

The Catafalque de l'Empereure Mathias

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Catafalque de l'Empereure Mathias, Jaques Callot, 1619, etching and engraving, Italy

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Jacques Callot is a Baroque artist who is known for his elaborate etchings of Florence. He became popular when he moved from Rome to Florence in 1611, depicting typical scenes around the city. Callot recorded festivals and other important events such as funerals that took place in Florence under employment of the Medici Family. Prints recorded history and were circulated throughout the public. Records of funerals for members of the high court were important because they conveyed the importance of royalty to the people, through elaborate decorations and furnishings. Callot was eventually fired from the court because of the Medici family's excessive overspending. This paper examines an etching commissioned by the court, recording a funeral for Emperor Mathias, *The Catafalque de l'Empereure Mathias* (1619). The print demonstrates Baroque funerary practices, how sites were decorated, and why and how Callot created this print and circulated it.

Mathias was born into power, being the son of Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian II. Emperor Mathias became the Holy Roman Emperor in 1612. This position was important because they were the protectors of the Catholic Church. The emperor was responsible for maintaining Catholicism as the main religion of the state. Mathias was a figure of substantial influence that made his presence felt in political and cultural affairs^[1]. He was also a member of the House of Hapsburg, which gained control of vast territories through dynamic marriages. This royal family gained power and was able to produce many kings of areas over vast areas such as Germany, Hungary,

Spain and Austria. Because the territory controlled was so large, the funeral was celebrated all around Europe. Emperor Matthias died in Venice, Italy so his body was not actually in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence that Callot depicts.

The etching and print is a funerary scene in a church in Florence, believed to be the Basilica of San Lorenzo. Because the print was created for circulation to the public, the inscription on the bottom explains that it is a funeral for Emperor Mattias. The chapel is decorated elaborately with skeletons, drapery, paintings and a tower of candles. The ephemeral decorations are temporary, only remaining up for the funeral procession. The altar space is the focal point of the etching with all of the attendees focusing their attention towards it. People in the foreground are gesturing towards the altar. This is a typical funeral for an emperor in seventeenth century Florence.

During the Baroque period funerals for royalty and members of the high court were elaborate celebrations that took place throughout the territory they controlled. These ceremonies, called *exequias reales* or *royal exequies*, were symbolic rituals in order to confirm the death of the ruler and celebrate the transition of power[2]. Because they took place all across their territory the body was often not present. With the death of Charles V in 1558, new funerary practices were introduced[3]. The changes included turning churches into elaborate mourning chapels that had black draperies covering the inside and outside of the chapel. The walls of the church were decorated with coats of arms, flags, emblems and narrative paintings of the ruler's accomplishments[4]. The decorations were there to honor the dead and to celebrate their life. The décor reflected their influence on society, stressing piety and power[5]. The attendees of the funeral were reminded of their divine right to power. The skeletons on the walls surround paintings that highlight

religious faith. The Christian faith emphasizes immortality of the soul, so the scenes illustrated symbolized the fact that death is a gateway to eternal life[6].

The focal point of the church is the tower of candles behind the altar, called the *chappelle ardente* or the flaming chapel. These were often elaborate constructions with columns and arches with a centerpiece featuring a crown and other symbols of royal authority[7]. The *chappelle ardente* can be seen in Callot's etching. It almost reaches the ceiling behind the altar. There are no arches and columns seen but the sarcophagus that has a crown on top. It is a highly decorated event.

Jacques Callot, who was born in Lorraine, moved to Florence in 1611, which is when his art career took off [8]. He worked as a court artist from 1614 to 1621 and his works predominantly display festivities in Florence. He creates etches with the theatre and festivals in mind, creating works that bring the subject matter to life[9]. His etchings are elaborate and detail oriented, but they are organized in a straightforward way so the event is still understood[10]. His style made him an excellent choice to represent the lavish style of the court. He was able to display the richness of royalty in a way the average people could understand.

These prints were created as historical records and for distribution to the people. Prints were commissioned by the high court as a news source for the people in their territory. The high court was able to influence the news people received because the prints were used as a news source. The average person in Florence would not have understood all of the symbolism behind the elaborate decorations but having a print to study allowed them to study the decor over time. Allowing the public to study the funeral gave it a deeper meaning and strengthened the power of the court[11]. The funerary

rituals provided a way to confirm the death of the emperor to the people. The average people were then able to celebrate the life of the ruler and welcome a new ruler. The prints were an important way to convey a change of power. The prints for the public praised the Holy Roman Emperor, and glorified him to reflect positively on his family and their importance in Baroque Europe.

Jacques Callot created *The Catafalque de l'Empereure Mathhias* (1619) on commission. The print was distributed to the people of Florence to be reminded of Emperor Mathias' great power and belief in religion. Callot's ability to accurately represent the celebrations in Florence while making the high court look dignified and powerful made him the perfect court artist for this commission. The Holy Roman Emperor's death was a significant event and the people of Rome needed to see the celebrations of his life, even if they did not attend the symbolic funeral held in the Basilica of St Lorenzo.

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Endnotes

- [1] Edward Goldberg, *Patterns in Late Medici Art Patronage* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983)
- [2] John A. Marino, *Late Medieval and Early Modern Ritual* (Belgium: Brepols 2013), 212
- [3] Marino, *Late Medieval and Early Modern Ritual*, 222.
- [4] *Ibid*, 222.

- [5] Deborah Marrow, *The Art Patronage of Maria de' Medici* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982) 73-76.
- [6] Marino, *Late Medieval and Early Modern Ritual*, 223.
- [7] *Ibid*, 213.
- [8] Brown University, *Jacques Callot: 1592-1635* (Rhode Island: Brown University, 1970)
- [9] Arthur Hind, "Jacques Callot" *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 21, no. 110 (1912): 73.
- [10] Robert Newman, *Baroque and Rococo Art and Architecture* (Pearson, 2013)
- [11] Goldberg, *Patterns in Late Medici Art Patronage*.