

Exploring 'The Dying Gaul', And Other Statues Of Dying 'Celts', By Nat Kane.

Though most of the common populous visiting modern museums may look upon the artworks depicting the 'Celtic' peoples, and not understand the ethnic coding placed upon these works without being given a knowledgeable explanation. This is not a chosen ignorance, it occurs as a result of continued misconceptions surrounding the 'Celts'. These misconceptions are often through national and/or colonial propaganda¹, and/or the arts and entertainment industries of the past and present. This essay will be exploring a collection of statues, which are part of the 'Ludovisi collection'. We will look at the ethnic coding of these statues which enforce a stereotypical perception of what a 'Celt' is ².

Delving deeper

In '*The Celts, A History From The Earliest times to the present*' written by Bernard Maier, Maier states,

When we view classical depictions of the celts in their entirety, it becomes clear that they reflect the viewpoint of a military adversary rather than a detached observer. The apparent realism of the classical artists go hand in hand with an concealed propagandist intent, which places disproportionately strong emphasis on the wild and warlike aspects of the Celts. What would become the definitive manifestation of this artistic tradition in the longer term is most visible in the art of the Empire of Pergamum, and these depictions of the Celts may have been used by later ethnographers, such as Posidonius when they wrote their own descriptions.

So we will explore the iconography of these statues to conclude if this statement is fairly discerned, three images have been placed to observe below, these are a perfect example of the symbolism of 'the noble savage'.

¹ Kimberley Cassibry, *The Tyranny of the 'Dying Gaul': Confronting an Ethnic Stereotype in Ancient Art*, 2nd edn (The Art Bulletin 2017), pp. 6–40. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44972828>> [accessed 24 November 2023].

² Cassibry, *The Tyranny of the 'Dying Gaul': Confronting an Ethnic Stereotype in Ancient Art*, pp. 6–40.



Figure 1 Dying Gaul | Museum of Classical Archaeology Databases.

Asia Minor⁵. They were copied and reproduced in Rome⁶, after the bronze originals were brought there, likely by Emperor Nero in 56 – 68 AD⁷.

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As seen in Fig. 1, the statue known as 'The Dying Gaul' is part of the Ludovisi collection⁴ of sculptures, which are marble copies of the Bronze Pergamon originals. The originals, which were produced in the 3rd BC for the king of Pergamon, were produced to celebrate the defeat of the Galatians, the Gauls of



Figure 2 Close up "The Dying Gaul", National Gallery Of Art Brochure, Washington.

In Figure 1 we see a marble statue of a man on the ground, defeated in battle, and suffering a mortal wound. He wears a torque around the neck, he has shaggy ungroomed hair, and is, of course, naked. Though it is important to state that these statues have been damaged, therefore the hair is actually shorter than first intended.

All three of these iconographies equate to the descriptions written and art work produced

³ University Of Cambridge. [n.d.]. 'Dying Gaul | Museum of Classical Archaeology Databases', Classics.cam.ac.uk/Museum <<https://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/dying-gaul>> [accessed 22 November 2023].

⁴ National Gallery Of Art, *The Dying Gaul an Ancient Roman Masterpiece from the Capitoline Museum, Rome* (Washington, USA: NGA 2013), p.2. <https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/exhibitions/pdfs/2013/DyingGaul_brochureforweb.pdf> [accessed 25 November 2023].

⁵ Bernhard Maier, *The Celts a History from the Earliest Times to the Present*, 2nd edn, trans. by Kevin Windle, (Croydon. UK: Edinburgh University Press 2018), p.115.

⁶ Maier, *The Celts a History from the Earliest Times to the Present*, p.115.

⁷ National Gallery Of Art, *The Dying Gaul an Ancient Roman Masterpiece from the Capitoline Museum, Rome*, p.2.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.1.

by past Roman and Greco artists, scholars, leaders and rulers⁹.

The positioning of the Galatian man can be seen as suspicious, any stab wound would usually result in the victim lying or sitting backwards, pressurising the wound. Sitting forward would be unwise unless intended to cause a quicker death, the sitting position would add a detrimental pressure to the area, and this would propel the blood to leave the body quicker. It would be understandable to suspect the man as being depicted as upright to denote a last ditch attempt at defiance against his 'superior' foe. This would in itself add greatness to those who defeated such a warrior, though it cannot be said with one hundred percent certainty, we see throughout history that many humans have bravely died in defiance of their enemies, and this defiant style of sacrificing one's self to suicide.

The theory of propaganda in the iconography, and it's reasoning being to bolster the achievements of those that defeated such peoples, is known as the colonial phenomena of the 'Noble Savage' trope¹⁰. As Barry Cunliffe states in his book *'The Celts, A Very Short Introduction'*, 'the image subtly changed to that of the 'noble savage' as seen through the eyes of Posidonius'.

We see this trope perpetuated again in the second statue in this collection, in Figure 3, *'Gaul Committing Suicide with his wife'*.



Figure 3 'Gaul Committing Suicide with his wife', National Gallery Of Art Brochure, Washington.

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The couple are seen with the wife on the floor after the husband slaying her, and then turning on himself as to avoid them being captured or killed by their foes. Once again the Galatians are depicted as being naked, which is linked to the symbolism of the warring 'Savage'. Once again you see the hair is of course in disarray, and in the style of the stereotypical depiction of a Gaul. Both the wife, and husband are slender, fit and appear to be of an athletic build, alike 'The Dying Gaul'. A substantial clue to the 'Noble savage' trope here is that they are committing the act of self-sacrifice. All of these symbolisms denote the intended ethnic coding and would booster the champions as even greater, for their enemy was wild yet admirable, their prestige as such only adds to the prestige of the champions¹². These stereotypes are seen in such media as Asterix¹³,

⁹ Maier, *The Celts a History from the Earliest Times to the Present*, pp.47-61.

¹⁰ Barry Cunliffe. *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York and Oxford: OUP Oxford 2003), p.13.

¹¹ National Gallery Of Art, *The Dying Gaul an Ancient Roman Masterpiece from the Capitoline Museum, Rome*, p.2.

¹² Cunliffe. *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction*, p.14.

¹³ Tapidesourix. [n.d.]. 'Asterix', *Astérix - Le Site Officiel* <<https://asterix.com/>> [accessed 29 November 2023].

the drunken yet rowdy lad-like culture of Celtic tribes, which are in cartoon/Comic book mediums for modern entertainment.

As a whole, from then to the present, these people are not seen as diverse individuals with autonomy, they are only 'barbaric' with matching 'tendencies', a similar stereotype we see in the present that is forced onto Indigenous¹⁴ communities¹⁵ across the globe to this day, with women of Colour¹⁶, and misunderstood individuals with ADHD¹⁷, and autism¹⁸. What we have learned in modern times is that this can indeed hinder our progress as a species, and the progress of a better life for all, and throughout all the layers of humanity, its history, its future, these are important things to understand. Othering does nothing but bare more conflict, more misunderstandings and further trauma to the species we belong to. For further reading on how this ideology is prevalent and relevant in modern times please read the references above, as with all humanity, we are never one thing, and understanding more than what is only in our lines of interest can do nothing but help to support the progression of humane psychology.

In conclusion

It is safe to conclude that the statement made by Maier were indeed fair.

These misconceptions can teach us many things, firstly about colonial psychology but that is of course obvious to anyone who understands modern colonialism, and/or ancient history. The academic lessons are easy to be seen, but there are deeper lessons in these possible inaccuracies, they are just as suitably rich to learn because of the need of human growth on all levels, through the common populous, and the learned. As stated before the conclusion, when we consider how we treat another human that may act in a way that is alien to us, how should we respond? Asking ourselves the questions are crucial to our development, do we continue to act from fear and greed, or in a more humane way alike being welcoming, and more importantly open minded to the talents, needs, and autonomy of the 'other'.

¹⁴ The University Of Yale, and Teresa Tansey Pardee. [n.d.]. '*Noble Savage: Depictions of Native Americans throughout U.S. History*', *Teachers.yale.edu* <https://teachers.yale.edu/curriculum/viewer/initiative_06.04.07_u> [accessed 30 November 2023].

¹⁵ Ter Ellingson. *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (University of California Press 2001) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pprf8>> [accessed 30 November 2023].

¹⁶ Daphna Motro, Jonathan B. Evans, Aleksander P. J. Ellis, and Lehman Benson III, 'The "Angry Black Woman" Stereotype at Work', *Harvard Business Review*, 2002. <<https://hbr.org/2022/01/the-angry-black-woman-stereotype-at-work>> [accessed 28 November 2023].

¹⁷ Nancy. Lovering, '*ADHD Stigma: How It Affects Children, Adults, and Caregivers*', Healthline, 2002. <<https://www.healthline.com/health/adhd/stigma>> [accessed 29 November 2023].

¹⁸ Ciaran Varley, '*Some of the Most Annoying Stereotypes Autistic People Have to Deal With*', BBC Three, 2018, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/3eccc871-fb8f-4db5-b3ba-f596544ab163>> [accessed 29 November 2023]

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