

Roman public entertainment

People



Jackie Sparagna Gregory Sumi Roman Public Entertainment: A Juxtaposition Between the Circus and Amphitheater Public entertainment was a crucial component of Roman culture and identity in the ancient world. Thousands of fanatical fans would gather in numerous venues which hosted exciting games and events to cheer on their favorite competitors, curse their rivals, and celebrate their victories. The circus and the amphitheater were the prime structures which displayed gladiatorial fights, chariot racing, executions, and wild beast hunts. The progression in the building of these venues displayed how social status and political power were enormous factors in public displays. The seating in both structures displayed separation of class and rank, indicating the importance of hierarchy in Rome. The most famous of these venues are the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus. Though they each focused on different events, the social experience of both the amphitheater and the circus provided each spectator with an entertaining show and the constant reminder of the empirical power of Rome. The Circus Maximus dates back to the 6th century B. C. and is located between the Palatine and Aventine Hills. Though it is most commonly known for chariot racing, the venue provided a variety of different shows that entertained the public. “ The contestants were young noblemen who drove four horse and two horse chariots or rode pairs of horses, jumping from back to back... wild-beast hunts took place five days running, and the entertainment ended with a battle between two armies, each consisting of 500 infantry, twenty elephants, and thirty cavalry. ”(Suetonius, Julius Caesar 39) The construction of the Circus Maximus needed to be spacious enough for these numerous events and yet maximized visibility for the spectators. It was 550 meters in length, with seating that allowed for at least 150, 000 spectators. (Evidence <https://assignbuster.com/roman-public-entertainment/>

indicates that the number might be as high as 350, 000, seats). The arena itself was divided lengthwise by a 344 meter barrier called a spina, around which the chariots ran. Carceres, or starting boxes, were located at the short end of the arena, allowing formal beginnings of races by releasing all of the horses at once. Up to twelve chariots could race at a time, which is indicated by twelve slots in the starting boxes. White lines were painted on the track to organize each charioteer's designated space. " Not far from the gates, a white line has been drawn, straight as a ruler, to either parapet: when the quadrigae set out, their contest begins from that point. " (Cassiodorus, *Variae* 3. 51) Seating in the Circus Maximus provided an unclear differentiation between the senatorial class and ordinary citizens. "...The wooden stands being supported by beams, for till then the spectators had stood. And dividing the places among the thirty curiae, he assigned to each curia a particular section, so that every spectator was seated in his proper place" (Dionysius of Halicarnassus 3. 68, pg 69) The hierarchy of Rome was not easily visible in the Circus Maximus because it seems the audience was in " a political light, not one so overtly class based. " (Futrell, 69) Augustus added the pulvinar, a platform that supported the imperial box. Raising the imperial box symbolically increased the emperor's power by further separating himself from the public. Augustus, however, was known for sitting with his friends in the circus stands. Regardless of this fact, the visibility of the box coupled with the elaborate circus and the view of the Palatine Hill and the Temple of Apollo, " drew a powerful link between the emperor and spectacle in Rome. " (Futrell, pg. 70) Julius Caesar and Trajan reconstructed the Circus Maximus by expanding seating to the public. These renovations were seen as acts of generosity and tremendous leadership. " To the <https://assignbuster.com/roman-public-entertainment/>

Emperor Nerva Trajan Augustus Germanicus Dacicus... set up by the thirty-five tribes because their advantages have been increased by an addition to their seats, due to the generosity of the best of emperors. " (CIL 6. 955)

Though not all emperors enjoyed the public events, it was common for them to make frequent appearances because the citizens liked knowing they had a common activity with the emperor. The anticipation and excitement of the chariot races were initiated with the precession or pompa. The pompa would start at the top of the Capitoline Hill, led by the presiding triumphator. " The praetor borne in his lofty carriage through the midst of this dusty Circus, and wearing full ceremonial dress... a posse of trumpeters, the imposing procession of white-robed citizens marching so dutifully beside his bridle-rein. " (Juvenal, Satires 10. 36-46) Once the processions were over, the crowd anxiously awaited the drop of the mappa, or cloth which signaled to a circus personnel to pull the cord that releases the controlling bolt for the ostia or gates, making them spring open. " The praetor is too slow for the fans, all the time their eyes are rolling as though in rhythm with the lots he shakes up in his urn. Then they await the signal bated breath: one outcry voices the common madness. " (Tertullian, On the Spectacles 16. 2-3)

Naufragia, or accidents, were extremely common at the beginning of races when charioteers sprinted for a good position on the first turn. Eggs or dolphins were located on the spina to indicate how many laps have been completed. " Agrippa set up the dolphins and egg-shaped objects so that by their aid the number of time the course had been circled might be clearly shown. " (Dio Cassus 49. 43) In each race, seven laps were completed, making each race approximately three miles long. Gladiatorial games, or munera, developed in connection with the aristocratic funeral games. Before
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amphitheaters were built, gladiator combats were held at cemeteries. " Indeed, it was the custom to kill captives at the graves of powerful men; because this, in later days, seemed cruel, it was decided to have gladiators fight before the grave, gladiators who were called " Bustiari" for the tombs (busti). " (Servius, On the Aenied 10. 519) However, over time, shows were not held exclusively in a funerary context, which moved these combats to the Forum Roman, a rectangular area bounded by basilicas for seating. However, " as a performance space, the forum has certain limitations, including a diminished seating capacity, even if sponsors erected temporary bleachers, the presence of monumental public buildings restricted the height and capacity of these structures... the difficulty of guaranteeing spectator safety also restricted the use of wild animals to small numbers of relatively docile and diminutive types for Forum shows. " (Futrell, 55-56) Therefore, new permanent amphitheaters were in need. These new structures needed to have thousands of seats, support for the seating, and isolated areas to keep gladiators and animals before performances. The first permanent amphitheater was built by T Statilius Taurus in 27 B. C. The structure was small and relatively private compared to other venues, but the political value of the amphitheater was vast. " In the fourth consulship of Augustus Caesar, Statilius constructed a stone hunting theater in the Campus Martius at his own expense and celebrated its completion with gladiatorial combats. Because of this he was allowed by the people to choose one of the praetors every year. " (Dio Cassius 51. 23) If this small and seemingly insignificant structure was so politically important and appreciated by the public, one can only imagine the social and political effect the larger structures had on ancient Rome. Amphitheaters were commonly built outside urban areas

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because they took up so much space; however, some were located inside city walls for security purposes. Amphitheaters were elliptical rather than circular. Their arenas were oval-shaped and completely surrounded by seating. This shape provides better angles for the public than ordinary circles. The Colosseum is the most famous and inspirational amphitheater in Roman history. Its construction began by Vespasian between 69 and 79 AD on the site of the lake of Nero's Domus Aurea. "once gleamed the odious halls of a cruel march, and in all of Rome their stood a single house...Rome has been restored to herself, and under your rule, Caesar, the pleasancess that belonged to a master now belong to the people." (Martial, Spectacles 2)

The Colosseum presented gladiatorial shows, animal fights, aquatic displays, and public executions, providing a variety of events for the public. It is the largest amphitheater in history, seating approximately forty-five to fifty thousand spectators. Each arched entrance way was numbered and each spectator had a ceramic tessera that gave the number of his exterior entrance. Once the spectator entered the Colosseum, passages, stairs, and ramps directed him towards his seat. This system exemplifies crowd control and convenience. Its current remains display underground pathways, secret trap doors, and compartments where animals, gladiators, and equipment were kept. "The higher up you were in the Roman power structure, the closer you were to the action." (Futrell, 52) Unlike the Circus Maximus, the Roman hierarchy was evident in the Colosseum and all other amphitheaters. The best seats were reserved for the elites. "At the Ludi Romani, the senate for the first time look on segregated from the common people, and this caused gossip." (Livy 34. 54) This was a controversial norm and few citizens agreed with the seating arrangements because there was high competition

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for good seats. Those who performed a public service, like saving a fellow citizen, also had reserved seating. " When a man has received this wreath, it is his privilege to wear it for the rest of his life. When he makes his appearance at the celebration of the games, it is customary for the Senate even to rise from their seats, and he has the right of taking his seat next to the senators. " (Pliny, Natural History 16. 6) This arrangement was much less controversial and usually followed by everyone. Augustus instituted major reforms by restricting seating to restore order after the civil war. "...the front ordo of stalls must be reserved for senators... other rules of his included the separation of soldiers from civilians, the assignment of special seats to married commoners, to boys not yet come of age, a ban on the wearing of dark cloaks...Augustus confined women to the back rows even at gladiatorial shows. " (Suetonius, Augustus 44) In amphitheaters, seating was mandated by sociopolitical status, where as circuses had a " festival" type seating. The presence of both the circuses and amphitheaters symbolize an idealized Rome. The amphitheater alone served as a constant reminder of the power of the empire and the danger in testing Rome's hegemony. The public games provide Roman society with entertaining and nail-biting shows where they can cheer on their favorite celebrities and celebrate victories. The entire social experience allows civilians to learn many of society's norms and possibly follow in the footsteps of their role models. These public events bring members of all classes together, though they may not always sit amongst each other. Regardless of the seating arrangements, public games allow all of Rome a common activity, which unifies society and enhances the Roman identity.