Art History: Renaissance Art and How it Borrows from Classical Art

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ABSTRACT

Renaissance art is known for its heavy biblical themes dating from the early 1400s. However, in this paper, I will discuss how the Renaissance takes a more individualistic view of man's place on earth through the use of mathematical symbolism, psychological complexity, and perspective. I will begin with the significant underlining characteristics of the Renaissance and how they were a revolutionary development. This will then lead to examples of Classical art such as the Statue of Hercules and The Cameo Glass Skyphos. I will then discuss the French Revolution and European Neoclassicism and how the Renaissance created new techniques that drifted away from these movements. The paper will conclude with an analysis of The Last Supper and the Church of San Vitale and how they became the dominant style of art in Italy in the 16th century.

Keywords: Renaissance Art, Art History, French Revolution, European Neoclassicism, The Last Supper, The Church of San Vitale

1. INTRODUCTION

Europe experienced a cultural transformation that took place during the 14th century. This transformation took the name *Rinascimento* (when in Italy) and then acquired the name *Renaissance* when it reached France. The reformation separated the Middle Ages from the Modern Age and was characterized by humanism and reformation (Charles 1). It was when classical arts that belonged to the Greek and Roman antiquity made way into the new artforms. The Renaissance period was split into the Early Renaissance of 1400 to 1490 and the High Renaissance of 1490 to 1527. The Last Supper was created between 1495 and 1498 as a mural painting. It features Christian themes described in John 13:21. The context of the painting is the revelation by Jesus that one of His disciples would betray Him. This essay will explore the idea that although *The Last Supper* delves into Biblical themes on the surface, it explores complexities exhibited by the High Renaissance through mathematical symbolism, psychological complexity, and use of perspective, and takes a more individualistic view of man and religion.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF RENAISSANCE ART

Renaissance art was expressed through painting, sculpture, music, architecture, and literature in three consecutive centuries (14th, 15th and 16th). The school emerged in Europe under various combined influences. The first of such influences was an awareness of nature, the second was a classical revival, and the third was an individualistic perspective of the man (King 2). The earlier belief concerning the school of Renaissance is that it emerged after an abrupt departure from the medieval values of the time (Huckins 199). This break is suggested in the word Renaissance which means 'reborn' (Kubovy 95). Renaissance art was a revolutionary development because of the changes it instituted in art from the conventions. Through an interest in humanism, the artist was transformed from an anonymous artist to an individual engaged in intellectual pursuits. Scientific observations emerged and combined with classical studies in contributing to the realistic picture of the human figure through artistic depiction (Moran 96). The figures that emerged with Renaissance art had an accurate anatomy through which they stood naturally through a Classical scheme. The images had mass. They were designed to occupy a significant space through the linear and atmospheric perspectives. There was also the use of illusionistic devices that tended to suggest the existence of a two-dimensional surface (Babu 108). High Renaissance art is a dominant style of art that developed in Italy in the 16th century. This same period saw the development of mannerism. The High Rennaisance period began during the 1490s with the creation of *The Last Supper* in Milan and ended in 1527 with the creation of the *Sack of Rome* (Corbett

26). The use of the term 'High Renaissance' with the works of Michaelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci is because it was during this period that the aims and goals of Renaissance art peaked and reached their most significant application (Hegarty 506). High Renaissance referred to some classical art elements and acted as an extension of the Early Renaissance, like the on-point perspective.

3. EXAMPLES OF CLASSICAL ART

3.1 Mummy Portrait of a Wowan

The portrait is attributes to Isiodora and bears the title "The Mummy Portrait of Isiodora". It is work that can be traced back to A. D. 100. The painting was made using various elements such as encaustic on linden wood, gilt and linen. The presence of material such as linen points to the portrait's Egyptian descent while the golden crown leaves (golden wreath) are consistent with Roman antiquity (Tzifopoulos 97). The practice of mummification was legendary in Ancient Egypt (Cunningham, Reich, & Fichner-Rathus 119). The presence of a golden wreath is centrally designed to emulate the significance of the Roman culture that emerged during the period.

The image in the portrait has a face with corkscrew locks that gained popularity in the first century. The woman's hairstyle has been braided Trajanically and then placed into a plaited bun (Haas, Toppe and Henz 298). There is a pin on the head to secure the bun. The presence of decorations are an indication that the person on the portrait had a high social standing and had substantial amounts of wealth. The golden wreath is synonymous with the occupation of a high political position or marriage to such a person.

3.2 The Statue of Jupiter

Chief among the Roman gods was Jupiter, who is identified as Zeus among the Greeks. The sculpture has been made using marble as the medium; it is said to have been produced around 100 BCE to 1 BCE (Younger and Rehak 44). The period when the statue was made was characterized by increased worship of assimilated gods from the Greek culture and religion. On their part, the Roman and their gods absorbed Greek religion and its gods. Their conquering spree led to them having so many gods (Cunningham, Reich, & Fichner-Rathus 130). In the sculpture, JJupiter has beards on his face; he has cut arms. Had he been captured in an earlier period, he would have hand a scepter in his hand and a thunderbolt.

The two (scepter and thunderbolt) are Zeus's instruments of power that go along with his attributes. The scepter demonstrates his occupation of the throne of gods. The thunderbolt coincides with the power and control he has in the skies (Holub and Williams 62; Taft). When an individual stands before the sculpture, the impression created is that it is way larger than them to the point of dwarfing them (Calder 42). Since the elements of Greek antiquity are present in the image, it was done before the Roman version was produced. The Greek version is among the wonder statues of the world, though Jupiter is still amazing to the eyes of the viewer.

3.3 The Statue of Hercules

The sculpture was produced during the classical period of Periclean Athens (Cunningham, Reich and Fichner-Rathus 157). The element of Periclean Athens in the statue is nudity (Allan 392). In the statue, Hercules is shown with a club over his left shoulder, and the skin of a lion (possibly of the Nemean Lion, conquered during one of his twelve labors). Popular literature concerning Hercules paints him as a hero (Cunningham, Reich and Fichner-Rathus 157). Hercules might have cut off the skin from the Nemean Lion after making his kill and moved around with it as portrayed by the sculpture.

Romans took up the literary symbols of the Greeks and the elements of these symbols such as nudity. The nudity of the Greek heroes is used as one of the means of consiering their beauty. This is in line with the Periclean adoption and use of Greek culture by the Romans in their artistic developments (Cunningham, Reich, & Fichner-Rathus 115). In the statue, Hercules is seen as a man in his youth; he is weary, possibly because of the labors he was subjected to by his nemesis (Nabilou 877). The statue gives a realistic depiction of who Hercules was in the classical era; the portraits were given a more realistic touch, especially when the images were for heroes and gods. This realistic imaging of the hero in a statue is a move towards humanizing him, given that he is the son of a god in the mythology as the son of Jupiter (the King of the gods).

3.4 The Cameo Glass Skyphos

The Cameo Glass Syphos represents a rare form of technique that was practiced by the Romans in the Julio-Claudian dynasty. The cup has been made to have a white opaque glass and a deep blue glass, and has the shape of a chalice. The Romans of the Julio-Claudian dynasty put a lot of skill when making their

cups (Greenberg 48). In majority of the cases, the cups were inscribed with images said to tell the stories that people wanted told. The people inscribed in the cup are involved in a leisure activity where as one drinks, the other plays the harp (Cunningham, Reich, & Fichner-Rathus, pp. 115). Given the activities inscribed in the cup, there is a likelihood that it belongs to regions such as Pompeii that were given to leisure activities during the time.

Pompeii gives a picture of impressive lifestyles following its excavation after the ruin of the great city following the eruption of Vesuvius in A. D. 79. The city was discovered to have fine things like silver in domestic households. The jewels discovered were of high quality, given the impression that people in the city wanted to portray. The cameo glass might have been a prime piece of jewelry before the tragic end of the city (Cunningham, Reich, & Fichner-Rathus 136). The glass can be dated to have been produced between 25 B.C.E and A.D. 25. Its affordability might have also been limited to some citizens and not others. The citizens might have been of a high societal standing given that the materials that forged it and the processes followed in the forgery were uncommon in the day.

4. FRENCH REVOLUTION AND EUROPEAN NEOCLASSICISM

The French Revolution can be traced back to 1789 as an event that was spared by the storming of the Bastille prison in Paris by the French citizens. In a few years, France had a history in which it adopted a number of constitutions, overthrew them, and executed one of its kings. As the revolution continued, the French adopted a style that came to be known as Neoclassicism given the through art, the French resumed with its initial moral and political purpose. Neo-classism has everything to do with the start of classes after the abolition of royalty; the art that began surfacing was inspired by antiquity. The French Revolution is credited to have transformed French society through art, its purpose, modes of expression, and an emphasis on nationalism.

Neoclassical works emphasized nationalism and a feeling of togetherness. The feudal system was done away with by the French people during the French Revolution. The revolution strengthened patriotism among the French and instilled self-sacrificing attributes that were later expressed in art (Yan and Fei 63). Neo-classical art emerged with inspirations from

antiquity; there was a lot of borrowing from Greek and Roman elements (Ruprecht 405). The architecture and clothing styles were set based on the countries of Rome and Greece.

A good example of neo-classicism is the oil painting *Oath of the Horatii* by Jacques-Louis David. In the painting, there are elements of Greek and Roman antiquity. The painting features a moment in which sons pledge their oath to fight for family and Rome. The pledge speaks to the emphasis on togetherness. Even though there are pain and sorrow in the painting, important values like valor, sacrifice, morality, and duty come to the fore. The other important value that also emerges is self-less service.

Before the French Revolution took place, there were two styles that emerged (Rococo and Neoclassicism). The emergence of Rococo was aimed at influencing the ornament-making art of many European countries. Rococo style was meat for the aristocracy in Europe, while Neoclassicism emphasized the values of all groups (Leonia 117). The aristocratic emphasis on those in power meant that individuals who were considered to be the lowest in society were ignored. The emphasis of Neoclassicism was Roman civilization, its virtues, and Romanticism; through these, the individual is celebrated along with their freedom. The subject matter that oriented the paintings changed from the Rococo period to Neoclassicism.

Apart from the painting, the architecture has grandeur of scale, simplicity, plainness of walls, and dramatic column setting. The simplicity is a reaction to the emphasis on grandeur as pursued by the aristocratic society (Hunt 295). There are three neoclassical types of buildings that emerged after the French Revolution. The temple styles adopted had features based on ancient architecture. The second type is the Palladian building design. The third type is known and the classical block.

The French Revolution transformed French society through the adoption of art, its purpose, modes of expression, and an emphasis on nationalism. Neoclassical paintings such as the *Oath of the Horatii* by Jacques-Louis David emphasized nationalism instead of the aristocracy. The painting has Roman and Greek antiquity elements based on the methods of dressing and the presence of swords in the painting. Neoclassicism departs from the grandeur witnessed with the Rococo style.

Image 1: The oil painting *Oath of the Horatii* by Jacques-Louis David

5. RENAISANCE REFERENCE TO CLASSICAL ART

The Last Supper makes suggestions attached to heavenly concepts. First, it has an allusion to Neo-Platonic geometry, which is an element of the humanist revival known for its attempts to reconcile Greek philosophy with Christian theology (Suk and Tamargo 35). This allusion is seen in the equilateral triangle that Christ forms and sits at a point where there is an arching pediment that would trace a circle once completed. When one refers to the *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato demonstrates the imperfection of the earth (Suk and Tamargo 35). Because of this imperfection, Plato explores geometry to demonstrate Divine perfection. Leonardo da Vinci seems to explore this concept in the way he has presented Christ. Christ is the embodiment of the heavens, and on earth, in the way, he has been centered in the drawing.

The painting explores mathematical symbolism by alluding to the number 3. The number 3 refers to the Trinity of Christian Theology (Gamwell 80). The disciples are three in a total of four groups; the number of windows is also three. Jesus is featured in a triangular shape (a triangle has three vertices and three sides). The triangular shape that Jesus shows is one that comes out clearly through his head and outstretched arms (Gamwell 80). When number three is contrasted with number four, number four has some significance in classical traditions. For instance, it features in Plato's four virtues.

6. NEW TECHNIQUE AND FEATURES OF RENAISSANCE ART

Christ features in the painting, as is the case with similar paintings with the same theme. Jesus is located at the dynamic center within the painting's composition. There are various architectural features in the painting that converge on the figure of Jesus. The head shows the vanishing point for linear perspective lines. With this vanishing point, The Last Supper is the highest point of the Renaissance single-point linear perspective. Leonardo da Vinci made the painting to feature some elements beyond the biblical context. For instance, Christ makes an expansive gesture. This gesture features Catholic practices attached to the holy sacrament, which features the holy sacrament (bread and wine). This part of the painting goes beyond the Eucharistic celebrations with the disciples; it is meant for monks and nuns.

One new technique that features the painting is communication to the viewer through ordinary models. Leonardo da Vinci has new techniques through which he communicates to the viewer. He does not rely on conventions employed by ordinary artists. Instead, Leonardo has ordinary models that he has developed from his communication with people. He also employs gestures that come from his understanding of sign language (used by the deaf and rhetorical expression for oratorical purposes by public speakers). When one looks at the painting, one sees that the people featured in the painting are in communication with one another,

using ordinary communication models.

Leonardo's version of *The Last Supper* is unlike other versions of the same title. He seats all the disciples and Jesus on the same side of the table with a few variations. The disciples and Jesus face the viewer. Even with this depiction, Judas remains marked for some mischief. In his hand is a small bag to symbolize the 30 pieces of silver he was poised to receive upon betraying Jesus. He has poured salt from where it was in the pot by accidentally knocking it over. This also symbolizes betrayal on his part. He has his head positioned at a lower point when compared to everyone else. He is also the only one in the shadow.

The painting also features the elements that later emerge with the still-life genre that was perfected by the Dutch realists of the Seventeenth Century. The table has a number of items, such as the lacework of the tablecloth. There are transparent wine glasses on the table along with other elements like pewter dishes, pitches of water, and a main dish and duck. The items have been laid on the table and featured in great detail. This arrangement of items on the table is synonymous with the rise of the still-life tradition that came centuries later after Leonardo da Vinci. Still-life is an art form in which the subject matter featured in paintings or drawings has inanimate subject matter at its center stage.

7. FORMAL ANALYSIS OF *THE CHURCH OF SAN VITALE*

The Church of San Vitale began in the 6th century after being commissioned by Bishop Ecclesius in the Justinian Empire. His arrival in Constantinople was between 525 and 532 AD (Andreescu-Treadgold and Treadgold 708). The Church of San Vitale was set up in honor of Saint Vitale through its name and setting (set where he was killed). The Church of San Vitale is shaped after huge early buildings of the Christian church such as San Lorenzo and is also inspired by the Santa Sophia (Andreescu-Treadgold and Treadgold 708). The Church of San Vitale is recognizable because of its geometric shapes from interior and exterior perspectives.

8. EXTERIOR FORMAL ANALYSIS

The construction of the Church of San Vitale follows a complex shape consisting of an octagonal body with wide and short features with an octagonal tower. The body is on two orders that have prominent windows and pillars (Kleiner, 2017). The structure has also been furnished with two stepped towers. The two are the porch resting on the façade and the apse set at the rear with the Prothesis and Diaconicon. The wall structure is of soft bare bricks of the Justinian era. The two-stepped towers have a bell that can be traced to the tenth century. On the other hand, the ninth century was when the buttresses were put in contrast to the internal vaults.

9. INTERIOR FORMAL ANALYSIS

The structure of the church has a spacious interior that is characterized by an articulated rhythm, mass, and arches. The arches give the internal part of the design seem to be lacking in clarity and gives the interior part of the church a geometric shape that makes it indefinite. The shape is that of a hemispheric dome with eight arches as support. One of the eight arches provides entry to the presbytery while the remaining arches form the exedras.

The shapes derived from the Church of San Vitale has a particular impression. When the architecture and position of the shapes are contextualized, they seem to create an expansion effect that emanates from the center to the exterior parts. The impression given is that the exedras are in their current shape because of inflation due to mysterious energy. The arches provide a basis for the repetition of the concentric waves. The exedras serve both a symbolic and aesthetic function. The ideas in the display are those that promote the metaphysical idea of space. As the concentric waves expand, they give the impression that God is of infinite power through which He expands infinitely.

The floor mosaics enriched the decoration of the church. The interior of the Church of San Vitale had mosaics and precious marble. The first of the mosaics is the Theophany, the second and third as the Justinian and the Theodora Processions. The Theophany is in the apsidal semi-dome while the Justinian and the Theodora Processions are on the apse sidewalls. The Theophany gives an account of God's appearance to the universe. San Vitale is depicted receiving the title of a martyr from Christ.

The background of the Theophany features some stylish landscapes. There is a flowery meadow that is full of roses and lilies. The two give a religious connotation with the rose being associated with the blood of Christ, while the lily symbolized the truth (Fredericksen). The mosaics have four springs at the feet of the Christ image, in line with the four gospels.

The Justinian Procession has several images with distinguishing portrait features. The central image is that of the emperor. The image uses a strong mosaic with the depth eliminated and figures motionless and without relief. The shapes strictly follow the rules of geometry. In the case of the Theodora Procession, there are various similarities with the Justinian Procession. The empress is featured as having a taller size with two women besides her.

In conclusion, this essay has explored the idea that although *The Last Supper* delves into Biblical themes on the surface, it explores complexities exhibited by High Renaissance through mathematical symbolism, psychological complexity, and use of perspective. The Last Supper was made in the High Renaissance art tradition, a dominant style of art developed in Italy in the 16th century. The Last Supper makes suggestions attached to heavenly concepts through its allusion to Neo-Platonic geometry, which is an element of the humanist revival known for its attempts to reconcile Greek philosophy with Christian theology. The painting explores mathematical symbolism by alluding to the number 3; this alludes to the Trinity of Christian Theology. Jesus is located at the dynamic center within the painting's composition. There are various architectural features in the painting that converge on the figure of Jesus in what is known as linear perspective. Leonardo da Vinci has new techniques through which he communicates to the viewer through gestures in the way people communicate with the deaf or in public speaking orations.

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