

TRAJAN'S COLUMN AS COMIC

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One of the great comics artists of the twentieth century stated, “it is possible to tell a story through imagery alone without the help of words.... The absence of any dialogue to reinforce action serves to demonstrate the viability of images drawn from common experience” (Eisner 16). Trajan's Column beautifully illustrates Will Eisner's opinion on wordless comics. While not appearing to be a comic at first glance, it uses two of the three fundamental storytelling devices of comics and can be considered as one. How does it use visual language and panels to tell the story of the Dacian campaigns?

Often, comics artists must represent invisible or hard-to-describe things, but to preserve the story's pace, must convey them in a glance. Their solution has been to create symbols: dollar-sign pupils for greed, wavy lines for smoke or smells, motion lines for rapid action...a visual language.

Trajan's Column likewise uses symbols

as carefully worked out as the words used by writers of epics. A series of undulating lines, for example, indicates water. A jagged outline on the horizon stands for a mountain. A large figure rising up out of the water represents a river. A wall can mean either a city or a camp. A female figure whose draperies are folded in the shape of a crescent moon informs the observer that it is night. (Marien 98)



Symbols: Selene in spiral six (Rossi 150-151).

The figures give examples of three of these: water and walls in spiral five (next page), and Selene in spiral six (right). Visual language can also be subtle. In his work, Eisner uses readily understood details such as the moon, changing scenery, and footprints



Symbols: water and walls in spiral five (Rossi 146-147).

to emphasize time, place, and action (19, 20, 23). The column does not rely on symbols alone. The artist makes use of identifying details of location, costume, insignia, etc (Rossi 98-129), and of imagery from daily life, imperial iconography, and the theater, including entire stock scenes such as the

adlocutio (Brilliant 192). With this visual vocabulary, the artist efficiently describes the setting and performers of the current action, leaving more space to detail the action itself.

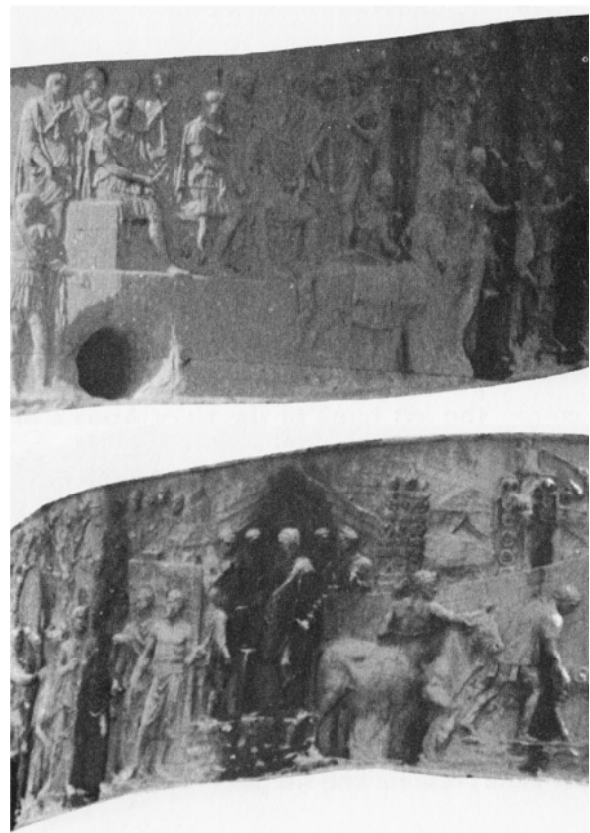
In comics, action is contained in panels, the theory behind which was developed by Scott McCloud in his book *Understanding Comics*. McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). Because it is the panelization that creates the sequence, one can say that the panel is *the* defining characteristic of comics. Their uniqueness, however, lies in the gutter:

See that space *between* the panels? ...The gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics! Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. Nothing is *seen* between the two panels, but experience tells you something *must* be there! Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. (McCloud 66-67)

Closure is the act of completing the incomplete, via the imagination. The panel invites the

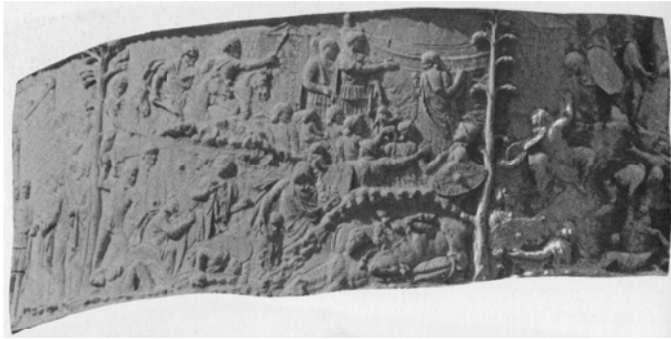
reader to join the fragments into a whole by making visible the edges of the fragments (McCloud 63-67). The panel is inherently fragmentary, and thereby antithetical to the classical unities of time, place, and action. It offers a way to tell stories that cannot be told under such constraints. Wide-ranging stories can be portrayed in representative fragments, while the narrative as a whole depends upon closure for its continuity.

Though he strove to depict the action as a single flow, the need for clarity forced the frieze designer to break it into recognizable pieces—panels, though not with the hard-edged frames readers are familiar with today. To control the reader's eye, the artist used the metaphor of an unwinding scroll, which creates the top and bottom edges of the panel frame. On this scroll, each appearance of Trajan signals a new panel (Marien 98). Just like Eisner, the artist made use of background changes and convenient vertical elements, such as trees, to create panel edges



Trajan as panel division: council followed by sacrifice in spiral two (Rossi 143-144).

where Trajan was not present. Sample panel divisions include spiral two, where a council is followed by a propitiary sacrifice (above), the tree-bracketed Roman pillaging of occupied Dacia in spiral five (left), and wingèd Victory in spiral twelve (Rossi 173-174, not shown), who



Trees as panel edges around the pillaging scene in spiral five (Rossi 145-146).

separates the two campaigns.

The existence of panels requires that there be transitions between panels, and

McCloud lists six types: moment to

moment, action to action, subject to

subject, scene to scene, aspect to aspect,

and non-sequitur (70-72). Of these types, Trajan's Column uses only subject and scene

transitions. Subject to subject transitions require a moderate degree of closure, but are still

focused on a single scene or idea. Most transitions on the column are of this type, and are used

almost seamlessly: the first spiral takes the reader through the frontier's defenses and preparation,

up the river, to the army base, and thence across the river on a pontoon bridge, with never a jolt

(Rossi 130-133).

Scene to scene

transitions bridge

larger gaps in time

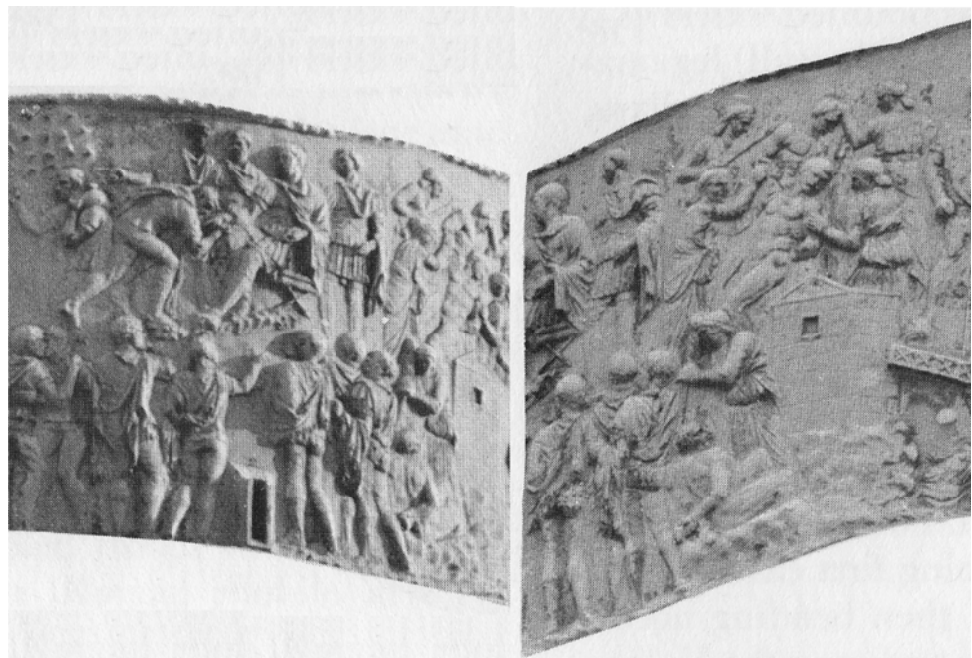
and space, and

make larger

demands on the

reader's ability to

connect the pieces



Scene to scene transition: Trajan rewarding soldiers followed by Dacian women torturing Roman prisoners, in spiral seven (Rossi 154-157).

shown. Spiral seven depicts soldiers being rewarded by Trajan after a fruitful battle, while their captured comrades are tortured by Dacian women (previous page). Another “meanwhile...” series of transitions ends spiral five. The Dacians circle around to attack a distant Roman garrison, forcing Trajan to hurry back to the other side of the Danube or leave his men in danger and leaderless (Rossi 146-149).

Inviting closure is not the only task the panel must perform. “The panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided.... Space does for comics what time does for film.” (McCloud 99, 7). Several of the sequences discussed earlier exemplify how the panel divides time and space. Another is the break between Trajan’s meeting with the *comati* Dacian embassy and the subsequent pillaging of occupied territory (Rossi 144-145). But is each panel a single frozen moment? No. “Time in comics is infinitely weirder than *that!*” (McCloud 94). Some panels *unite* space and time to present an entire sequence in one image, thereby replacing a choppy series of moment to moment or action to action transitions with a smoother and more economical long panel. These composite simultaneous scenes present a gestalt of that which in



Gestalt panel uniting space and time: soldiers build a fort in spiral two (Rossi 136-137).

reality was spread out over space and time, and do it so well that often the reader does not even notice it

happening. Most if not all of the frequent building-of-engineering-works scenes are such gestalts. Near the end of spiral two, the Romans build a fort. Earth-moving, mortar-mixing, block-chiseling, and stone-laying are all shown, with the soldiers draped over the already-complete walls as they work. This is not a genuine single instant in time, but a composite that the reader will immediately recognize as the building of a fort.

Trajan's Column strives valiantly to appear to be simultaneous as is a Greek frieze, but the column is in fact a pioneering wordless comic of considerable sophistication. It carefully uses visual language, including symbols, everyday images, and specific details to set the scene. This economy provides greater scope for the action to take place. That action is structured into panels, sometimes deliberately broken apart to produce tension, sometimes flowing from subject to subject or scene to scene to provide continuity. The panels sometimes divide, sometimes unite time and space. These devices allowed the artist to provide a clear, concise, and lively picture of the two Dacian campaigns for the Roman public and for posterity.

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