
In 2002, an international group of scholars hailing from Europe and North America convened in Leeds, England, for a conference titled “Royal Monuments and Public Space in Eighteenth-Century Europe.” The purpose of this conference was to examine the phenomenon of statue building during the Age of Enlightenment—specifically the making of royal equestrian and pedestrian statues for public display in cities throughout the Western world. This volume of essays, edited by art historian Charlotte Chastel-Rousseau (a specialist in British and French sculpture at the Louvre Museum, Paris), grew out of papers delivered at the conference. Rather than looking at these monuments solely within a specific national context or merely as artistic statements, the papers addressed the international scope of royal monument building during the eighteenth century and situated individual works within a wider urban and socio-political arena.

Reflecting the broad geographical framework of the conference from which it grew, Reading the Royal Monument in Eighteenth-Century Europe offers multi-national coverage of the topic at hand. The volume includes ten original essays, all written by European art historians and translated when not initially composed in English, that examine a variety of royal monuments in Continental Europe and Britain (France, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, Italy, England, and Ireland) and in the United States (Washington D.C.). The volume begins with three essays on the development of equestrian and pedestrian forms for royal statuary in France, where representations of the king strategically placed in urban settings functioned as powerful symbols of the regime. Subsequent essays describe how these prototypes—which ultimately derived from the ancient world—were disseminated by French artists working abroad and by other means to various cities beyond France, where local customs and circumstances often resulted in variations on the equestrian or pedestrian theme and in different modes of display within the urban fabric. Chastel-Rousseau’s introductory essay nicely frames the discussion for the reader, identifying the influential role France played during the eighteenth century in adopting a formal model for expressing royal power and virtue that would resonate far and wide.

While all of the essays are straightforward and relatively free of specialist jargon, the subject matter of this volume would most likely appeal to scholars and students, and the book would therefore be most at home in an academic library serving an art history audience, as well as those interested in architectural history and urban studies. Each essay is followed by notes and citations, and an extensive bibliography is also provided. Several black-and-white images of adequate size and quality accompany each essay, providing critical views of artworks and urban settings that serve as visual reference points for the reader.

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