

# "The Giants Against the Gods": the Dramatic and Plastic Explication of the Pergamon Alrar

Contemplation of the Exhibit at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts

Tatiana Portnova

Institute of the Russian Theatre

Moscow, Russia

e-mail: Tatiaportnova@bk.ru

**Abstract**—The research offers analysis of the project exhibit "The Giants Against The Gods" that presented interpretation of the reconstructed famous Hellenic monumental sculpture of the Pergamon altar by the contemporary German art photographer and artist A. Alexander. Under review are the author's mythopoeic nature that links historicism with theatrical metaphor and the compositional and semantic match of the lost artifact fragments with the details restored by the project's author in his light panel. Highlighted are the holistic view and the integrated and systemic approach to the particularities of the art masterpiece. The antiquity, Greek mythology and the contemporary plastic installation, as well as the performance art, being symphonized into a single artistic pattern, constitute the centerpiece of this scientific study.

**Keywords**—Hellenism; Pergamon frieze; project (renovation); A. Alexander; artifact; Greek mythology; gods and giants; explication; installation; digital technology; stage version

## I. INTRODUCTION

The timeline of this article is conditioned by a set of messages that are of a particular interest to the art history. Primarily, the exhibition's topic has never been addressed from the perspective of scientific analysis, but for occasional reviews and opinions. Secondly, applying insights into this topic permits to show the use of classic examples of the Hellenistic period in the development of the contemporary art's artistic language, its new directions and forms. Thirdly, the findings and compilation, received in the process of reviewing the exhibit with the use of the famous artifact of monumental statuary, are outlining the theoretical approaches to formulating the definitions "sample", "borrowings" and "imitation", which existed in the antiquity, in the context of the modern display in the form of a light panel that imitates the mythical theme of the Pergamon frieze. The theoretical and methodological basis of the article includes historical, artistic, stylistic and comparison studies that help to bring out the influence of the antique monument's images of sculptured heroes and gods on the monument's interpretation by the contemporary artist Alexander.

## II. BRIEF DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE EXHIBIT

"The Giants against the Gods" – it appears that this name of the exhibit in one of the halls at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, contains an absolutely concrete and, at the same time, an unusually expanded artistic program for the people of art. The project, which offered the recreation (reconstruction) of the well-known masterpiece of Hellenistic art – the sculptural frieze of the Pergamon altar, had presented it in a new visual form, implying the connection between the ancient history and the modern age. It should be pointed out, that such conceptual thematic exhibits and installations have long been used in museum practice in the West. To the Pergamonmuseum on the Museum Island in Berlin, which houses this major exhibit, people occasionally come as to theater. It is worth recalling experience of Italian artists and designers that designed around the ancient monument a tremendous view of Pergamon, visually displaying the ancient city's image. All of them are controversial and require certain skills and expertise, as well as alertness in work with the artwork originals concerning their interpretation. Especially if such conceptions are being addressed by non-specialist artists and fine art experts. Is it possible to consider as successful the work of residing today in Germany art photographer and actor of the Moscow pantomime theater Andrey Alexander, who has confidently undertaken the reconstruction of the antique sculptures' lost fragments? The replenished work appeared full-size in the form of a light panel. Has he achieve the major scientific task in this complex labor-intensive process of restoring the archeological original or pursued other goals? A.Alexander knew that he had to ascend to a higher level bearing creative risks. In spite of that he was assisted by professional fine art experts on the antique and mythology, he could not rely on the accurate authenticity from the perspective of the fine art science. According to the long established point of view, there is nothing in common between the science and arts, which are the phenomena of the very different systems and lie in isolated, nonintersecting planes; however, the moment of fundamental ideas' revision is crucially important for the development of the experimental science. Therefore, the source, used by the author in his pursuit of new means, is far

from being non-essential for the subject and no less important and, perhaps, most crucial is the issue for what reason this was done. Indeed, this is not about the direct borrowings, but about an artistic revision, re-thinking and appearance of new forms, means and ideas in terms of the antiquity's revival. The time is establishing the distance not only between the Pergamon frieze's image created by A. Alexander and the viewer, but also between the story, conceived many centuries ago, and between our present-day perceptions of how the story could have developed. The miracle of the dramatic art – pictorialized through time – is born only, when one succeeds in recreating on stage the remarkable emotional atmosphere of the epoch. This is the most compelling and challenging task. The creator is not afraid to fuse the script and fantasy while choosing the offered project's material and methods of its implementation. For this reason, the shift of the Pergamon altar's artistic world in A. Alexander's interpretation toward the theatrical seems deeply reasonable and meaningfully justified. History and sculpture take up theater as their own metaphor. However, there is one more extended space between the marble and the plastique involved in the installation – the mythical story. And not just because the author addresses the work based on the Greek mythology, but because its perception by A. Alexander is mythopoeic in nature, which allows to naturally combine in the artistic appearance the historicism with the theatrical metaphor. The idea of a comprehensive perspective and system approach to the particularities of the artwork is a present-day idea, which opens new opportunities and perspectives for the visual anthropology, art theory and criticism.

### III. PHENOMENON OF THE PERGAMON ALTAR AND ALEXANDER'S INTERPRETATION

Why had this particular monument inspired the mime artist A. Alexander for its expressive recreation on the canvas? Probably not just because the Pergamon altar, or the altar of Zeus, had been the famous masterpiece of the Hellenic monumental sculpture and architecture, erected to commemorate the victorious battle of the Pergamon king Attalus I with the barbaric Galatians. To begin with, this is the memorial monument extant, the full significance of which was appraised by the Romans that rated it among the Seven Wonders of the World. Secondly, the scale of this creation is impressive. An unknown to us artist had erected in Pergamon an altar, the size of which reached half of Parthenon and the Acropolis. The relief figures in the frieze are in natural size. The frieze has survived only in fragments and many details and set pieces of the composition were lost. Thirdly, the Pergamon altar's fate is not exactly an easy one. In ancient times, it was buried under earth in the result of earthquakes, and only in 1880 discovered by the German engineer Carl Humann during road construction works. The altar was placed in a specially erected for this purpose museum in Berlin – the Pergamon Museum, where it is being exhibited as the central item in the Berlin Collection of Classical Antiquities. During the World War, the altar was dismantled and hidden in a vault near the Berlin Zoo. Later it was retrieved from ruin by Russian soldiers and sent for the restoration to the Hermitage Museum in Russia,

where it stayed until 1958 and after returned to Berlin. [1] Consequently, not only the global pattern, but also the Pergamon altar's history itself had inspired the actor, mime and artist A. Alexander in his lasting work over the project of the altar reconstruction. The author himself calls this project the continuation of his acting profession, as he sees in the ancient sculptures the carved from marble pantomime, the variety of expressive original setups: «I'm a mime artist and a stage director, for me this is a play. It had somewhat ended on a note of destruction of everything. I got the impression that this play can be continued». [2] A. Alexander feels well the specific nature of the plastic presentation. The sculpture is capable not only to capture the direct visual comprehension of appearances, but also to convey their movement, their temporal and dimensional development. The material of pantomime and dance consists of movements and human positions, which have been plastically conceptualized in time and space and composed a single system. At the same time, it is important to underline the author's insight of the antiquity's dimensional formulas, because they are closely related to the plasticity and gesture. In the Hellenic period, the statuary art had reached such theatrical effects, the height and grandeur of expression that it was comparable with the arts of the Age of Pericles. The evolution and development of the Greek theater as an art made the fine arts seek "theatralisation", and, in particular, of the statuary art that had entered into the new stage of relations with the performing art. [3] Such "theatralisation" in its finest specimens had produced an effect of a «new spectacularity», of the grand and monumental style. The sculptured images of the Pergamon altar already contained the catharsis, which had been perceived by the ancients. The images keep within the bounds of "the psychologism of drama", "the psychologism of characters". What is meant here is the phenomena of psychological renderings. The sculptural relief not only fixes our vision, but also refracts it in a special way. Soundless presentation carries a special expressive power. The mime artist A. Alexander is awake to this and the best part of his plot is being dedicated to this deliberate, voiceless, inspirational description of the ancient myth. However, the author abandons the metaphrastic adherence to the original and exact recreation of the "archeological" texture. The scene is being enwrapped in the conditional space of the canvas, formally infinite and yet enclosed in the theatrical manner. The two-dimensional space and the heroes' dramatic action depicted in it seemingly could correspond to the understanding of the conceived reconstruction task. The author targeted not the analytically scientific, but the picturesque and creative reconstruction of the altar. We may thoroughly study the historical period, creation of the masters and schools of arts in this period, themes and their iconography, think out every detail starting from stylistic design to perspectives, from the logic of action to microscopic breakdown of set pieces, but the artistic image never would appear on the canvas. Arguably, A. Alexander fairly analyses in details all Pergamon friezes' iconography (there are four of them arranged in the cardinal directions), keenly and attentively sensing the notional strings between the friezes, and correctly places emphasis on the eastern (main) frieze, which he identifies as the focal point, and tries to reproduce

it. Two new distinctive trends in the Hellenic ornamentation appear in the relief's plastic artwork – the pursuance of the forms' three-dimensionality, drawing the relief closer to sculpture in the round (the frieze is in the high relief) and the “tapestry” principle of fitting the images in the frieze spacing. High relief of the images almost detached from the background are not only profiled, but also appear in complex perspectives and turns – both full-face and from the back. The entire frieze, designed for separate groups, was built on the principle of the contraposition: there is a dramatic conflict in one and the nature of battle in another, the celebration of harmony in the figures of beautiful goddesses and manifestation of elemental animal outbreak in the other; one focuses on the center, while the other has none; we see only anthropomorphic figures in one group, while zoomorphic creatures appear in the other. [4] In the meantime, the groups' formal and semantic match has been well-thought-out. Everything purports just one central idea – the battle of heroes with death and its defeat. Unravelling of the plot presents a continuous action, wherein as in any other headway, there are acceleration and slowdown, rises and falls. Many of the figures' stance seen in the filled-in parts of the frieze, as for instance of Heracles, Zeus or Apollo, Athena or Artemis – give the impression of moving bodies, tense masses, expressive lines, which have not been borrowed from daily life or just out of one's head, but from the produced artistic action. It is notable that the notion “plasticity” combines both the statuary art and the art of pantomime. Both have been very close to A. Alexander. From this plasticity the second birth of the Pergamon frieze rose out in every sense of the word. Here the aura of the personalities' action not so much “plays out» on behalf of the actor, but urges our imagination to fill in the lines of the dramatic drawing, inciting our cultural and historical associations. Following the semantics of the myth of the Gods' battle over the Giants (so-termed Gigantomachy), the Olympian gods headed by Zeus fought with the Giants, the offspring of Gaia. They looked like giants with snakes for legs. Having great strength, they tried to deprive the Olympian gods of their power over the world. Gaia endued her siblings with the survivability and only a mortal could take the giants' life. Heracles was such mortal, whose participation in this battle decided its outcome. Heracles was the son of Zeus and fought together with his father on the side of the gods. His arrows shot dead many giants. [5]

#### IV. COMPOSITIONAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL EXPRESSIVE MEANS

Staging of the frieze compositions has been manifested in the appearances' hierarchy: there are Olympian gods in the upper part of the frieze, and the defeated giants in its lower part. The gods' movements are ascending, while those of their foes are descending: the figure of Heracles, who is drawing his bow, also figures in other fragments (of the earth-goddess Demeter with a torch in her hand, of Hera managing the quadriga pulled by winged horses); however, according to A. Alexander's version, the quadriga is handled by Iris, and Hera spears a giant. It has been established that all these lost figures were presented on the Big (east) frieze of the altar. [6] Other best-known reliefs of the

Gigantomachy, namely of Artemis, Heracles и Clytie, Leto, Apollo and the defeated giant, «the fight of Athena with Alcinous” and “the fight of Zeus with Porphyrion”, and other broken fragments and details were to be simulated in the conceived project. Evident is not the sheer admiring of the figures, but the fundamental analysis of agonistical experience, roaring and pathological gesticulation whereby the intrinsic spiritual drama is unfolding. The Olympian, gods of human nature, are combating under chthonian powers, the wild monstrous nature is disturbing the serenity of the world. We see the wattage and expressive drive of movement, drawn faces and contrast effects. It was essential for the author that the psychological space of the reconstructed frieze would not be structureless, de-energized, otherwise the viewer would have to conjecture himself what are the central scenes of the composition. He was to complete the pieces of heads, hands and legs, drapery, wings and snake tails, and the entire missing figures as well. The seeming unity of the fragments on the sculptural plates at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts is nothing other than their composition based on increment, as the fragments are separated here and there. Sometimes the action comes inconsequently one over the other. The author had to decode the ancient sculptors' intended underlying idea, but also complete the very drama of the images. The Pergamon frieze characters were interesting to the author as the visualization of contrast differences and conjunction of emotional polarities. There were several stages of the dramatization based on the Olympic gods' combat with the Giants, depicted on the frieze. For reconstruction of the frieze scenes the author invited modern artists, dancers and athletically built sportsmen, whose anatomical organization closely resembled figures on fine plaster copies that were especially made for the museum from the marbles of the Berlin original. Indeed, gods' semblance with human being composes the distinctive feature of the Greek sculpture, as well as their similarity with perfect athletes placed on the opposite side of the museum hall.

To feel and faithfully convey the import of the Greek myth, it was necessary to find an equivalent to the complex material composition presented in the marble patterns and to tune in the performers. Here was needed a production director with an unmistakable perception of mythological genre and sculptural plasticity, with the ability to dimensionally and globally implement an ambitious antique tragedy. A. Alexander had picked the scene and prototypes to the effect that this evoked his personal emotional response and did not turn into loss of the events' interior meaning. These noble, athletically built performers, resembling ancient gods in vast cloaks and skin-tight chitons as if inspirited the strength of ancient gods, differed and yet constituted one whole pattern, just like the authorship of the frieze had belonged more than to one master. In the process of the frieze's good overview, certain differences in the characters' breakdown into separate compositional groups can be seen. Craftsmen from all over Greece worked on and realized one grand project, as attested by inscriptions on the frieze's footstall, but this fact had not disturbed the monument's integration.[7]. A. Alexander filmed the performance captured in the frieze, including its lost

fragments, and mounted the received pictures with the photographs of the sculptured masterpiece's survived pieces. As a result, he got the digital version of a complete assembled frieze, imprinted on a 25-meter long and 4-meter high canvas, highlighted from within by lamps. The necessary emotional disposition has been achieved through a special treatment of the black-and-white film, adding somewhat an archaic touch to the panel frames, fitting the plastic sculptures presented in the hall. These twin presentations, the convergence of the "old" and "new" has produced a certain doubling of the monument. This is a pure theatrical device. The figures lie within the frieze limits, almost twice higher the human scale. Here we have reconstruction of the antique treasure based of the XXI century digital technology rather than its restoration. The exhibition project presentation was made amid a performance that united possibilities of the artwork and the theatrics. The performance, being one of the forms of the contemporary art, one of the actionism derivations, is focused on a wordless physical action with movements unrehearsed and designed for the "here-and-now" context.

#### V. PETRIFIED MYTH

This is a unique fusion of the dramatics, dance, music and special effects. In this fashion, the Pergamon frieze in A. Alexander's interpretation starts to lose the strict hierarchy of the architecture just as in the original, as if it lives its own life, creating a 3D environment, which enswathes the exhibition hall's "performance venue" and helps along to eliminate the object's artificial decomposition into specific architectural and sculptured details and to perceive the installation as a one whole work of art. The author involves himself into his project's solution, moving and clearly visible from the sidelines. As if he is revitalizing the reliefs' sculptured events. Upon that, he is being carried away by the current developments, so it is not so easy to capture the appearances' meaning without being aware of it previously, although it stems from these appearances' quite accurate bearing. We have a theater without one wall before us. The author addresses the viewer so he is also involved into the image, can imaginatively come into its world, solidarize with its gesture. By means of this, the viewer steps into the mythical space, while the pantomime's descriptive movement suggests a certain distance between the audience and the image. Altogether, this is the conditionality of the theatrics, as already discussed.

There are quite many grounds to assume that the archaic sculpture was polychrome at all times of its development. This has been fulfilled by A. Alexander's plastic pantomime with the use of color, where red is the dominant color. The artist's unitard spoke as a splash of color among nuances of white, grey and black that symbolize the great tragedy of the actualized images. The more the artist looked into the material as basis of his creation, the more and more personal associations came into his contemplations. The music and text as part of the organized visual demonstration urged the show creators to look for original forms of the presentation. The world of sound and musical dynamics appeared to be closer to the plasticity of sculptured surfaces and patterns.

At this point, can be traced their perfect analogy. Their centrifugal and centripetal laws have been identical. Music came into play as a logical continuation of the sculptured reliefs, imparting to them an additional conceptual depth, joining the flurry of images and associations. The music, color and highlights have introduced an additional appearance into the Pergamon frieze, and the philosophical power of such fusion transformed everything into an integrated voice of the Great tragedy.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

All these put together compose one indivisible canvas, one rhythm, one breath, something organically drawn to each other and coalescing. The work done by the Pergamon frieze reconstructors has unveiled to the Russians the treasury of the antiquity, for so long hidden in museums, libraries and archives. Usually we learn about such reconstructions from researchers, experts and scientific art historians. This article inquires into the monument as a manifestation of the author's individual style. Yet, Alexander's project, presented at the exhibit, has hardly been just a retrospection, so to say, the flashback through the stream of modern time. Today the art sociology allows to pretty exactly define the relationship, not an easy one at times, between the museum specimen and viewers, and to describe "the morphology" of the visual interests, needs and expectations.

The Pergamon frieze is both the document of the bygone times, the event of a global scale in the archeology and art history, and a spontaneous artistic self-actualization of the contemporary author and expositor. Neither one thing in itself nor the other are enough for us, because they should not be just compared with each other, but also be supplemented with that very new quality, which provides the contemporary author with the remoteness in time, provides for the society's historical age, gathered wisdom and the interactive flexibility of the cultural tradition.

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