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## Marketing Trajan at the Museo dei Fori Imperiali

Jeremy Hartnett

TRAIANO: COSTRUIRE L'IMPERO, CREARE L'EUROPA (TRAJAN: CONSTRUCTING THE EMPIRE, CREATING EUROPE), MERCATI DI TRAIANO, MUSEO DEI FORI IMPERIALI, ROME, 29 NOVEMBER 2017–16 SEPTEMBER 2018, curated by Claudio Parisi Presicce, Marina Milella, Simone Pastor, and Lucrezia Ungaro.

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Since their reopening in 2007 as the Museo dei Fori Imperiali, the Markets of Trajan (Mercati di Traiano) have largely justified the sentiments of Walter Veltroni, Rome's mayor at the time. At the inauguration of the space, he declared it "one of the most important jewels of the city and even one of the least expected . . . [where] a foreigner [who enters] discovers a world apart, where there's a sense of history, of scholarship, and of the talents of our ancestors." In reusing Trajan's ancient architectural complex as a museum space and exhibiting many sculptures, architectural fragments, and inscriptions from the imperial forums that had long been hidden from public sight, the Museo dei Fori Imperiali has become—thanks to its unique combination of archaeological/architectural setting and important holdings—a can't-miss stop for scholars, student groups, and lovers of antiquity. Like the Centrale Montemartini, where overflow from the Capitoline Museums has long been housed, the Museo dei Fori Imperiali showcases the particular genius of Rome's curators for pairing ancient artwork with less-orthodox settings.

*Trajan: Constructing the Empire, Creating Europe* marks 1,900 years since the death of the *optimus princeps* by drawing together a variety of artworks, architectural fragments, models, casts, and audio-visual material to celebrate the emperor's achievements, most prominently in the fields of war, architecture, and engineering. Where better to trumpet his accomplishments, the curators may have reasoned, than in this most idiosyncratic and

striking structure of the Trajanic era? A score or so of other exhibitions have graced this space over the past decade. Topics have ranged from ancient jewelry and brickstamps to archival photographs, contemporary art, and interactive digital installations. *Trajan: Constructing the Empire, Creating Europe*, however, seeks to set a new and ambitious mark, not just for exhibitions in this particular space but also for what might be included in a show altogether.

The show's curators have gathered some phenomenal artwork and artifacts, such as a bronze portrait of Trajan from the Netherlands that rightly receives pride of place in an early room. Similarly, splendid fragments of fresco and stucco are on display from a recently excavated villa in Altipani di Arcinazzo Romano, a mountainous location about 60 km east of Rome; a fair amount of evidence points to Trajanic ownership. A number of pieces from Bucharest's Muzeul Național de Istorie a României grant a sense of Roman warfare and help bring to life the violence inherent to Trajan's Dacian conquests. The show's organizers should also be proud for reuniting here sections of an architectural frieze of winged cupids and griffins that have been separated for approximately 400 years in the Berlin Antikensammlung and the Vatican Museums. On display for the first time are two notable sculptural fragments from the Forum of Trajan: one a portion of an over-life-sized portrait of the emperor, the other a colossal male hand. The latter is displayed with another fragment of a giant hand that likely derives from the cult statue of the Traianeum in Pergamum (also on loan from Berlin); it even sports a signet ring. Together with colossal female heads on display, the two hands grant a palpable sense of the scale of ancient sculpture in Trajan's forum and elsewhere.

It is important to note that the exhibition may depart from expectations. Its promotional materials repeatedly present Trajan's portrait rendered in the show's dominant color scheme of chartreuse, magenta, and teal (fig. 1). The emperor's face is split in two and offset vertically; the right side shows the colors inverted, while the lower half of the left side is shown rasterized in black and white.



FIG. 1. Promotional image for *Traiano: Costruire L'Impero, Creare L'Europa*.

If the graphics shout that this show will be something apart from the standard, the dramatic opening sequence that visitors encounter lives up to the billing. The viewer's initial experience of the exhibition involves walking through curtains and into a darkened room constructed to roughly the same dimensions as the base of Trajan's column (a cylindrical stump projects above the box to help forge the connection) (fig. 2). There, one encounters a film projected on two walls. An actor portraying Trajan narrates his life course from his Spanish birth through his rise to power and coronation, and finally, drawing on Cassius Dio's account, he laments that he could not reach India as Alexander had done. This overture's theatrical effect carries through the exhibition, as videos—18 in all, by my count—appear on televisions, are projected on screens, and even splash onto the markets' brick-faced walls and ceilings. Additionally, audio installations help to animate sculptures and inscriptions. Visitors accustomed to natural sunlight or standard museum illumination might be surprised to see greenish light rake across more than one portrait of Trajan (fig. 3).



FIG. 2. Visitors enter the show through an evocation of the base of Trajan's column on whose interior walls is projected a short biographical film of the *optimus princeps*.



FIG. 3. A raking green light illuminates one portrait of Trajan.

In a small niche at the back of the “column base” appear two Roman glass vessels evocative of the cinerary urns that presumably once held the ashes of Trajan and Plotina in the monument itself. Little attention is drawn to the fact that these are not the actual resting places of the emperor and empress, and visitors have to inspect labels closely to see that several of the other sculptures on display are casts, many of them from the Museo della Civiltà Romana, which is currently closed for restoration and thus has been able to loan pieces from its superb collection. Beyond the “base” in the Grande Aula, the central space in the mercati, for example, visitors encounter six casts of sections from Trajan’s column; originally produced in 1861, these not only serve to record a monument that remains subject to the elements but also allow a close-range inspection of scenes that are typically viewed at a distance (fig. 4). Of the 68 numbered entries in the exhibition catalogue, 12 are of models and 11 are of casts.

The story presented by the show moves forward in time, as the next room off the Grande Aula evokes Trajan’s posthumous triumph, if that is indeed what was celebrated. A video projection displays falling rose petals, the cheers of a crowd echo from speakers, and a small model of a triumph in the center of the room completes the effect. Attention then shifts to the campaign that won the triumph, focusing on the army, as casts of soldiers’ stelae recall the human costs of war. In the following spaces, a visitor encounters a model of the Tropaeum Traiani, which joins a sweeping video of the Romanian landscape and several statues of conquered Dacians to remind us of the devastation wrought by Trajan’s campaigns.

Also on the level of the Grande Aula are many plastic models of other structures from Trajan’s reign, such as the temple honoring the emperor at Pergamum; a bridge in Alcántara, Spain; and arches at Benevento, Ancona, Leptis Magna, and Timgad. Nearby, a stunning collection of gold and silver coins issued during Trajan’s reign offers a superb opportunity for close inspection of these numismatic miniatures of monumental marvels built in or near Rome. Finally, a film projected on the ceiling celebrates Trajan’s building projects that are otherwise hard to represent physically: roads, aqueducts, colonies, and the like (fig. 5). Seeing these many undertakings—from across the empire as well as in the city—in one space certainly justifies the first part of the exhibition’s subtitle and offers a helpful corrective on popular caricatures of

Trajan as military man. The second half of that subtitle, however, feels somewhat forced, in that several Trajanic projects celebrated here were constructed in Africa, and much of the territory of the European Union’s member states was not within the official boundaries of the empire. Perhaps *Creare L’Europa* represents instead a nostalgic nod to the EU, as it celebrates a time when Europe was, in some way, more united and less prone to splintering than it currently seems to be. Or *Creare L’Europa* may reflect Trajan’s ambitions for a still farther-flung empire.

As the exhibition continues on an upper level, domestic matters take center stage from martial and architectural ones, as colossal heads of women in the imperial family dominate several spaces. Some of these figures “speak,” through audio installations, about their business activities and contributions to alimentary schemes, and brickstamps featuring their names reinforce the degree of their engagement in the construction industry. The women’s hairstyles in the portraits and their carefully curated presence on Trajanic coins underscore how their public image was very much tied to that of the emperor. Where did this family live? Joining the original artwork from the villa at Altipani di Arcinazzo Romano is a video, filmed partially by a drone, of the so-called Privata Traiani Domus on the Aventine. The dramatic shots take viewers through a manhole and more than 10 m underground before revealing several rooms of a domestic nature decorated with a white-ground fresco dating to the mid second century C.E. Even if neither space is linked conclusively with Trajan, they give a taste of near-contemporary imperial accommodations.

Curators faced some practical issues in laying out the exhibition, not least of which was dealing with the relatively limited securable area that the Museo dei Fori Imperiali affords, as well as its smallish rooms. One result is that the show shares space with the permanent collection. Differentiating the two can, in fact, be a challenge, despite the best efforts of curators in installing wrought-iron frameworks around some pieces in the special exhibition and continuing the chromatic scheme through the labels and didactics. A series of numbered stops and other way-finding devices attempt to steer visitors through the complex’s labyrinthine passageways. Another challenge in balancing a technologically ambitious exhibition with a millennia-old space comes in positioning the video and audio installations. The resonant surfaces of one room



FIG. 4. Casts of six sections of the column of Trajan are displayed in the Grande Aula of the Mercati di Traiano in the Museo dei Fori Imperiali.



FIG. 5. Several models of Trajanic construction projects, on loan from the Museo della Civiltà Romana, share space with a video documenting other infrastructure undertakings.

on the upper floor make distinguishing among speaking statues and other audio-visual pieces problematic. Finally, a theme of construction sets a challenging bar, since collecting fragments hardly satisfies, while scale models threaten to weaken the effect of mammoth structures. One answer presented here are three- to five-minute videos, set up on the lower level of the markets, that introduce visitors to major Trajanic monuments through digital reconstructions, flyovers, and the like. While their quality is uneven, the best of these sparkle as they capture the scope and importance of these endeavors in Rome and its environs: the Aqua Traiana, Trajan's baths, his reconstruction of the Circus Maximus, and of course his substantial interventions at Portus and Civitavecchia, among others. An iPad-aided interface with a mock-up of the Forma Urbis Romae and several holograms grant viewers a three-dimensional sense of the Basilica Ulpia.

The exhibition catalogue consists of, in addition to the entries of objects on display in the show, 58 short essays related to Trajan's reign. Many reflect the nature of the show as a survey of the emperor's time in power, as they engage aspects of Trajan's military campaigns; his self-presentation in portraiture, coins, and building projects; and "the poetics of empire." Others, meanwhile, dive deeper into specific topics, such as the scientific analysis of gilding found on the stucco reliefs from the Altipani di Arcinazzo Romano villa and the iconography of griffin and cupid reliefs. Of particular interest, given the content of the show, is a group of four essays dedicated to casts and copies. The catalogue will helpfully serve as a first stop for those interested in a host of Trajan-related topics, yet in some ways it mirrors the exhibition overall:

both address wide-ranging subjects from this time period that cohere and fragment intermittently.

*Trajan: Constructing the Empire, Creating Europe* self-consciously pushes normal expectations of exhibitions of ancient artwork on several fronts: the extensive use of audio and video displays not only to document and educate but also to generate atmospherics, the deployment of casts and models alongside the real article, and the curation of a visitor experience that aims at offering a rich narrative of an individual. One potential danger in such a biographical enterprise could entail venturing into a Pliny-like panegyric of the *optimus princeps*, a popular sobriquet applied to, and used by, Trajan even before it became part of his official titulature in 114 C.E. The exhibition, however, while honoring the emperor's achievements, also shares the credit by turning the spotlight on his troops, female relations, and others. Additionally, it establishes the context of all the construction by emphasizing the warfare and despoilage that funded such imperial largesse. The ambitious result, though not always seamless, puts the exhibition on par with displays in natural science museums in terms of accessibility for, and engagement with, a general audience. It grants a better sense of Trajan, his campaigns, and his construction projects.

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