

*European Research Studies,*  
*Volume XVIII, Issue 4, Special Issue, 2015*

*pp. 189 – 196*

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**"Giants against Gods"**  
**(Regarding the plastic nature of sculpture and theater by the  
example of the exhibition and installation of the Pergamon  
altar in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts)**

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***Abstract:***

*The article analyses the project exhibition "Giants against Gods" that presents reconstruction of the famous monumental sculpture of the Hellenistic era of the Pergamon altar interpreted by the contemporary German artist, photographer, and artist Aleksander A. The author's vision mythological and poetic nature, which combines historicism and theatrical metaphor, is studied. The compositional and semantic correspondence of original lost fragments to restored ones by the author in a luminous board is considered. There is an idea of complex view, system approach to specifics in a work of art. The major subject matter of the paper is antiquity, Greek mythology and modern plastic installation, and also performance synthesized in a single art image.*

***Key Words:*** *Hellenism, The Pergamon frieze, project (reconstruction), Aleksander A., archaeological original, Greek mythology, Gods and Giants, interpretation, installation, digital technology, theatre staging.*

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## **Introduction**

Relevance of the paper is caused by a number of factors, which are of specific interest to the science of art history. First of all, the exhibition topic wasn't exposed to scientific analysis except for individual reviews and feedbacks. Secondly, reflections on the topic enable us to demonstrate the use of classic images of the Hellenistic epoch in shaping the art language of the contemporary art, its new trends and forms. Thirdly, conclusion and compilation obtained in the course of reviewing the object – an installation with the use of well-known artifact of monumental plastic arts, outline theoretical approaches to formulation of such terms as “sample”, “borrowing”, “imitation” that occurred in the ancient art, but at this point with respect to modern exposition in the form of a luminous board imitating mythological theme of Pergamon frieze battles. Theoretical and methodological background of the paper involves historic and artistic, stylistic, and comparative analyses that make it's possible to understand the ancient monument characters and gods sculptures images' impact on its interpretation realized by the modern artist Alexander A.

## **Ancient archeology and modern reconstruction**

“Giants against Gods” – it appears the name of the exhibition that took place at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts encapsulates both entirely specific and vast creative program for people of art at the same time. The project representing recreation (reconstruction) of the famous masterpiece of the Hellenistic era the sculpture frieze of the Pergamon Altar demonstrated it in an uncommon new visual format supposing the connection between ancient history and modernity. It should be noted that such conceptual subject exhibitions and installations have been met in museum practice in the West long ago. Moreover, audience sometimes visits the Pergamon museum at the Museum Island in Berlin (the place of this major artifact's storage) like a theater. It stands to recall the experience of Italian artists and designers, who constructed the huge panorama of Pergamon around the antique artifact that visually demonstrates the image of the ancient city. All of them are controversial and require certain skills and knowledge as well as caution in the work with art works' originals in new interpretation. Particularly, when no specialists artists and fine art experts turn to such plans. Can we consider the work of the artist photographer and Moscow Theater of Mime and Gesture actor currently living in Germany – Aleksander Andrey, who boldly took on restitution of lost fragments of the ancient casts, successful? The updated image appeared life-sized in the form of a luminous board. Is the major scientific goal in this difficult laborious process of the archeologic original recovery achieved or the author pursued another aim? Aleksander A. realized he is on the way to a new level associated with creative risk. Nevertheless, antique art and mythology experts helped the author from the perspective of fine art science, he cannot claim complete accuracy. According to the traditional point of view there is nothing common between science and art, they are phenomena of different order and belong to discontinuous, non-intersecting spaces, but particularly the moments when we have to reconsider basic concepts are of most

importance in the development of experimental science. Therefore the original the author addresses in the search of new means is anything but indifferent for the substance of the case, and the question for what reason it was done is not less, but probably more important. The issue is not straight borrowing, but creative processing, rethinking, appearance of new forms, means, ideas based on antiquity revival. It is time that creates a distance not only between the Pergamon frieze created by Aleksander A. and the audience but between the plot made several ages ago and our today's ideas of how this plot may be evolved. The miracle of theatrical art – impressed time – arises only when one manages to recreate the epoch emotional atmosphere onstage. It's the most interesting and complicated task. The author isn't afraid of merging the document with fantasy in the selection of material and its embodiment means. That's why the shift of the Pergamon Altar's art world to theatricality appeared to be deeply grounded and meaningfully feasible. History and sculpture absorb theater like their own metaphor.

### **Stage plastic arts and myth**

However between marble and stage plastic art there is another broad field involved in the installation – myth. The author not only addresses the art work based on Greek mythology – his understanding is of mythological and poetic nature that allows organically combining historicism and theatrical metaphor in an art image. The idea of complex view, system approach to specifics in an art work is a modern idea revealing new opportunities and prospects to visual anthropology, art theory, and criticism. Why the actor mime Aleksander A. became inspired with particularly this monument for expressive recreation in canvas? Apparently, not only because of the fact that the Pergamon Altar or the Zeus Altar is a famous work of monumental sculpture and architecture of the Hellenistic epoch raised in commemoration of victory gained by the Pergamon tsar Attalus I over barbarians – Gauls. Firstly, it's a memorial artifact that came to our days, significance of which was acknowledged by the ancient Romans having ranked it among Seven Wonders of the World. Secondly, the scale of this work is actually impressive. In Pergamon unknown master raised the altar sizing half Parthenon and the Acropolis. Relief images of characters in the frieze are life sized. The frieze survived in a fragmentary form, many episodes and compositions details are lost. Thirdly, the Pergamon Altar's fate is heavy. In ancient times it was buried because of earthquakes, then it was found by the German engineer Humann K. in 1880-s in the course of roadway construction. It was placed in a museum constructed specially for this purpose – Pergamon, where it's demonstrated in antique collection as major exhibit up to the present moment. In the course of the world war it was hidden in a vault in the territory of the Berlin zoo. It was Russian soldiers who saved it from destruction. They sent it to Hermitage to carry out necessary restoration. The Altar stayed in Russia to 1958, then it was taken back to Berlin [1]. Thus, not only global image but the history of the Pergamon Altar inspired the mime and artist Aleksander A. in his many years work over the project of its reconstruction. The author calls this project continuation of his actor profession, he sees a mime, many impressive original mise en scenes carved in

marble in the ancient casts, "I'm a mime, a director, and it's a performance for me. As if it ended on a note of total destruction. I thought this performance could be continued" [2]. Aleksander A. feels plastic image specifics well. Sculpture can not only record direct visual perception of events but convey their move, temporal and spacial development. Human bodies' moves and poses plastically interpreted in time and space and constituting the unified system is material in pantomime, dance. It should be noted the author's examination of spacial formulas of antiquity since they're closely related to the plastic and gesture theme. In the epoch of Hellenism sculpture reaches theatrical effect, splendour of expression that it can be compared with the art of Pericles' days. Owing to formation and development of Greek theater as an art form, thrust to fine arts "theatricalization" took place, particularly, theatricalization of sculpture that entered the new phase of interrelation with stage art [3]. In its best specimens such "theatricalization" produced the effect of "new visual appeal", grand monumental style. The Pergamon Altar already had catharsis encapsulated in its sculptural images, the catharsis ancient Greeks had seen. They stay within the "psychologism of feelings", "psychologism of characters". Herein the phenomenon of psychological depiction is meant. Sculptured relief not only fixes but specifically refracts our vision. An image devoid of sound has distinct expressive power. The actor mine Aleksander A. has a good grip of this fact and devotes the best part of his plan to this deliberate, silent, inspirational description of the ancient myth. However the author denied literal following the original and accurate reconstruction of "archeologic" texture.

### **Composition and semantic emphases**

Action is imbedded in canvas simulated space, formally limitless, but closed after the fashion of theatrical one at the same time. It seemed two-dimensional space and characters' dramatic action it represents could well meet understanding of reconstructive task of the project. Not analytically scientific, but imaginatively creative reconstruction of the altar appeared the author's target. It's possible to thoroughly study the epoch, masters' creative works and art schools of this period, plots and iconography, meticulously think everything out – from stylistics to views, from logic to episodes boarding, but art image won't appear in canvas. It is to be supposed Aleksander A. analyzes iconography of all the Pergamon friezes (there are four of them, located in cardinal directions) in detail, grasping sense-bearing relations between them and accurately puts an emphasis on the East (main) frieze he identifies with compositional center trying to restore it. Two trends typical for Hellenistic sculpture are revealed in the relief plastic solution – drive to form voluminosity sculpture, making the relief similar to sculpture in the round (the frieze is made in a high relief) and the "Gobelin" principle of image refinement within relief. Strongly protrudent figures over background surface are depicted not only in the traditional form sidewise but in intricate views and turns – full-face and from behind.

The entire frieze designed for individual groups is constructed on the principle of antithesis: there's a dramatic conflict in one, battle nature in another, the triumph of harmony in the images of beautiful goddesses in one, demonstration of spontaneous, animal nature in another, the center is stressed in one and is not in another, there are only anthropomorphic characters in one, zoomorphic creatures appear in another [4]. However, groups' formal semantic correspondence is carefully designed. There's one subject everywhere – characters' fight against death and victory over death. The unravelling of the plot is represented as a continuous process wherein there are acceleration and backing-up, ups and downs as in any translation motion. Many figures' positions in completed parts of the frieze, for example, Hercules, Zeus or Apollo, Athena or Artemis – give the feeling of moving corporeal forms, strained masses, expressive lines, which are borrowed not from common life and not just out of the author's head, but from conscious artistic moves. No wonder that the term of "plastic arts" unites both the art of sculpture and the art of mime. Aleksander A. knows both of them, and in the proper sense of the word the second birth of the Pergamon frieze took place based on these plastic arts. The atmosphere of characters' actions not so much "plays out" for the actor as makes our fantasy fill in the actor drawing form lines, stirring our culture-historical associations. According to the myth semantic of "The Battle of Gods and Giants" (so-called Gigantomachy), gods of the Olympus led by Zeus fought against giants, Gaia's children. They looked like snake-legged musclemen of mighty strength, tried to take Olympian god's power over the world away. Gaia endowed her children with invincibility and only a mortal could deprive giants of life. It was Hercules, whose participation in the battle turned the balance. Hercules, a Zeus' son, fought with his father in the favour of gods. His arrows stroke many giants [5].

Frieze compositions theatricalization appeared in image hierarchy: there are Olympic gods at the top of the frieze, and prostrated giants – at the bottom. Gods' actions are of ascending motion, and rivals – descending: Hercules' figure pulling his bow as figures of other fragments (earth goddess Demeter with a torch in her hands, Hera driving a quadriga of winged horses), however according to Aleksander A. Iris drives the quadriga and Hera strikes a giant with her spear. It's known that all these lost figures were in the Gigantomachy (East) frieze [6]. It was necessary to model other famous reliefs of the Gigantomachy frieze – Artemis, Hercules and Clytius, Leto, Apollo and an overthrown giant, "The Battle of Athena and Alkyoneus", and "The Battle of Zeus and Porphyryon" with separate broken off parts and details.

### **Images' drama**

Here we have not admiring with figures, but in-depth analysis of agonistic feelings, roaring and pathetic gestures that accompany true spiritual drama. Olympians – gods of human nature fought against underground elements' power, wild gigantic nature clashes with imperturbable harmony of the world. There are energetics and expression of moves, drawn faces, contrast actions. It was important for the author

not to make the psychological space of the recreated frieze amorphous, otherwise the viewer has to conjecture what composition plots are main ones by himself or herself. He had to complete not only the pieces of heads, arms and legs, hangings, wings and snake tails but also entire missing figures. Apparent unity of fragments in the sculpture stones of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts is nothing but their composition on the principle of discreteness as they are disjointed here and there. Sometimes action arises not successively after the other, but through the other. It was necessary not just deciphering implication provided by ancient sculptors, but completing images' drama itself. The characters of the Pergamon frieze were interesting to the author as an embodiment of contrast contradictions, combination of emotional polarities. Staging based on the frieze of the battle of Olympic gods and giants consisted of several stages. Modern actors, dancers, sportsmen of athletic build similar to anatomical organization of figures in the high quality plaster copies specially made for the museum from the Berlin original marbles were invited to reproduce frieze scenes. This is because the distinctive feature of Greek sculpture is gods' resemblance to men, their similarity with gorgeous athletes located opposite the museum hall.

In order to feel and convey the essence of the Greek myth in a proper way it's necessary to find an equivalent to complex material formation, which is represented in marble casts, to tune performers in. A director with faultless sensation of mythological genre and sculptural plastic arts, skillful enough to organize serious tragedy of antiquity in relief was needed. Aleksander A. chose both nature and character types in such a way to awake an echo in his heart and not run into the loss of intrinsic meaning of the events. These slender athletic built performers looking like Olympic gods in wide coats and form-fitting tunics as if having adopted antique gods' power were different, but they created a single image in the same way that frieze's authorship didn't belong to one artist. When carefully studying the frieze, differences in developing characters of separate compositional groups can be observed. Masters from different corners of Greece bought the single project to life what was confirmed by notes in the lower skirting board of the frieze, but didn't affect its integrity [7]. Aleksander A. filmed action, including lost fragments, depicted in the frieze, and obtained photographs were assembled with photographic cadres of remained parts of the sculptural masterpiece. As a result, there was a digital version of assembled frieze, which is imprinted in 25 m long and 4 m high canvas. From within it was lighted with a luminous source. This emotional disposition was attributed to specific treatment of black-and-white film giving the board cadres somewhat archaic look corresponding to sculptural casts represented in the hall. However, these double images, combination of "the old" and "the new" showed some bifurcation of the monument. The technique is entirely theatrical. Figures inscribed in the frieze exceed human height almost two times. This is not restoration, but reconstruction of the ancient masterpiece based on the digital technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Project presentation**

The presentation of the exhibition project was accompanied by a performance combining the opportunities of fine arts and theatre creativity. Performance, being a form of modern art, one of actionism kinds, is focused on speechless physical actions with no rehearsed, but “now and here” moves. It’s a peculiar synthesis of acting, dancing, music, and special effects. Thus, the Pergamon frieze interpreted by Aleksander A. begins to lose strict intersubordination to architecture as in the original, as if it lives its own life creating space environment, enveiling “stage” of the hall with a specific layer that helps to eliminate artificial breakdown of the object into specific architectural and sculptural details and to perceive it as a single art work. In this case the author includes himself, moving and well seen to onlookers, in the project solution. As though he revives sculpture episodes of the reliefs. He is absorbed by the effect of immediateness of what is going on, so it’s not easy to catch images’ sense with no knowledge of their meaning, although he assumes extremely accurate meanings of these images. This is theater, but with no fourth wall. The author addresses the audience, it means that the viewer is pulled in the image, can imaginatively put himself in his place, identify with his gesture. Owing to this, the viewer is involved in the space of the myth, but conceptual mime movement implies a distance between the viewer and the image at the same time. And all of these are convention of theatrical type as we’ve already mentioned.

There is every reason to believe that ancient sculpture was polychromatic at all stages of its development. It’s tallied with the use of colour in the Aleksander’s plastic miming. Red was one of dominant colours. Artist’s tights were a bright spot among the hues of white, grey and black symbolizing large-scale tragedy of images reconstructed in canvas. The longer he peered through the material where he built his work, the more and more personal associations were involved in the chain of his reflections. Moreover, music and text involved in this particularly organized image – visually action induced show’s authors to the search for original forms to present the Pergamon frieze. They found inspiration in the world of sound musical dynamics with plastic actions of sculptural volumes and surfaces. Their full analogy can be traced at this point. Their centrifugal and centripetal laws are the same. Music appeared the logic continuance of relief sculptures giving them additional notional intense, it was included in the flow of images and associations. Music, colours, and light effects not just introduced an additional image into the Pergamon frieze, the philosophical power of this synthesis made it the common voice of the Great tragedy. All put together is one indivisible matter, one rhythm, one breath, something organically gravitating to one another and merging together.

## **Conclusion**

This work carried out by reconstructors of the Pergamon frieze revealed to the Russians the treasure of antique culture that had been hidden in museums, libraries, archives for a long time. As a rule, we get to know about such reconstructions from researchers, specialists, fine arts academics. This studies a monument as individual

author's style. However, what Aleksander A. presented during the exposition is scarcely only a retrospection, so to say a flashback through the modern time flow. Today art sociology enables us to define relations, sometimes not really simple, between museum specimens and the audience, accurately enough, to describe the "anatomy" of visual interests, needs, and expectations.

The Pergamon frieze is a document of past epoch, an event of global scale in archeology and history of arts, and spontaneous artistic self-comprehension of the modern author- interpreter – neither one thing nor the other on their own isn't enough for us. They should be not only matched but complemented by the modern author with a new quality given by distance through time, historical age of society, gained wisdom, and interactive mobility of cultural traditions.

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