

THE BRONZE HORSEMAN: HOW CATHERINE THE GREAT CARVED AN IMAGE OF
HERSELF OUT OF PETER THE GREAT

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Striking the viewer with its scale, The Bronze Horseman stands prominently in Senate Square of St. Petersburg. Catherine the Great commissioned this monument in 1782 from French sculptor Etienne Maurice Falconet¹, almost sixty years after Peter the Great's death. It might seem that a monument of Peter would solely commemorate past glory but, in fact, his depicted legacy legitimizes Catherine's present reign as an heir to his reforms. I will begin by analyzing the monument's inscription, as it shows Catherine's attempt to identify with Peter's Westernization of Russia. Then by looking at key elements of its artistic composition, I will recognize the monument as an embodiment of Peter's Enlightened reign: thus a depiction of Catherine's ideals and Peter's approval of her.

The act of inscribing a dual language message sets Catherine up as a continuation of Peter's Westward leaning rule. Immediately observed by the viewer, the inscription on the monument reads in both Latin and Russian: "*Petro Primo Catharina Secunda - To Peter the First from Catherine the Second.*" The Latin is etched on the Western facing side of the monument while the Russian faces the East.² Peter and Catherine both rebranded Russia in a Western light, importing European culture. The Latin portrays the development of European ideas in Russia while the Russian remembers the country's heritage. Putting both languages on the monument asserts that both the Western and Eastern facets of Russia can exist in union. Though Peter sits between these two languages on the monument, Catherine sits on the throne with current power in facilitating the melding of these two different ways of life. Her name in the inscription draws attention back to her role in this omnipresent question of Russian identity. She depicts Peter,

¹ Schenker, Alexander M.. 2003. *The Bronze Horseman : Falconet's Monument to Peter the Great*, 208. New Haven: Yale University Press. Accessed October 5, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

² Schenker, Alexander M.. 2003. *The Bronze Horseman : Falconet's Monument to Peter the Great*, 293. New Haven: Yale University Press. Accessed October 5, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

rather than herself, appealing to the public's perception of Peter's past success in fusing European ideas with Russia. Catherine establishes her place in history through the inscription, as she envisions her reign following Peter's Westward trajectory.

Along with affirming her relationship to Peter's legacy, Catherine reinforces her Enlightenment ideals through the depiction of restraint in the monument. Peter sits with a collected expression, balancing atop his horse rearing in the air: a picture of control. He holds a steady face, displaying emotional restraint in the face of chaos. A metaphor for his reign— Peter “tamed” Russian culture by implementing his reforms, fashioned from European values, to alleviate the stain of “barbarism.” The horse charges wildly into the future, but a balanced leader could control and chart the course. The symbol is two-fold, as it displays the success Peter found with the values of balance and refinement—Enlightenment virtues—while it also acts as a message to the people from Catherine. She hoped to be a living model of the Enlightenment to her citizens, and a monument of their renowned leader serves as the ultimate means for a reminder. The monument acts as a vessel with which Catherine fills her values.

Peter's authoritative pose in the monument works to Catherine's favor, for the goal of solidifying her reign. While preserving his balance on the advancing horse, Peter's hand extends outward, appearing as a blessing offered to Catherine. The hand gently stretches out over the square to be perceived as support Catherine would receive from Peter. His eyes appear at ease with the continuation of his reign under Catherine's leadership. The upward stance of the horse then illustrates the forward propulsion towards an Enlightened Russia that Catherine hopes to continue, along with Peter's blessing over her plan. Peter's hand and the horse both portray movement outwards and forward, as if riding along with Catherine in spirit, holding calm

knowledge in the progress of the future. Hence, the artistic decisions reflect an affirmation of Catherine's reign.

Although it is tempting to analyze the monument for what it shows about Peter, reading the influence of Catherine proves an insightful tool in understanding political motivation. In all aspects of the monument, Catherine projected progress as a precedent from Peter, giving herself leeway in rule and an approval from this monumental version of a mystified leader. But Catherine is not the only leader to employ commemoration as a political tool. Russia's current leader, Vladimir Putin, unveiled a monument of St. Vladimir the Christianizer of Rus, centuries postmortem, during a time of his own disputed leadership. It's difficult not to view a connection and ulterior motive given the identical names—what does it mean for a leader to project himself as an already admired predecessor? Monuments can act as an influence on the people and a distraction technique: look to the past instead of focusing on current turmoil. The Bronze Horseman serves as a reminder that a monument is more telling about the time period it is built than the time period it is supposedly reflecting on.

Bibliography

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