIII and encouraged him to speed up the process concerning a free constitution.[55] But such claims could not be directly expressed in an absolute monarchy, which meant that the demands had to be somewhat disguised. Art was the perfect medium in which to present these veiled requests.

Indeed, Thorvaldsen had to work within the confines of monarchy and respect the political situation of the time even though he might have held views which supported freedom and egalitarian values as Marie Lehmann and her mother claimed. He had to be a diplomat besides his artistic profession if he was to succeed (and thus enlisted and employed help from his social circle).

The Sculptor vs. Bonaparte

Not even a year after his arrival in the Pope's city, the French occupied much of Italy and would continue to exert heavy influence right up until Napoleon's own downfall in the years 1812-4. Apart from the uneasy peace of Amiens in 1802-1803, European politics were tormented by continuous warfare throughout Napoleon's rule and it would have been impossible for Thorvaldsen to ignore this in Rome.

[55] H.E. Havsteen, 'An Ambiguous Monument', arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk, 2017.

Resistance, as well as collaboration, to French rule characterised Rome in the years under French dominance.[56] The French looting of the city's treasures of art, one of the main reasons why artists had headed to Rome in the first place, was highly unpopular. Thorvaldsen himself witnessed how the French stowed important pieces of art in crates in the Capitoline Museum, which he described in a letter to the Danish painter Nicolai Abildgaard in late 1797 or early 1798.[57] The Napoleonic Wars severely affected the art market in Rome since they hampered the possibilities of exporting art from Rome, particularly to Britain, where many collectors resided, which resulted in economic hardships for many artists.[58]

No known written comments on Napoleon from Thorvaldsen himself exist, but again statements from people close to Thorvaldsen can uncover some patterns of thought. It should also be noted that Thorvaldsen executed a portrait bust of Napoleon in 1830. As mentioned, Tabea Schindler argues that this is indication of Thorvaldsen's support and respect for Napoleon.[59] But this portrait bust wasn't commissioned as an official portrait, rather it was ordered by a Scotsman, Alexander Murray, a Napoleon aficionado at the time.

The bust [fig. 10] does appear peculiar when compared to other portraits made by Thorvaldsen. No other portraits made by Thorvaldsen contain such elaborate ornaments like the eagle forming the base and a globe supporting it. It thus cannot be confirmed whether this bust is a testimony of Thorvaldsen's affinity of Napoleon or scepticism of him. Again, its meaning appears ambiguous just like the circumstances behind its commissioning.

Thorvaldsen's friend and benefactor baron Hermann von Schubart (1756-1832) gives a highly interesting account of the sculptor's possible political antipathies concerning the Bonaparte family in French: *"He [Thorvaldsen] showed me the greatest repugnance to go, for although a sculptor, he has the strongest aversion for the Bonaparte*

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[56] Thomasson, pp. 166-7.
[57] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, m28, nr. 15, Bertel Thorvaldsen: Late 1797 or early 1798. Draft of letter to Nicolai Abildgaard.
[58] Wittstock, p. 74
[59] Schindler, pp. 77-8.

family. It was no use telling him that an artist should not have political opinions, that he belongs to the whole world. (…) Because of this political prejudice our good Thorvaldsen lost at least 10.000 species which he could otherwise easily have earned.'[60]

The letter, written in May 1809, is revealing. Thorvaldsen's 'aversion' for the Bonaparte family became apparent to the displeased diplomat Schubart when the emperor's sister Elisa Baciocchi (1777-1820) wished to commission work from Thorvaldsen. Alongside her husband Félix Baciocchi she ruled the principalities of Piombino, Lucca and Tuscany: as emperor Napoleon I had the habit of installing family members on various thrones around Europe. Thorvaldsen often spent time at Schubart's country estate at Montenero in Tuscany, where Elisa requested that Thorvaldsen be sent to meet her so that she might commission some works from him. Thorvaldsen, however, returned to Rome rather than meet with Elisa, whom he openly disliked.

Not only was the Danish diplomat von Schubart annoyed by Thorvaldsen's lack of diplomatic tact (which might have had diplomatic consequences for Schubart himself who had set up the meeting between the two) it explicitly states that Thorvaldsen was ready to abstain from earning 10.000 species[61] because of his political disagreements with the Bonaparte family. Unlike Canova who agreed to work for Elisa, Thorvaldsen, according to Schubart, got carried away by emotions since he politically despised the Bonaparte family and held 'political prejudices'. The tone and content of the letter reveals without a doubt that Schubart thought that it was wrong of Thorvaldsen to hold political opinions as an artist, or at least uttering them so vocally.

It is not immediately apparent *why* Thorvaldsen held these political prejudices against the family (who in 1809 was an ally of Thorvaldsen's native Denmark), but several explanations can be offered. One could

[60] J.B. Hartmann, ‚Bertel Thorvaldsen Scultore Danese e i suoi soggiorni a Montenero', in 'Rivista di Livorno, Rassegna di Attività Municipale a Cura del Comune (ed. Mostardi C.) vol. 5, (Rome, 1958) p. 281.
[61] One specie was the equivalent of 25 g silver, so the amount mentioned here must have been the equivalent of 250 kilos of silver, see also: Editors at the Thorvaldsen Museum Archives: 'Monetary Units', arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk, 2009.

suspect that Thorvaldsen found that Napoleon and his family had betrayed the very ideals of freedom and equality originally promoted by the French Revolution. If Thorvaldsen truly supported these ideals, this might explain his unwillingness to meet with Elisa in 1809 and to work for the Bonaparte family in general. This suspicion might be reinforced by that fact that Thorvaldsen's confidante and friend Friederike Brun was close with Germaine de Staël, the woman of letters who formed an important part of the French opposition to Napoleon.

Why then would Thorvaldsen agree three years later to execute such a formidable monument like the *Alexander Frieze* for the Quirinal Palace in Rome in Napoleon's honour shortly after his dismissal of Napoleon's sister? There might be several reasons for Thorvaldsen's change of attitude. One explanation is rather mundane. In a letter from Karl Viktor von Bonstetten (1745-1832) to Thorvaldsen's confidante Friederike Brun (1765-1835) dated 1.1.1812 he states in German that *"In Rome three hundred and fifty artists are currently starving, yes even Thorvaldsen works at a lower price in order to survive".*[62] As mentioned, the consequences of the general state of warfare in Europe was being felt in Rome in 1812, even for an established artist such as Thorvaldsen. The prospect of a commission may have enticed Thorvaldsen into abandoning a few principles.

On the other hand, the diplomat Herman Schubart and other people in Thorvaldsen's social circle may have succeeded in maturing his political views, making it apparent to him that pragmatism concerning patrons was the proper way to go for even a famous artist. Thorvaldsen may have realised that entering in an open conflict with the emperor of the French might not have seemed to be the best way forward. Or he might have thought that executing a frieze for Napoleon might be a chance to subtly utter his own views in a prominent context.

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[62] Bonstetten, K.V.v.: Bonstettiana: Briefkorrespondenzen Karl Viktor von Bonstettens und seines Kreises Elfter Band 1811-1817 Teilband XI/i 1811-14 Noviziat in Hyères das Eiserne Zeitalter Neue Weltordnung Walser-Wilhelm D. & P. (ed.): Wallstein Verlag, (Göttingen, 2007) p. 22.

Chapter 2: "The Most Beautiful Sculpture Made since Antiquity"

The Commissioning of the Frieze

The historical circumstances behind the commissioning of Thorvaldsen's *Alexander Frieze* for the Quirinal Palace were highly dramatic. On the night of the 5-6th of July 1809 imperial French gendarmes entered the papal residence of the Quirinal Palace and seized the elderly pope Pius VII (1742-1823) and exiled him first to Savona, later to Fontainebleau outside Paris, the culmination of a long conflict between the pope and Napoleon. For this ruthless act Napoleon was excommunicated.[63] Later that year the religiously ostracised Napoleon decided to push through his divorce from empress Josephine because of her inability to give birth to a male heir. Instead, he married princess Marie Louise (1791-1847), a daughter of the Austrian Emperor Francis I.

The marriage was supposed not only to secure an heir and thus the future of his dynasty, but also to seal an alliance with Austria, France's enemy since the revolution. When Marie Louise finally bore Napoleon a son in 1811, he was given the title 'King of Rome'. Since the pope had unwillingly vacated the city, Napoleon saw a chance to turn Rome into the empire's second city, culturally linking the ancient Roman empire with his modern French one.[64]

With the pope gone and the emperor in need of a proper residence in Rome, one of the holy father's former residences, the Quirinal Palace on top of the Monte Cavallo, was designated as the new imperial quarters. In 1811 the architect Raffaele Stern (1774-1820) embarked on a grand project of renovation so that the palace could properly accommodate the imperial family. They were scheduled to arrive in Rome in the summer of 1812 for an additional coronation of Napoleon in St. Peter's Basilica after the ones he had already had in Paris (1804) and Milan (1805).[65] The extensive renovation was typical for Napoleon's

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63 Broers, M.: Volume 2: *Napoleon – The Spirit of the Age 1805-1810*, (London, 2018) p. 362.
64 Ibid. p. 439 & Grandesso, S.: Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844), (Silvana, 2018) p. 103.
65 Grandesso p. 103.

imperial project and similar projects had been initiated all over the French sphere of influence in Europe, where they were generally characterised by lavish budgets.[66]

Thorvaldsen was not the only artist contributing to the redecoration of the palace, which Napoleon himself seems to have given a lot of attention. The emperor must have obliged Antonio Canova's pleading when they had met in 1810. The art world in Rome needed commissions, Canova complained, and Napoleon was willing to give them that.[67] A committee was set up to oversee the iconographic programme consisting of among others Antonio Canova, the painter Camuccini and the architect Raffaele Stern. The decorations would, apart from Alexander the Great, depict illustrious men of the past as well as mythological figures such as Romulus and Remus, Pericles, Julius Caesar, and Lorenzo de Medici. Apart from the paintings, friezes were also supposed to adorn the rooms, an Italian renaissance tradition which was accepted by the French court.[68] The Italian sculptor Carlo Finelli for instance executed a frieze of the Roman emperor 'Trajan's triumph'. The friezes were better suited to tell a coherent story than paintings or sculptures – Thorvaldsen's frieze (which was not as long as Finelli's) was 35.2 meters long and 1.17 meters tall and covered all four walls in the 'Hall of Honour'.

Napoleon's association with Alexander the Great was far from new, and nor was he the first ruler to use imagery of Alexander in propaganda campaigns. The comparison with Alexander had been obvious to make ever since Napoleon's political and military breakthrough in the 1790's.[69] The similarity became even more conspicuous when Napoleon went on his Egyptian campaign. Napoleon knew the history of Alexander well through Plutarch. But although he supported these propaganda comparisons, the use of Alexander did have its negative sides too. For was Alexander a great hero or a vain tyrant? After Napoleon's marriage to Marie Louise in 1810 the allegorical comparisons with Alexander ceased to be

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[66] P. Mansel, *The Eagle in Splendour – Inside the Court of Napoleon,* (London, 2015) pp. 67-72.
[67] Grandesso, p. 105 and Bonstetten p. 22.
[68] Grandesso, p. 106.
[69] Broers, *Spirit of the Age,* pp. 141-42.

commissioned.[70] In the alliance with Austria Napoleon wished to send less bellicose signals in his propaganda. Thorvaldsen's *Alexander Frieze* constitutes an important exception to this rule.

Interestingly, Alexander the Great was not a motif commonly used by Thorvaldsen either. It was the first time he depicted the ancient Macedonian hero, and he would only return to him once after the *Alexander Frieze,* namely in 1831 when Thorvaldsen executed a relief depicting Alexander burning down the Persian ceremonial capital of Persepolis [fig. 11]. This depiction of the ancient hero is in stark contrast to the peaceful Alexander in Babylon, rather focusing on the drunk prince, who in anger burns down a defenceless city. One can't help but wonder whether this later relief, commissioned by the Bavarian monarch, was a comment on both the original *Alexander Frieze* from 1812 and Napoleon's destructive occupation of Moscow the same year.

It seems that Thorvaldsen's himself chose the iconography of Alexander in 1812, but the acceptance for the overall iconographic programme was needed from the French imperial representatives, who reported back to Napoleon in detail.[71] We can only guess as to why Napoleon accepted this, but Thorvaldsen's emphasis on peaceful motifs in the frieze (which was in line with Napoleon's new propaganda programme) might have been a contributing factor. In any case an awareness seems to have existed concerning the ambiguity of using Alexander as an allegory in art, both from the perspective of the patron, the artist and the public. A contract was finally signed on the 17th of March 1812 where Thorvaldsen received the first instalment of the total 4,000 Francs for the work.

Napoleon's Triumph?

Thorvaldsen had been inspired by the famous Parthenon frieze made for the Parthenon Temple in the city state of Athens 'the cradle of democracy' in the 5th century BC by the renowned sculptor Pheidias.

[70] A. Fulińska, 'Alexander and Napoleon' in Moore, K.R. (ed.): *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Alexander the Great*, Series: Brill's Companions to Classical Reception; volume 14, (Leiden, 2018) p. 567.
[71] Ibid. p. 568.

Plaster copies and engraved reproductions had made their way to Rome from 1810 onwards where it was quickly celebrated as a grand artistic achievement and an example to follow for contemporary artists.[72] While Thorvaldsen modelled his own frieze in clay on two slate plates, his assistants would simultaneously produce plaster versions of the work. Apart from the plaster version for the Quirinal Palace, Thorvaldsen managed to produce and put aside an exact copy in plaster for his own studio, a version which can now be found in the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen. This plaster copy would enable him to produce reproductions of the frieze (with changes) for future clients and in his studio the frieze would enjoy attention from many visitors. Thorvaldsen hoped to produce a marble version of the frieze at a later point in time.[73]

Thiele describes the commissioning of Thorvaldsen's frieze as happening almost by chance, when Thorvaldsen incidentally met Raffaele Stern, the architect responsible for the restoration of the Quirinal Palace in March 1812.[74] This is probably an overdramatization on Thiele's part since an even quicker execution of the frieze made Thorvaldsen's effort even more impressive.[75] It seems however that Stern and the commission had had their eyes on Thorvaldsen since the autumn of 1811, which makes sense, especially since Thorvaldsen by 1811 was an important figure in the Roman art world. But Thorvaldsen's execution was indeed swift, and it was noted by his impressed contemporaries that he produced the 35-meter-long frieze in less than three months.[76]

Thorvaldsen relied on the Roman historian Curtius Rufus' work *Histories of Alexander the Great* for narrative inspiration (a copy of the work is still to be found in his library) and the Swedish orientalist Johan David Åkerblad for advice on ancient Babylon. Although Thorvaldsen was inspired by the Parthenon frieze, a crucial difference separates his modern *Alexander Frieze* from the ancient Greek one.

[72] Grandesso, pp. 108-9.
[73] Grandesso, p. 109.
[74] J.M. Thiele, II: *Thorvaldsen i Rom. 1805-1819*, (Copenhagen, 1852) p. 199.
[75] Grandesso, p. 109.
[76] Wittstock, pp. 83-4.

Whereas a single procession in the Parthenon frieze heads for the end of the frieze, two altogether different processions, the Persians, and the Macedonians, are found in Thorvaldsen's *Alexander Frieze*. They converge on the central figure of Alexander in his chariot (accompanied by the goddess Nike) on the Macedonian side who is met by the Goddess of Peace on the Babylonian side [fig. 2]. Alexander is followed by his soldiers, cavalry, and infantry alike, as well as his horse Bucephalus. The triumphant soldiers bring with them a captured Persian nobleman as well as an elephant carrying looted treasures. At the very end of the Macedonian procession Thorvaldsen depicted himself underneath a palm tree (possibly signifying triumph) overseeing the entry into Babylon [fig. 2, 3 & 12].

The other procession is made up by the vanquished Persians, where the submissive satrap and governor of the city, Mazaeus, can be seen directly behind the Goddess of Peace in the company of his small children who are pushed towards the Macedonians [fig. 2]. He is followed by Persian women throwing flowers in the path of Alexander and his army. An altar is prepared and animals brought forward as a present to the victorious army along with the astrologers of Babylon, scenes of everyday life and the river god of Tigris [fig. 4 & 5]. In the last part of the relief, merchants are leaving Babylon with their goods and a fisherman is fishing peacefully underneath the palm trees with his dog [fig. 4 & 13].

Thorvaldsen's frieze quickly stood out as the artwork everyone spoke of in Rome. In one of the leading German magazines of the day, *Morgenblatt für Gebildete Stände*, the Baltic German author Carl Gotthard Grass describes the brand-new frieze in October 1812 and draws attention to the Italians who dubbed Thorvaldsen the *Patriarch of the Bas-relief* in recognition of his effort.[77] This meant that Thorvaldsen now outranked his rival Canova, when it came to the art of bas-reliefs. The frieze's connection to Napoleon is hardly mentioned. Instead, Grass emphasises that it is made in a *"truly Greek style"* and that the Italians found the work to be *"classical",* two great compliments at the time. Thorvaldsen had returned to the spirit of Greek antiquity, but with 'new motifs' as Grass points out. Thorvaldsen had, in Winckelmann's

[77] C.G. Grass, ‚Korrespondenznachrichten', *Morgenblatt für Gebildete Stände*, nr. 254, 22.10.1812, pp. 1015-16.

words 'imitated' antiquity, not 'copied' it. He had been inspired by the greatest work of antiquity, the Parthenon frieze, but managed to reinterpret it so that it might fit contemporary problems. It was a *"return to the spirit, not the letter, of antiquity"* to quote James L. Larson.[78]

Simultaneously with the installation of the artwork, the frieze's commissioner was heading for disaster. Emperor Napoleon's Russian campaign ended in a catastrophic defeat in the fall and winter of 1812, a defeat from which he would never recover. Like Alexander had experienced it before him, the seizure of an imperial capital wouldn't ensure the survival of Napoleon's own empire. In the end the *Alexander Frieze* became a kind of allegory not of Napoleon's entry into Rome and subsequent coronation, but into Moscow and his ensuing abdication. Just like Alexander ended up dying in Babylon along with his empire, Napoleon too would suffer death in Moscow, albeit metaphorically. For his army and the Russian population however, the suffering and death was quite literal. Here there was to be found no peaceful, triumphal entry but rather a pitiful retreat from a destroyed Moscow back to France.

The Triumph of Peace?

But the demise of the artwork's patron did not diminish the fame of the frieze nor of Thorvaldsen. When the Danish painter C.W. Eckersberg arrived in Rome in 1813 from Paris (where he had been a pupil of Jacques-Louis David) he executed a portrait of his Roman mentor Thorvaldsen [fig. 1.] in which the *Alexander Frieze* features prominently. In Eckersberg's view "*Alexander's triumph is also Mr. Thorw. triumph*".[79] This view of the artist as a hero became central in the subsequent years.

The only known description of the frieze made by Thorvaldsen doesn't reveal any political point of view.[80] The perhaps most important contemporary analysis available today is to be found in a letter from

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[78] J. L. Larson, 'Winckelmann's Essay on Imitation' Eighteenth-Century Studies, Spring, 1976, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Spring, 1976), pp. 390- 405, quote from p. 390.
[79] Copenhagen, Royal Library, The Manuscript Collection, Add. 301-2 (IV-50), Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg: 11th of February 1815. Letter to Johann Friedrich Clemens:
[80] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, m28A I, nr. 37, Bertel Thorvaldsen: 23rd of December 1813. Copy of letter to Raffaele Stern:

Caroline von Humboldt (1766-1829) who was married to the Prussian civil servant Wilhelm von Humboldt and was herself a shrewd art critic. It is worth noting that the Humboldt couple and Thorvaldsen had enjoyed a long and close relationship by the time Caroline wrote her letter, in fact ever since they had first met in Rome back in 1802. Apart from belonging to Thorvaldsen's inner social circle they were in the vanguard of the German Romantic movement and supported the Danish sculptor during his first years in Rome.

Caroline described the frieze to her husband as *"The most perfect work made in recent times*"[81] after a visit to Thorvaldsen's studio in Rome. Apart from her appreciation of the frieze's beauty, two of her points in this letter are of special interest. First, she describes the meeting between Alexander and the Goddess of Victory on the one hand and the Goddess of Peace on the other as a "*deeply understood grouping and conflict between the figure*s". As such to Caroline the frieze's most important message wasn't necessarily the representation of Alexander (or Napoleon's) triumphant and yet peaceful entry into a conquered city. Rather she thought it conveyed a message of a conflict between peace and war with Alexander in an exposed position in the middle.

This contemporary understanding of the frieze's motifs adds ambiguity to the interpretations which see the frieze purely as a tribute to Napoleon. Thorvaldsen's contemporaries saw different layers in his work including political themes. It remains of course her words on the frieze, but it would hardly come as a surprise if she had had the chance to discuss the matter with Thorvaldsen in person in 1817. Considering the intimacy between Caroline von Humboldt and Thorvaldsen it is tempting to consider whether her interpretation might reflect Thorvaldsen's views of the frieze as well.

A second important point in the letter is Caroline von Humboldt's emphasis on the 'Greek' character of Thorvaldsen's work and how Thorvaldsen managed to produce a piece of art that surpassed that of the

[81] C. v. Humboldt, *Wilhelm und Caroline von Humboldt in ihren Briefen*, red. Anna von Sydow, bd. V, "Diplomatische Friedensarbeit 1815-1817", Berlin 1912, p. 320-321.

Greeks. In a letter dated the 22nd of June 1817 she labels the frieze *"the most beautiful sculpture made since antiquity"*.[82] The identity of the sender as well as the letter's recipient should here be noted. Caroline and Wilhelm von Humboldt were, like many other German Romantics, greatly preoccupied with ancient Greek art which in their worldview was closely connected to politics. A good example of this view can be found in Friedrich Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* with whom the Humboldt-couple had been closely associated.[83] Through (neo)classical art people could be cultivated and thus improve society in general. To Wilhelm von Humboldt, his wife, and their peers the artistic and political ideals of Ancient Greece therefore meant a great deal. To Humboldt *everything* in Ancient Greece was politics including their ideals of aesthetics and art which again were closely connected with politics themselves.[84]

It could thus be argued that Thorvaldsen's frieze appears to the Humboldt couple as the embodiment of the Romantic change in society through an aesthetic cultivation of people's minds as well as a tribute to peace rather than to the power of Napoleon. Finally, the emphasis on the frieze's Greek character might also be interpreted as a struggle between Germanic and Latin culture. German intellectuals (including the Humboldts) increasingly saw Greek antiquity as superior to Roman antiquity, and more importantly they perceived themselves to be the true successors of ancient Greece. The French on the contrary were seen (and to an extent the French themselves agreed with this view) as the successors of the Roman Empire. This view gained increasing popularity following the French invasion and subsequent occupation of the German states in 1806-7.[85] Thus an emphasis on the frieze's *Greek* character might as well be understood as an emphasis on its *Germanic* nature, and thus its superiority in a more general cultural struggle against Roman or French (Latin) art and culture. This conflict between Roman and Greek culture is examined

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[82] Humboldt, *Briefen*, p. 342.
[83] Beiser, p. 85.
[84] For an additional discussion of the political mindset of Wilhelm von Humboldt see Berghahn, C.F.: *Das Wagnis der Autonomie: Studien zu Karl Philipp Moritz, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Heinrich Gentz, Friedrich Gilly und Ludwig Tieck*, (Heidelberg, 2012) p. 331 and Beiser, pp. 111-124
[85] See discussions of this in Beiser, Arthur Lovejoy 'Schiller and the Genesis of German Romanticism' in *Essays in the History of Ideas,* (Baltimore, 2019) and J.G. Fichte*, Addresses to the German Nation*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, Moore, G. (ed.), (New York, 2008), p. 57-8.

in Suzannah Marchand's book *Down from Olympus* (1996). She notes that although German access to ancient Greek culture had been mediated through Latin and French authors, the German intellectuals wished to rediscover Greek culture themselves and therefore rejected *'the culture of 'Augustan' [French] Neoclassicism'*.[86]

The comprehensive German understanding of politics, art and society might be one of the reasons why German Romanticism (and Thorvaldsen as well) has later come to be understood as a generally unpolitical movement, and that its rivalry with French/Latin culture came to be seen as a cultural, rather than political struggle. The emphasise on broad education (Bildung) and its importance in shaping the minds of every citizen has led scholars to believe Romanticism was unpolitical because of its focus on culture. On the contrary. It was a profoundly political movement which held the view, that all societal change had to begin in the artistic and cultural sphere. Humboldt has also been perceived to have been unpolitical, partly since he argued that culture and state should be separated since he, as a liberal, didn't want the state to interfere too much in the lives of the private citizen.[87] But all of Humboldt's professional life he was deeply preoccupied with politics, and Thorvaldsen must have witnessed (and maybe participated too) these aesthetic, political discussions in the home of the Humboldt family, which neighboured Thorvaldsen's house in Rome.[88]

The German philologist Friedrich von der Hagen first emphasised in December 1816 the stylistic difference between Thorvaldsen and his Italian rival Canova. But he also took note of the seemingly ambiguous iconography of the artwork. He notes that the defeated Persians show clear signs of "*involuntary happiness*" [fig. 5.] during the entry of the Macedonians. He also interprets the Persian merchants who are leaving Babylon with their goods as 'freedom loving' people who escapes the Macedonians by sailing across the Tigris River at speed. In short, he suggests, just like Caroline von

[86] Marchand, p. 4.
[87] Beiser, pp. 113-14.
[88] Thiele II, p. 86.

Humboldt, that the motifs of the frieze aren't quite as peaceful as might be suggested after a first quick glance.[89] Rather the apparent peaceful motifs cover up the fear and insecurity of the vanquished Persians, possibly reflecting the common reaction to Napoleon's 'peaceful' entries into conquered cities.

The Danish-Norwegian priest Frederik Schmidt (1771-1840) became friends with Thorvaldsen during his trip to Rome in 1818. He describes the frieze in his diary the 11th of October 1818 noting that *"the children of Babylon's commander show various degrees of fear"* during Alexander's entry.[90] This view of course collides with the intention of showing Alexander entering a city, which population welcomes him and shows trust. Contemporaries thus identified conflicting messages when seeing the defeated Mazaeus' children meeting the victorious Alexander.

In March 1818, the Swedish author Per Atterbom made a description of the frieze which presents another interesting view of the messages in the artwork. The description was later translated and published in a magazine to the Danish public. Atterbom regretted that Napoleon *"neglected to see the perhaps only truly beautiful aesthetic tribute which was ever made in his honour"*. Atterbom however, was not convinced whether the frieze was truly a tribute to Napoleon (my translation): *"I will moreover leave it aside, to which an extent he [Napoleon] would have felt himself flattered by it, had he noticed the friends of freedom, which row away over the Tigrisas fast as possible, and if he had understood this sly hint concerning the voluntary joy of the Babylons.*"[91] Atterbom, like Friedrich von der Hagen, thought that the merchants depicted on the frieze were fleeing the invading Macedonian army. He thus interprets the frieze to contain subterfuge criticism of emperor Napoleon a provocative claim, considering that Napoleon originally commissioned the work.

[89] Hagen, Friedrich Heinrich von der, 1780-1856: *Briefe in die Heimat aus Deutschland, der Schweiz und Italien*, vol. 2, (Berlin, 1821) p. 335.
[90] F. Schmidt, *Provst Frederik Schmidts dagbøger*, vol. 1-2, Ole Jacobsen og Johanne Brandt-Nielsen (ed.): København 1966-69, vol. 2, p. 384-385.
[91] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, Småtryk-Samling 1821, Harpen, Per Atterbom: 16th of June 1821. Printed Danish translation of letter to Erik Gustaf Geijer.

Atterbom's view has since become controversial among scholars, who have tended to discard his argument as discussed earlier in this dissertation. Atterbom has even been described as politically naive and that he "*wanted the frieze to be critical of Napoleon*".[92] This might be, but Atterbom was nevertheless quite close with Thorvaldsen, as were several other of the people behind remarks that point towards ambiguous motifs in Thorvaldsen's *Alexander Frieze*. Indeed, whether Atterbom was politically naive or not isn't really the question here. He disseminates a view of the frieze which has hardly been taken seriously ever since by scholars. By proposing the quite direct view that the frieze was no tribute to Napoleon he indirectly expands on Humboldt's more subtle analysis.

Atterbom's claim is somewhat strengthened by Thiele. Even Thorvaldsen's cautious biographer, who was most reluctant to ascribe political opinions to Thorvaldsen, mentioned that he had heard, by hearsay in Rome that a fisher depicted on the frieze shared facial features with the French emperor: *"Concerning this fisherman the talk goes in Rome, that the artist, in the Quirinalversion of the frieze modelled his head, after thinking of the portrait of the emperor of France, who at this time was the worldly contrast of the fisherman Petrus, whose place in Rome he had seized."*[93]

Thiele adds that he does not guarantee the truth in this anecdote, but that *"it might have suited Thorvaldsen's sarcastic caprice"*. Not only is Thiele's remark of interest – the way he formulates it is too. Thiele served an absolutist state. He wrote these lines in Thorvaldsen's biography in 1831, when Denmark was still ruled by the ageing king Frederik VI who had been a close ally of Napoleon after the British had set Copenhagen ablaze in 1807. This defeat had been costly for the Danes. Moreover, Frederik VI insisted on strict censorship throughout his reign, which meant that authors could suffer severe consequences if they weren't careful. This might explain Thiele's cautious way of expressing himself regarding a sensitive topic. For an audience more used to living with censorship, this may very well have been a direct way of

[92] Thomasson, p. 172.
[93] J.M. Thiele, *1832,* p. 126.

stating that the message of the frieze was double edged, and that Thorvaldsen deliberately made it possible for viewers to conclude differently depending on their political standpoint.

When reviewing the reception of the *Alexander Frieze* from the end of the 1810's all the way up to the years around Thorvaldsen's death in 1844 some patterns are found. One popular view is the frieze being Thorvaldsen's rather than Alexander's triumph if Thorvaldsen isn't directly compared to or even seen to surpass the merits of Alexander. Another persistent view is to see the frieze as a symbol of the reinvigorated Greek art and lastly a critique of Alexander's posture is also frequently found, especially in the decades leading up to the year of 1848.

Chapter 3: The *Alexander Frieze* and the Public Sphere

A recurring issue when working with Neoclassical sculpture concerns the question of originality. Which version of a sculpture can be characterised as the 'original'? Normally the first version of any given work by Thorvaldsen would have been made in clay, but only rarely have these originals survived. Thus, the closest thing to an 'original' version of the *Alexander Frieze* would be the first plaster version made. The first plaster version of the *Alexander Frieze* is to be found in the Quirinal Palace as already mentioned – an additional (exact) copy of this frieze was then made and is currently in the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen. From this copy Thorvaldsen proceeded to make further versions, often with some changes to the original, for new customers.

These versions bear testimony to the fact that Thorvaldsen had probably planned all along that the frieze wouldn't be reserved for exclusively for Napoleon's use, but that it should be disseminated all over Europe (albeit in edited versions). Bjarne Jørnæs claims that the frieze's connection to Napoleon was

soon forgotten[94] although several sources as late as the 1840's clearly state an awareness of the work's original association with the French emperor.[95]

A few versions were ordered for new clients, and several more versions were considered by potential clients such as the Duke of Wellington and King Ludwig of Bavaria, but they never materialised.[96] The Italian count Sommariva ordered a marble version for his villa at the Lake Como, the Danish court ordered a marble version for the new Christiansborg Palace which was by then under construction. Napoleon's stepson Eugène de Beauharnais ordered a plaster version for his Palais Leuchtenberg in Munich (but the frieze disappeared during the Second World War). An unknown number of smaller plaster versions were procured by costumers all over Europe, including the liberal Puggaard family in Copenhagen, who had hoisted the tricolour over The Thorvaldsen Museum.[97]

People perceived the frieze to be his best piece of art since *Jason with the Golden Fleece* (1803) [fig. 14] and he seemed to have agreed with that himself, calling it '*one of my favourite works*'. It is therefore natural that he wished to enhance his fame (and wealth) by exporting it to clients all over the European continent. A considerable amount of show-off is palpable in this letter to crown prince Ludwig of Bavaria dated 16th of October 1813 hidden behind a thin veil of modesty: *"It is my devout wish that this piece of work, which until now only exists in a fragile plaster version, would, in a permanent material, be transferred for posterity as a firm monument of my modest talent",* [98] an example of Thorvaldsen's diplomatic shrewdness. Thorvaldsen was anxious to produce a marble version of the frieze, and even before the fall of Napoleon he and his advisors were heavily involved in persuading possible costumers to procure a marble version. Napoleon himself appears

[94] Jørnæs, B.: 'Thorvaldsen's triumph of Alexander', Analecta Romana Instituti Danici, 1989 p. 40.

[95] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, Thorvaldsens Museums Småtryk-Samling 1843, M17,49, *Conversationslexikon für Bildende Kunst*.

[96] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, m5 1818, nr. 68: Jørgen Knudtzon: 12th of October 1818. Letter to Bertel Thorvaldsen.

[97] See also K. Kofoed: ‚A Dispute between two Women about Thorvaldsen and his Posthumous Reputation', arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk, 2019

[98] Munich, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Geheimes Hausarchiv München, Nachlass König Ludwig I., I A 40 IV, Bertel Thorvaldsen: 16th of October 1813. Letter to Ludwig I.

to have been interested in procuring a marble version for the 'Temple de la Grande Armée' in Paris (today the Madeleine Church), but he abdicated before being able to commission it.[99]

Crown prince Ludwig wasn't interested, since he thought the frieze was too closely associated with Napoleon, and a sale to the Danish court almost came to nothing since the Danish monarch wanted an 'original work'. Thorvaldsen had to personally convince the Danish crown prince Christian Frederik (8.) that the frieze was an original monument, an allegory of the Danish king enjoying the tribute of his people.[100]

Most spectators would probably not have seen the frieze 'in situ' in the Quirinal Palace. Rather it would have been more likely for visitors in Rome to see the version of the frieze which was found in Thorvaldsen's studio in Rome, like Caroline von Humboldt, Per Atterbom and Mendelssohn did. This might have affected peoples' perception of the frieze. Did Thorvaldsen or his assistants for instance provide visitors with suggestions as to how the frieze should be interpreted?

Thorvaldsen's studio became something of a tourist attraction, where even the holy father Pope Leo XII would visit in 1826.[101] It is unknown how many people visited the Quirinal Palace and saw the frieze there. A great many people would have seen reproductions in newspapers or when visiting private homes decorated with either plaster or terracotta copies of the frieze. Thorvaldsen himself commissioned the the Swiss copper engraver Samuel Amsler to publish a copper engraving of the *Alexander Frieze* in 1835 after drawings made by the German painter Johann Friedrich Overbeck. This further enlarged its audience and the frieze continued to enjoy immense popularity when it was published in multiple editions.[102] In general the 'targeted' audience seems to have been the educated public who subscribed to

[99] Thomasson, p. 171.
[100] Copenhagen, The Danish National Archives, The Royal Archive, Bertel Thorvaldsen: 9th of May 1818. Letter to Christian Frederik (VIII).
[101] See Ditlev Marten's painting 'Pope Leo XII Visits Thorvaldsen's Studio near the Piazza Barberini October 18th, 1826' [Fig. 15].
[102] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, Thorvaldsens Museums Småtryk-Samling 1836, *Kjøbenhavnsposten,* 20th of February.

journals, travelled to some extent, and had rudimentary knowledge of art, history, and literature. This bourgeois class of people, although a minority in German and Scandinavian society, had grown since the 18th century, and came to serve as a political and moral counterweight to princely and aristocratic rule.[103] And Thorvaldsen became one of the bourgeoisie's preferred artists.

Thorvaldsen as Alexander

The Austrian author Franz Grillparzer paid tribute to the frieze and heralds it as almost as good as antiquity – and just as important, in his opinion he finds Thorvaldsen superior to Canova.[104] The Danish historian Christian Molbech notes too in 1820 during a visit to Rome that the frieze had become 'Thorvaldsen's triumph' regarding the Dane's rivalry with the Italian Canova.[105]

These conflicting views of 'Germanic' vs 'Latin' art signified more than just aesthetic preferences. From a Danish perspective it marked the beginning of a nationalistic view of Thorvaldsen.[106] Thorvaldsen's genius originated from his Danish upbringing according to Molbech. On the other hand, the German composer Mendelssohn praises Thorvaldsen as the foremost of the 'German' artists alongside Beethoven and Goethe in 1831[107] after seeing the *Alexander Frieze* in the Quirinal Palace: *'I ought to write an entire letter on Alexander's entry [into Babylon], since no other sculpture has ever made such an impression on me like that one. I go there [to Thorvaldsen's studio ed.] every week to see only that and follow the procession into Babylon myself'*[108]. Thorvaldsen and his frieze, in the eyes of Germans and Scandinavians, thus became a counterweight to the otherwise cultural dominance of Italy and France, which is supported by later dismissive French views of Thorvaldsen and his art.[109]

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[103] Hauser, pp. 57-8 & Busk-Jepsen, K.: 'Caffè Greco: Art Temple, Post Office and Cosmopolitan Sanctuary', arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk, 2014.
[104] Grillparzer, F.: 'Tagebücher', in: Stefan Hock (ed.): Grillparzers Werke, Berlin 1911, vol. XV, p. 61-62.
[105] Molbech, C.: *Reise giennem en Deel af Tyskland, Frankrige, England og Italien i Aarene 1819 og 1820*, København 1822, vol. 3, p. 206-209 and 221-229.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Mendelssohn, *Briefe,* p. 267.
[108] F. Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Reisebriefe von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy aus den Jahren 1830 bis 1832.* Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy (ed.), Leipzig, 1861, p. 113.
[109] Småtryk 1856, David d'Angers.

It also became a rather popular view to see the frieze as either Thorvaldsen's or art's triumph in general rather than stress the artwork's association with Napoleon or the Danish monarch. This view became explicit when Thorvaldsen returned to his native Copenhagen after more than forty years in Rome. His arrival in Copenhagen in September 1838 became a veritable triumphal entry for Thorvaldsen himself. The famous Danish poet Hans Christian Andersen wrote a poem in honour of Thorvaldsen and his *Alexander Frieze* on that occasion, celebrating Thorvaldsen as an Alexander figure.[110] Indeed the newspapers were flooded with comparisons between Thorvaldsen and Alexander and the frieze as a symbol of the triumph of art in society in those days.[111]

Alexander as a Villain

The only real criticism that the *Alexander Frieze* received from Scandinavian and German viewers concerned the figure of Alexander himself on the frieze. The anonymous author of an article in the German newspaper from 1827 'Literarische Blätter der Börsen-Halle' finds that the figure of Alexander is a clear exception from the other depicted on the frieze who reflect 'the Etruscan calmness': *"By the concepts which we have of this Charles XII of the ancient world, we couldn't have failed to wish to see him in a more rehearsed posture, he has conquered the world, but he is too full of his own triumph, he should have shown more pride and less vanity*."[112] The author of this text is clearly opposed to Alexander and to violence in general, comparing him to the brutal Swedish warrior king Charles XII (1682-1718) whose campaigns had laid waste to Sweden and large tracts of Eastern Europe. He is not impressed by military glory which in a way reflects Caroline von Humboldt's interpretation of the frieze from 1817.

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[110] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, m33, nr. 16. Hans Christian Andersen: 7th of October 1838. Poem to Bertel Thorvaldsen.
[111] See for instance Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, Thorvaldsens Museums Småtryk-Samling 1838, *Kjøbenhavnsposten* 8th of October.
[112] Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, Thorvaldsens Museums Småtryk-Samling M17,13, 'Thorwaldsen's Werkstatt zu Rom. *'Literarische Blätter der Börsen-Halle*'.

This view is again expressed in 1830 in the newspaper 'Das Inland' in which Alexander's posture is criticised not only for his exaggerated vanity but also for having too close a resemblance with Canova.[113] In 1839 in the literary magazine 'Kunst-Blatt' the critique is even heavier, and again the figure of Alexander bears the brunt of the criticism being labelled a 'theatre caricature'.[114] Alexander was clearly no popular figure around this time.

In 1843, a year before Thorvaldsen's death, an article on the *Alexander Frieze* in 'Conversationslexikon für Bildende Kunst' reveals to which a degree the views of Caroline von Humboldt and Per Atterbom lived on in the later reception of the frieze. Apart from generally praising the frieze as an important piece of art, descriptions of the frieze's fisherman with Napoleon's facial features as reference to Napoleon seizing the pope's palace, the frightened children and Persian merchants fleeing Alexander are all to be found.[115] Additionally the figure of Alexander, the symbol of power and war, is increasingly ridiculed by contemporaries. This description in a contemporary encyclopaedic article would generally give a good picture of the authoritative view of the frieze at the time.

This is view is amplified in 1846 in 'Illustrierte Zeitung' where Thorvaldsen is even compared to Ludwig van Beethoven who famously removed the dedication to Napoleon in his 'Eroica' symphony, since Thorvaldsen, according to the anonymous author, like Beethoven refused to pay tribute to Napoleon with the frieze.[116] Beethoven's rejection of Napoleon's regime after the composer's initial enthusiasm is one of the most famous political statements made by an artist during the Napoleonic era. For Thorvaldsen's *Alexander Frieze* to be compared with Beethoven's Eroica Symphony is a testimony to the fact that the view of the *Alexander Frieze* as a monument critical of Napoleon was firmly established.

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113 Heidelberg, Heidelberg Universitätsbibliothek, *Kunst-Blatt Gebildete Stände*, No. 18, 1839, p. 70-71.
114 Ibid.
115 Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, Thorvaldsens Museums Småtryk-Samling 1843, M17,49, *Conversationslexikon für Bildende Kunst*.
116 Copenhagen, The Thorvaldsen Museum Archives, Thorvaldsens Museums Småtryk-Samling 1846*, Illustrirte Zeitung*, VII, no. 167.

Rather than supporting the French emperor, signs of protest were found in the frieze. It is maybe in this light that Thorvaldsen's only other work depicting Alexander the Great should be viewed: The plaster relief from 1832 commissioned by the Bavarian king Ludwig I, which portrays a drunk Alexander burning down the Persian ceremonial capital of Persepolis, much to the despair of the horrified Persians. It shows another more violent and sinister side of Napoleon's alter ego, a side which most art critics were acutely aware of in the 19th century. The frieze's commissioning shortly after the second French Revolution of 1830 might reflect the conservative values of the political reaction of the period. The Bavarian king, sceptical of the universal monarchy, wished to emphasise the destructiveness of military 'glories' of the universal monarchies of Alexander and Napoleon. And while Thorvaldsen supplied him with the frieze, the sculptor himself had an opportunity to add a last comment to his most renowned monument.

Conclusion

Studies of the primary source material at hand reveal that Bertel Thorvaldsen held political opinions which were often critical of monarchy and authoritarian power, even though written statements from his own hand are rare. In the first chapter I argued that he held critical views of the Bonaparte family, as revealed in Schubart's letter of 1809, a figure who knew Thorvaldsen well. Thorvaldsen's critical view of Napoleon might be interpreted as part of the generally conflicted view of the French emperor, which much of European society held of the fallen emperor both before and after 1815. These conflicting views of Napoleon often contained both condemnation as well as admiration.

Analyses made by people who knew Thorvaldsen well, such as Caroline von Humboldt and Per Atterbom, hint that they interpreted the meaning of the *Alexander Frieze* to be ambiguous, suggesting that a conflict is apparent in the frieze next to its motifs of peace and tribute to Alexander. Unlike earlier scholarship, I consider it to be highly likely that Thorvaldsen ensured, on purpose, that the frieze could be interpreted both as a tribute to Napoleon as well as a critique of him and his policies. This subtlety

ensured that the frieze could be installed in the first place as well as guaranteeing the frieze artistic and political relevance in the aftermath of the emperor's fall from grace.

The French emperor appears to have held a positive view of the artwork (although he never saw it *in situ*) and the German opposition to the French regarded the frieze as highly critical of Napoleon. As such Thorvaldsen managed to cater to both the feelings of a ruling prince as well as the political opposition of the bourgeoisie. Thorvaldsen had the resources to show political agency as an artist, but was forced to do it in a subtle way, otherwise his work would be censored, hence the ambiguity of many of his works including the *Alexander Frieze*. The story behind the commissioning of the *Alexander Frieze* is a fine example of his artistic agency. In a sense Thorvaldsen succeeded in being both an idealistic artist, a shrewd diplomat as well as an efficient businessman, ensuring the popularity of his own artwork despite a highly volatile political landscape. The frieze thus became a triumph for Thorvaldsen's quest for artistic independence.

Moreover, as shown in the second and third chapters, it is beyond any doubt when reviewing the frieze's reception history in the later decades of the 19th century, that many observers continued to interpret the frieze either as a critique of Napoleon and war, as art's triumph over politics or as artistic proof of 'Germanic' culture's superiority over Latin culture, thus making the *Alexander Frieze* part of the nascent nationalistic conflicts in Europe. In this way the commissioning, execution, display and reception history of the frieze reflects the political and societal change the European continent underwent in the decades between the revolutions of 1789 and 1848.

The French Revolution in 1789 demystified monarchical rule and enabled art to be outspokenly critical of the power of ruling regimes. The relationship between power and art, between patrons and artists had been complicated throughout history, but it experienced further strain following the revolutionary years and with the advent of a (critical) public sphere. Artists such as Thorvaldsen, found themselves in the

middle of a political conflict between princely rule and bourgeois dreams of free constitutions and this was reflected in the artwork of the era.

As examined in the introduction, several factors such the neglect of Neoclassicism in general, Thorvaldsen's role as a national icon in Denmark and the conflicted view of political Romanticism in Germany can help explain why the analysis of Neoclassical art in a political context has been underappreciated by scholarship in much of the 20th century. It reveals to us how difficult it is to analyse and understand political communication and political opinions in a society which was characterised by authoritarian rule, censorship and political attempts to change this condition. In early 19th century Europe, art was aptly used as a means of political communication by various factions. For posterity it is thus immensely useful as historical source material. Thorvaldsen's *Alexander Frieze* is a poignant example of this, and his art alongside the general artistic output of the period deserves to be further examined in the future.

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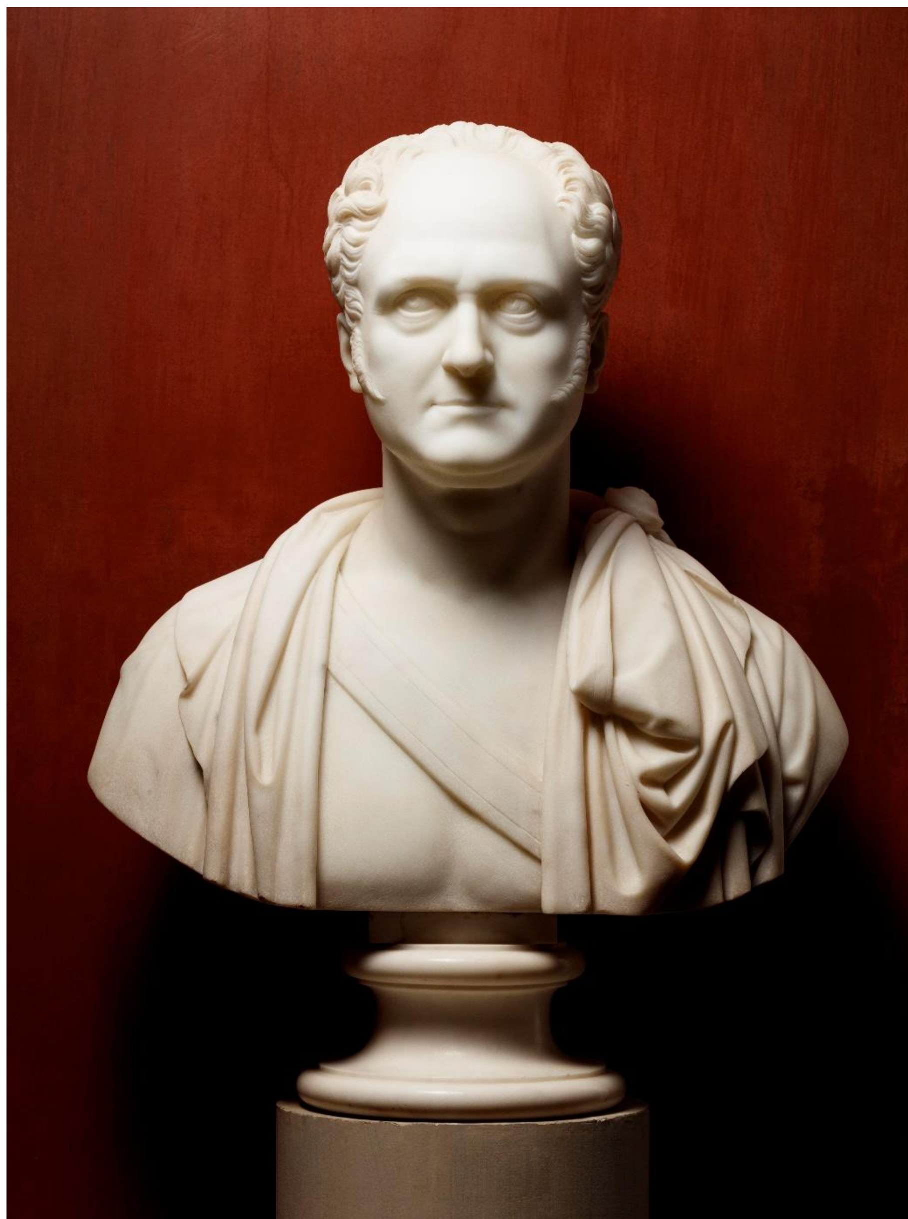

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