

WIM BLOCKMANS

THE CREATION AND MYTHIFICATION OF A CLASSICAL HERO

Rulers throughout the ages have felt the need to have their deeds commemorated and glorified by means of panegyric texts, genealogies of their dynasty, chronicles, artefacts and monuments. Roman antiquity produced a wide range of such devices for worship. Some of these traditions were relinquished in medieval Europe: no longer were triumphal arches, columns or theatres built, and there were but very few personalised statues erected to immortalise the leaders of glorious slaughters. This is not to suggest that military achievements lost their immense appeal in Christian Europe; the middle ages instead glorified their chivalrous heroes by literary means. The scenery for such commemorations remained limited to the smaller circles of court society: there, they helped foster the self-consciousness of dynasties, the solidarity of their followers, and acted as models for their behaviour. Evidently, it would have been dangerous for the chivalry to propagate their own value system among the lower classes of society, focused as it was on the cult of honour, the recurrent application of physical violence, and the contempt of the rational seeking of material profit. Imagine for a moment what would happen if a peasant community would try to imitate chivalrous behaviour: the economy would immediately collapse and general disorders break out.

Charles V was certainly nourished in this chivalric culture, as is testified to by his commission, as late as 1540, of a translation of the allegorical romance of chivalry *Le Chevalier délibéré* written by the Burgundian court chronicler Olivier de la Marche. His devotion to the values of chivalry was demonstrated in practice by his apparent willingness to meet his opponent Francis in single combat. He issued this challenge in 1526 as a response to the French king's breach of his oath to the Treaty of Madrid, which behaviour Charles had described as cowardly and base, *lache et méchant*. The challenge was repeated in 1528 and in 1536, and yet another was issued to Sultan Suleiman, which was equally ineffective. My point will be, however, that Charles's image has gradually been assimilated into that of classical heroes, starting with Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Renaissance iconography offered him a new symbolic system, very suitable for the Roman emperor who became the master of

Italy. Given the poor appeal his physical appearance made on contemporary observers, the elaboration of a fake image became increasingly important for the emperor.¹

During the first years of his reign, Charles demonstrated no particular interest or creativity in the use of artistic media for his political propaganda. The famous bust by Conrad Meit, made around 1515 and now in the Bruges Gruuthuse Museum, belonged to a series representing members of the dynasty. Charles's prayer book from 1516 (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, ÖNB) shows the young king kneeling with his device 'plus oultre' and the emblems of the Order of the Golden Fleece in the marginal decorations on the frontispiece, all in the purest Burgundian tradition. The workshops of Michiel Sittow and Barend van Orley (c.1492–1542), who had been working for Margaret of Austria, reproduced multiple copies of Charles's portrait dating from 1516–17, one now in the Museum at Brou. These portraits were offered as gifts to visitors, friends and courtiers. In the German area, medals, medallions, woodcuts and even alabaster engravings showed the rather unflattering image of the young prince (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum).

At the occasion of ceremonial entries and coronations, subjects staged pageants and offered works of arts. In the Bruges Entry of 1515, the city organised an impressive symbolic programme of *tableaux vivants* representing its past glory and present decline. The young prince was urged to move the Wheel of Fortune again in order to bring prosperity back. He was offered a precious manuscript, now in Vienna, ÖNB, representing the whole ceremony in 60 miniatures. A translation in French with woodcuts was printed by Gourmont in Paris, and a shortened Dutch version in Antwerp. The magnificent event was thus eternalised and circulated through various publics. The emblem of Charles handling the Wheel of Fortune returned in a tapestry woven in 1520 in Brussels after a design by Barend van Orley, and made at the occasion of Charles's imperial election (now in Segovia, La Granja). In all these cases, Charles was rather the passive object of a representation in the Burgundian tradition.

Gradually, however, Charles became involved in another cultural atmosphere, that of the Italian Renaissance. His grandfather Maximilian had already demonstrated the propagandistic value of the stylistic renewal by using the new medium of the printing press. In 1515–17 Albrecht Dürer, Albrecht Altdorfer and other artists designed 192 woodcuts show-

ing together a triumphal arch with portraits, heraldic images, and scenes of the emperor's victorious battles. Maximilian's impressive funeral chapel in Innsbruck was designed by the humanist Conrad Peutinger to display the busts of 34 Roman emperors. Along with statues of his own ancestors and of saints, they were intended to make visible a direct connection from Julius Caesar and Constantine to himself. In the medals and sculptures produced in the 1520s, Charles is shown in that tradition, still longhaired and beardless.

Charles's great rival Francis elaborated a rather different style of art patronage. His most renowned initiatives were the major architectural projects at the Louvre, Fontainebleau and Chambord palaces. In Fontainebleau the first true art gallery north of the Alps contained a collection of ancient Greek manuscripts and sculptures. Inspired by Guillaume Budé, Francis founded the *Collège Royal* (now the *Collège de France*); he favoured 'the revival of letters' and presented his interest in learning as a value in itself. He liked to guide his guests through a visit to his gallery and to make comments on the objects himself.

None of this would be typical for Charles. His main architectural projects testify to his – or rather his Spanish counsellors' – willingness to recuperate the monuments of Islamic culture. Efforts to transform the Great Mosque in Cordoba into a Catholic cathedral started in 1523, and lasted for nearly two and a half centuries. Gothic arches were built right upon the pillars belonging to the marvels of Islamic culture. In 1527 work started in the Alhambra of Granada, to build a palace in a quadrangular form with a circular patio. It was constructed right in the middle of the magnificent palaces of the Moorish period, part of which were demolished for this purpose. This mark of a new domination symbolically reflected the newest imitation of the pure classical forms. Architect Pedro Machuca had just visited Rome prior to this project. The emperor's emblems are to be seen on all the walls; battle scenes and heroic figures decorate the main gate. A large inscription glorifies Charles in the most classical style as the 'semper augustus pius felix invictissimus'. The construction proceeded very slowly and the palace never became one of the emperor's residences. Charles's itinerant life and his lack of a single capital obviously did not motivate him to invest, on a great scale, in patronage of architecture.

The turning point of Charles's image building was 1529. By that time, he had become the undisputed master of Italy and had reached

political maturity. His domination of Italy enabled him to press Pope Clement VII to celebrate his formal coronation as the Holy Roman Emperor. On the eve of leaving Barcelona for Genoa, Chancellor Gattinara advised Charles to change his appearance by having his hair and beard cut short, in order that he may more closely resemble the classical emperors, and maybe also to conceal his prolapsed chin. His court painter Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen caught this very moment in one of his portraits, now in the Brussels Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten. The confrontation with Italian culture, where the Renaissance had penetrated more widely than in Spain and in the Northern territories, must have stimulated the emperor to become more stylish. Charles's court preacher Antonio de Guevara published in 1528 a biography of Emperor Marcus Aurelius whom he advised his master to take as a guide and example.

In the Genoa entry of 1529, Charles was hailed as *re del mondo*, and the image of an eagle on a globe was prominently displayed. It was, however, the coronation procession in Bologna on his thirtieth birthday, 24 February 1530, which made the deepest impression. As it occurred with the Bruges entry in 1515, the event was immediately publicised in a series of 24 commented woodcuts published in Antwerp after a design by Robert Péril. Nicolaus Hogenberg, who had been working for Margaret, Governess of Austria, in Mechelen, produced in the following years a series of 40 engravings with only short epigrams in Latin and a collection of heraldic arms. In the Plantin Moretus Museum in Antwerp a coloured version on parchment is kept with comments in handwriting, which probably served as the model for the print by Péril. It was mainly the presence of four triumphal arches under which the procession had to pass that expressed a clear Renaissance style. Vasari mentions the name of the sculptor Alfonso Lombardi who made the statues in *haut relief* on the arch at the palace gate. Details are shown here from the woodcuts because they are clearer. We first see a portrait of the designer Robert Péril, on the side of an arch. The shrine has to pass under it with the Holy relics of *Corpus Christi*, carried under a baldachin carried by 12 Roman patricians and accompanied by 12 apostolic clerics holding torches. The text commenting explains that the herald of arms named Bourgoigne had hanging at his saddle two sacs full of newly struck gold and silver coins which had on one side the image and semblance of the Holy Majesty with around it the inscription 'Carolus quintus imperator augustus', and

on the other the two columns and 'plus oultre'. During this procession, both on its way to and back from the cathedral, he threw by both hands these gold and silver coins in all directions in the streets on the people, shouting *largesse, largesse*, the people screaming loudly *imperio, imperio, vive l'empereur Charles Catholique*.

The coins thus were the only mass medium by which the emperor had his image, title and device propagated in Bologna, apart from the traditional show of heraldic symbols and imperial insignia. Four princes of the Empire carry the imperial *insignia*: the sceptre, the sword, and the globe, while the fourth is empty-handed since the emperor is wearing the crown himself. Also under a baldachin, as sacralised universal rulers, the pope follows with the emperor at his left hand – a significant detail: six years later, Pope Paul III would dignify Charles to allow him to ride at his right hand while making his entry in Rome. They are immediately followed by the Count of Nassau, Charles's first chamberlain, and the pope's physician and secretary.

The two columns of Hercules have been promoted as Charles's emblem in 1516 and 1517 by the Italian humanist bishop, Luigi Marliani, who also became his physician. In a speech, he called Charles the new Hercules, and from then onwards, this emblem would be repeated innumerable times in many forms. In combination with the device *Plus Oultre, Plus Ultra*, which elaborated on that of his grandfather Ferdinand of Aragon *Ulterius*, it may have referred to the Rocks of Gibraltar, beyond which lay his 'new gold-bearing' lands.

The coronation ceremony attracted numerous artists to the court, hoping for imperial commissions. The most renowned among them was Parmigianino, about whose work Vasari noted the emperor was very pleased: 'He made a very large oil painting in which he showed Fame putting the laurel-crown on Caesar and a boy resembling a little Hercules giving him the world.'²

Hercules carrying the Heavenly Spheres (Madrid, Palacio Real) is also the subject of a tapestry woven in Brussels about the same year 1530 on a design by Barend van Orley or his workshop on a commission by King John III of Portugal. Charles certainly did not have the monopoly on emblems popular in his time, especially not that of Hercules. As early as 1507, Pope Julius II had a magnificent antique sculpture of Hercules and Telephos placed at the entrance of the *Cortile delle Statue* in the Vatican, only days after its discovery.³ Charles, however, started to make

the most prolific use of this theme. Subjects imitated and reproduced the emperor's image and emblems on prominent public buildings, such as the sculpted chimney in the Court of the *Vrije* at Bruges; the Bisagra city gate in Toledo; the choir screen in Toledo cathedral; the stained glass in Brussels Saint Gudula church. Through the multiplication of his visual image by mass media, the emperor could be *represented*, while he himself had to be very distant for most of his subjects.

It was in Bologna that Titian made his first portraits of Charles, among which the famous copy of Johan Seisenegger's portrait with the Ulmer dog, from 1532 (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum). Various Italian princes were instrumental in drawing Charles's attention to their best artists, thus Titian was introduced to him by Cardinal Hypolite de Medici and Federico Gonzaga. The very recent frescoes by Giulio Romano and his collaborators in the Palazzo Te in Mantua made a deep impression on him. In one room, ancient gods were depicted in an unrestrained erotic fashion: Amor and Psyche, but also Charles's dearest emblems Hercules and Jupiter. The room, with the astonishingly panoramic *Struggle of the Titans*, was finished in 1532 just before the emperor's visit. This possibly impressed him most because of their groundbreaking open eroticism. Through the metaphors of Jupiter and the Eagle on a throne, allusions were made here to his own victorious struggle with Francis. It was in particular Federico Gonzaga who stimulated Charles's interest in the political power of the image, as they had also a common interest in Arabic horses.

After his successful campaign against Tunis in 1535, which was labelled a crusade by Pope Paul III, Charles made a series of entries in Italian cities, which further stimulated his glorification by Italian artists. From Palermo, to Messina, Naples, Rome, Sienna, Florence and Lucca, the victorious emperor attracted painters, sculptors and decorators running from one place to the next in order to offer their services for the impressive but ephemeral works. Scripts of at least three of these spectacles (Messina, Rome and Florence) have been published for the distant public. In several places, references were made to his success against the Muslims, and several of its scenes were illustrated. In Rome, his entry only nine years after the destruction of the city by his troops presented a particularly delicate situation. Accompanied by 5,000 followers, among whom were many veterans of the expedition to Tunis, Charles made a really triumphal entry in the tradition of the Roman emperors. The *Via*

Sacra had been cleared for this occasion of some churches and other buildings standing in the way. The local organisers took care to stage Charles's five imperial ancestors of the Habsburg dynasty. Ancient history provided the rest of the imperial themes. Mostly, however, Charles was compared to ancient and mythological models. In a way, these dramas 'romanised' Charles's image, even beyond his own initiative. In Sienna he was represented as an ancient hero on horseback, with three subdued provinces at his feet. The horse, painted in gold, was placed on a cart, so that it could be drawn from the city gate to the palace. Here, connections with triumphal carts could be made, such as those used for other processions and the one designed for Charles in 1537 by Hans Schaeufelein. Anticipating his interest or even patronage, artists expanded the imperial iconography to grandiose dimensions. Reality of his image must, however, have remained close to this portrait in a contemporary woodcut by Hans Lieftrinck, supported mainly by his traditional heraldic symbols.

Florence evidently could not do less than Sienna. Alessandro di Medici ordained Giorgio Vasari to take the responsibility for the *ornamenti magnifici e grandissimi per ricevere con magnificenza conveniente l'imperatore*. Painted scenes represented the fight of the Turks, the coronation of a new King of Tunis and the river Bagradas. A play described Charles as the *domitor Africae*, the tamer of Africa. On the Trinità Bridge, the Rhine and the Danube were shown in earthward, together with Hercules fighting the hydra, Peace and, again, an equestrian statue of Charles himself. Alessandro's dedication read 'imperator caroli augusto victoriosissimo', imprinted on the horse alone since the emperor's statue could not be finished before his arrival. The show had to go on.

Cities north of the Alps followed the Italian example. On his visit to Paris in 1540, Charles was shown a life-size silver statue of Hercules. On his tour with Philip through the Low Countries, to have his son inaugurated in 1549, the city of Ghent erected a series of classical triumphal arches headed by Charles's emblemata, and representing various historical scenes of the transmission of power from fathers to sons, as done by the city of Brussels earlier that year. I will refer here especially to those of Philip of Macedonia with Alexander, Vespasian with Titus, Charlemagne with Louis the Pious, and Count of Flanders Thierry of Alsatia with Philip, the arch erected just before the *Prinsenhof*. The ref-

erences to two other Philips and one other Charles were particularly well chosen.⁴ The city of Antwerp's secretary Graphaeus noted in his printed report of the entry there that 1,726 local artists and artisans had collaborated for the decorations of the arches and stages, while the procession would have counted 5,296 participants, both on horse and on foot. He had himself designed the route around the old city walls and the location of the triumphal arches ornamented with stylish sculptures. The painter Pieter Coecke, who had translated Vitruvius' *Rules of Architecture*, headed the whole enterprise. Here too, Philip was confronted with a large ephemeral architecture exemplifying eight historical Philips, while the city was represented as an obedient virgin seeking the new ruler's clemency. The Spanish merchants' nation had erected a huge installation opening with two enormous pillars, opening a double row of seven great Spanish rulers to the left and the seven virtues to the right. A triumphal arch showing Charles's victories had on its top a model of the Roman Temple of Janus, which expressed the wish for a lasting peace.⁵

All these representations were initiated by cities and princes receiving and hosting Charles. They were carried out by local artists seeking employment, some of them belonging among the very best of their age. The themes were created by the artists themselves and by some learned courtiers, never do we see any creativity on the side of the emperor. At most he showed his interest in the writing of his own history, either in the form of printed pamphlets in which his position and his successes were propagated, or in that of dictating his memoirs and political testaments, in imitation of Julius Caesar and Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

Also on a purely informative level, and intended for purposes of self-glorification, Charles ordered his court painter Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen to accompany the campaign to Tunis in 1535, to record it visually as realistically as possible. Pieter Coecke and Maarten van Heemskerck also joined the team. Their drawings were the foundation of the famous series of tapestries representing the Conquest of Tunis, woven in Brussels about 1554 (Madrid, Palacio Real). Charles's commission dated already from 1540. The glorification of the Battle of Pavia had already taken place previously in a comparable series of seven magnificent tapestries offered to Charles by the States General of the Netherlands (Naples, Museo di Capodimonte). The Tunis expedition was represented again on a golden jug with a plate made in Antwerp in 1558 (Paris, Musée du Louvre). Heemskerck served the same propagandistic purpose

with his series of 12 engravings representing Charles's Victories, published in 1556 on a commission by Philip. Four of these had to be chosen in the single campaign of 1547 against the German Protestants. Charles's own defeats were silenced in the propaganda campaign which became more active when, at the end of the reign and immediately afterwards, real victories were no longer won.

Charles was primarily interested in technical devices such as clocks and weapons. He enjoyed the skills of armourers and appreciated the increasingly refined design of his armours, which became wonderful pieces of art bearing even political messages, such as Negroni's helmet dated 1545 (Madrid, Real Armeria).

Only during the last ten years of his reign, however, is Charles's own increasing involvement with art patronage discernible. His personal admiration for Titian and Leone Leoni grew over the years and permitted them the freedom of expression required for great art. As always, however, art had to support a clear political message. Many commissioned portraits showed the emperor in a particular mission, such as that of Charles as sovereign of the Order of the Golden Fleece (Collection of the Duke of Buccleuch). Titian's portrait at the Battle of Mühlberg (Madrid, Museo del Prado) exhibits the victorious defender of the Catholic Church, holding the Holy Lance, one of the Holy Roman Empire's most precious relics, and symbol of Saint George, patron saint of the Burgundian dynasty. His nearly simultaneous portrait at the age of 48 (Munich, Alte Pinakothek), on the other hand, reflects purely a meditative older, wiser and sadder man.

The political message is very obvious again in Leone Leoni's glorification of the emperor as a classical hero, demonstrating the power of art to compensate the sad reality of Charles's later years (Madrid, Museo del Prado). Leoni's supreme work was his Hercules fighting the Fury (Prado), dated 1551/1553, which refers to Charles's victory over the Protestants, as does Titian's portrait. The magnificent sculpture of the naked hero displays a perfectly built Herculean body. At that moment this was absolutely a mythification of slender, old, sick, defeated and discouraged Charles.

Two further steps were set. The identification of Charles with classical gods – *divus* was the ancient expression, used by humanist authors as an equivalent for 'saint' in a strange combination with Catholicism – led to far-reaching associations. A medal dated 1544 represents the Trinity

with the emperor and all his insignia on the throne of God the Father. Another medal struck to commemorate the defeat of the Schmalkaldic League showed Charles as Jupiter with a thunderbolt in each hand, and a motto from Virgil's *Aeneid* 'discite iustitiam moniti', (heed the warning of Justice). Truly mythifying was also the representation of Charles's Apotheosis, one in the form of one of the 12 engravings by Heemskerk, similar to an early image with the seven Electors, another in that of the allegory of the ship (Madrid, Real Armeria). This image returned in the funeral procession held in Brussels in 1558, widely publicised in prints, which completed the emperor's mythification. Titian's *Gloria* (Prado), finally, places Charles and his family far above mankind, very close to the Trinity, with only Mary as a mediator between them. This composition, in conjunction with his penitential garment, may show that the emperor had come, at the end of his life, very close to either his personal apotheosis, or the Lutheran vision of a direct responsibility of the Christian to God.

Charles was interested in art only when it regarded and glorified his person and his victorious deeds. He supported it in the same way as he did the chroniclers and pamphlet-writers whose task consisted in the propagation of his policy and personality. He thus greatly helped himself by creating the image of grandeur by which later authors have always remained impressed. But even this propaganda trick was not Charles's own idea: it was suggested to him by friendly Italian princes and by artists themselves, long before he took an interest in the quality of the artistic works as such. In this respect, Charles was much less an Renaissance prince than Francis, even though the new style and themes of that age, as well as the new devices for mass communication helped greatly to embellish his rather problematic image.

NOTES

- 1 Substantial for this subject is F Checa Cremades, *Carlos V y la imagen del heroe en el Renacimiento*, Madrid, 1987
- 2 A Chastel, 'Les Entrees de Charles Quint en Italic', in J Jacquot, ed , *Fêtes et ceremonies au temps de Charles Quint*, Paris, 1960, pp 197–206
- 3 *Hoch Renaissance im Vatikan Kunst und Kultur im Rom der Papste 1503–1534*, Catal Bonn, 1998, nr 217
- 4 M Lagerse, 'La Joyeuse entree du Prince Philippe à Gand en 1549', in Jacquot, *Fêtes et ceremonies*, pp 297–306
- 5 A Corbet, 'L'Entrée du Prince Philippe a Anveis en 1549', *ibid* pp 307–310, E J Roobaert, 'De seei wonderlijcke schoone triumphelijcke incompst van den hooghmogenden Prince Philips in de stadt van Antwerpen Anno 1549 ', *Bulletin der Koninklyke Musea voor Schone Kunsten*, 9, 1960, pp 37–73, W Eisler, 'Celestial Harmonies and Hapsburg Rule Levels of Meaning in a triumphal Arch for Philip II in Antwerp, 1549', in B Wisch and S Munshower, eds , *'All the World's a Stage' Art and Pageantry in the Renaissance and Baroque*, Philadelphia, 1990, pp 332–356, W Kuyper, *The triumphant entry of Renaissance architecture into the Netherlands*, Alphen aan den Rijn, 1994, M A Meadow, 'Ritual and Civic Identity in Philip II's 1549 Antwerp "Blijde Incompst"', *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art*, 49, 1998, pp 37–67