

Creative Final Project

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Creative Project: Art and Architecture

Interactive Pixel Art on Website

<https://master.d2pwz450n65frp.amplifyapp.com/>

Original Art: Roman Propaganda Cups distributed by Emperor Lucius Sergius Catilina



Photograph of Roman Propaganda Cups at the Museo Nazionale Romano Terme di Diocleziano in Rome

Written Supplement

The original artwork I chose is a ‘Roman Propaganda Cup’. It was used by Lucius Sergius Catilina to distribute food to the Roman electorate in hopes of convincing them to vote for him, and I felt this type of direct-to-voter interaction which focuses on identifying with the common citizen emotionally — along with numerous other traits of Catiline — had many meaningful modern counterparts. For my project, I’ve created a website which features pixel art I drew of the Roman Propaganda Cups, Catiline himself, and other depictions based on various other artwork of Catiline (not by the Romans) which represent Catiline’s identity. You can move the cursor around, and this creates a changing perspective effect so some objects will come in/out of view. When you click the left mouse button, all of the artwork in the scene shifts to parallel counterparts of those objects in the modern era, and you can quickly switch between the two to see what connections I’ve made.

I found it extremely interesting to draw parallels between the actions, personality, and story of Lucius Sergius Catilina and many individuals who hold prominent positions in government today; most notably our current President: Donald Trump. The character traits of these two individuals are curiously similar, comparable in everything from the likeness of their childhood upbringing and wealthy familial origins to their strategies for gaining public support and targeted demographics. More importantly, making these comparisons allows us to see insightful correlations between the state of Roman society during the 1st century BCE and our own society today, some of which seem to reaffirm notions of the rising instability of our social, political, and economical structures many of us imagine is happening.

After descending from households carrying significant fortune and influence, Trump and Catiline both seem to have participated in (or at least have been accused of) scandalous behavior

during their career for profit (tax fraud by Trump (New York Times), and abuse of office by Catiline). Partially because of these reasons, it seems that both individuals are somewhat disliked among the respected elite (this would be the media, leaders of big tech, conventional politicians, etc. in our society). For Catiline, this unlikeability didn't do him any favors when a trial investigating his abuse of office almost completely barred him from running for consul. Catiline is eventually able to run in 64 BCE and loses, but much like how Trump initially refused to accept defeat after his loss in November, Catiline is persistent to fight back "after his failed election attempt [and] incites other disgruntled aristocrats and impoverished veterans to rebel against the republic" (Lecture 5.1-3). Both seem to possess a sort of brute-force mindset, refusing to ever come to terms with loss, willing to go to dangerously extreme lengths to achieve what they want.

Both are seemingly disliked among many of their respective elites, and this is something they openly use to their advantage and as a result are able to capture the minds of huge numbers of the lower classes. During his speeches, Trump often makes a point to align himself to be a 'man of the people', against 'the powerful elite', a group who his supporters are vehemently against because they feel that the powerful people in our society are corrupt and cause the relevant social and economical problems they see around them. As a result, these types of political strategies are more effective in times when the plight of the working class is greater or is increasing due to decreased trust and increasing cynicism. This aligns nicely with the state of Roman society during Catiline's quest for office, which was slowly declining especially for the working class who found it increasingly difficult to find employment while competing against the insurge of slave labor. The natural tendency for slaves and working class citizens to develop opposition to each other while fighting for the same resource surely could not have benefitted

social relations between the groups and likely caused problems of its own. This is comparable to some Americans' dislike of illegal immigrants who, as a result of being majority Hispanic are often subject to racial targeting. Growing inequality in the distribution of wealth is quickly becoming the issue of the decade as a result of abusive industrial monopolization and automation, and this wealth inequality was a critical component of societal instability in Rome 1st century BCE just as well (albeit for very different reasons).

The similarities between the political identities of Trump and Catiline are not remarkable, in fact, they're expected. As Prof. Lundy explains at the end of Lecture 5.1: Catiline's Conspiracy, "we have to look behind the scenes [of the stories of Catiline's life]" and inspect the state of the Roman republic. It's reasonable to expect societies with similar issues to give rise to politicians with similar platforms. Now, the thing is: the 'issues' we reference in the context of Rome during this time period were characteristically atypical, and retroactively we understand that **they represent the start of the collapse of the Roman Republic**, thus Lundy's assertion that "we have to look at how the Republic falling apart sets the scene for [the success of Catiline]". Naturally, we immediately form the *extremely worrying* conjecture: is the widespread success and appeal of a politician like Donald Trump an initial potential warning signal that, 1) things are getting a lot worse for middle and lower class Americans, 2) things are going to keep getting worse unless there is massive reform, 3) we are dangerously nearing some form of government collapse pending sufficient loss in faith by the American people? This question is the reason I chose to make this comparison. I understand applying past patterns as a golden explanation for future ones is dangerously prone to error without precise and careful consideration of analogous events, but what still stuns me is how close the behavior, public perception, life events, and even personality of Catiline and Trump coincide. Trump's original

success was a surprise to many and it wouldn't be difficult to argue that his presidency is uniquely unprecedented, and to me this spells change and feels somewhat comparable to the changing Roman Republic right before its collapse. In any event, I found exploring this comparison to be highly fascinating.

Informal Bibliography

Goodman, Dr Penny. "How To Win An Election In The Roman Republic." Iris Online, 4 May 2015, irisonline.org.uk/index.php/features/321-how-to-win-a-roman-election

Kruse, Michael, et al. "Trump Reclaims the Word 'Elite' With Vengeful Pride." POLITICO Magazine, 2018, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/11/01/donald-trump-elite-trumpology-221953

Lecture 5.1-3 PowerPoint slides, "CC 302-WB Fa20 Lecture 5.1-3 Catiline.pdf" and accompanying commentary by Steve Lundy in "Lecture 5.1: Catiline's Conspiracy" & "Lecture 5.2: The Crisis of the late Republic"

Photograph of Roman Propaganda Cups from Museo Nazionale Romano Terme di Diocleziano in Rome, Salvatore Falco, June 2005. Picture downloaded from Wikimedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cato_and_Catilina_propaganda_cups.jpg
(I was unable to find a link to the original photographer/publisher's website)

Rashbaum, William K., et al. "Manhattan D.A. Intensifies Investigation of Trump." The New York Times, The New York Times, 11 Dec. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/12/11/nyregion/trump-taxes-cy-vance.html