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History of Western Art
Part Three – Renaissance to Rococo

Assignment Three – Exercise 1

Chapter Ten – The Fifteenth Century in Europe

Renaissance artists very self-aware. They and humanists (eg. Valla) saw themselves as reviving the arts, rescuing it from a period of decline (p416)

However, 'Dark Ages' of art something of a myth, promulgated by later writers (arguably the original humanists) eg Petrarch, harking back to what they saw as more noble Classical period. (p416)

Humanists saw classical period as the standard by which all activities, inc. art, should be judged. Believed value was in intellect and prowess, not endowed by birth, nobility, chivalry. City-states identified with republic status, democracy, self-reliance, pragmatism. Not advocates of chivalric or contemplative attitudes (p417)

Humanism pre-eminent in intellectual history of 15th century. Humanist focus on the present not the afterlife, so some conflict with Christian and clerical standpoint. Art, however, still mostly religious, esp in Italy and N Europe. 15th century golden age of Flemish and Florentine art. (p417)

Beginnings of the Italian Renaissance

Pazzi chapel vs St Lorenz. Pazzi pared back, cubist, emphasis on purity of mathematical proportion, absence of ostentatious décor. St Lorenz High Gothic, pointed tall spires, geometrically proportioned but reaching to heavens, spacious and aspirational. (p417)

Renaissance churches not lacking in spirituality but expressed divinity through perfection and proportion of human form, harmony and equilibrium and proportion in construction/design. Man in God's image vs spiritual/otherworldly representation of Gothic.

Beauty of proportion, maths and geometry. Minimal ornamentation. 'The truths of the Christian religion are as self-evident as the laws of mathematics' Manetti (p418).

Pazzi chapel. Nothing could be added or taken away – to do so would only be to make it worse. (Alberti via Vitruvius). (p418) Attributed to Brunelleschi altho' he died before completion so may have had some influence of another designer. Based on Foundling Hospital in Florence, arguably 1st Renaissance building, style of Brunelleschi is clear and can be seen as influential in Pazzi. Hospital is clear example of blend of traditional classical architecture with contemporary renaissance appeal; long colonnade of rounded arches, Corinthian pilasters and geometrical use of space. Brunelleschi first artist/designer/architect – not trained as mason but liberal education; 'a gentleman' - well-travelled, took inspiration from Rome and possibly Persia.

Rationale for return to classical aesthetic also had political element. Florence identified itself with Rome and with republican, civic-state rule. Not the oligarchical rule of N Europe. Renaissance also therefore a

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rejection of Gothic, 'tyrannical' rule. (p419) Emphasis on the liberal, more civilised politics. Also recently 'released' from German control by death of Visconti, allowing Florence to expand. (p419)

Brunelleschi credited with developing maths-based linear perspective. Seeing scene as tho' painting is a window through which viewer sees. Established concept of the vanishing point, orthogonals, seeing a scene from a single viewpoint. Whilst 2 paintings demonstrating this lost, principles captured in treatise by Alberti. Revolutionised art, gave it an almost scientific underpinning, imposing rational order on visible world. (p420)

Massacio

L. perspective developed quickly. Masaccio's work good examples. Use of foreshortening, light and shade (chiaroscuro) and careful attention to light source make paintings more real, figures tangible, lifelike and expressive. Holy Trinity demonstrates use of scale, foreshortening in 'real' figures, larger, no foreshortening in holy figures – combination of real and ethereal. Chapel so well depicted could produce a plan from the painting alone. (p421)

'Progress' in sculpture

1424 Ghiberti completes door panels for Porta del Paradiso. First evidence of competition in art which Ghiberti won. 28 panels (quatrefoils) with finely modelled figures, buildings and skilled use of perspective and naturalism. (p423)

Ren. Artists valued individuality. Not all followed Brunelleschi's model. Eg. Jacopo della Quercia. Style evolved independently, still moving away from Gothic, naturalistic, reality-based depiction, powerful emotive figures (eg. Expulsion from Paradise c1430)

A New Style in Flanders

Italy and Flanders two centres of European art. Both prosperous, Italy republic, Ghent, Bruges, Ypres subject to Burgundy, later Austrian Habsburgs (1474).

Flemish experiential rather than theoretical. Developed new styles/techniques by trial and error.

Developed aerial perspective (graduating tones to give depth to landscapes). Flanders artists developed use of oils (sometimes in combination with tempera). Allowed greater detail painting due to much slower drying times and longer workability of oil over tempera. (p424)

Van Eyck and Van der Weyden

Little known in Flanders literature; artists rarely written about. VE first referenced in Italian account. VE credited with invention of oil painting, and revered for realism in depiction and revival of ancient pigments (a humanist sentiment). VE master of perspective, paintings v lifelike and luminescent; exploitation of media, translucency of oils made work intensely real. V skilled at foreshortening and perspective.

Landscapes (eg. Madonna of Chancellor Rolin c1433-34) so real could almost be identified. Painting replete with subtle symbolism, any part of which could be representative; eg candlestick to represent the Virgin, flowers the attributes of the Virgin. 'corporeal metaphors for things spiritual (Thomas Aquinas). (p425)

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VE one of first great portrait artists; subjects very individual, v detailed depiction. VderW less detail but gentle, delicate modelling. Sitters are $\frac{3}{4}$ seated, preferred pose for Flemish painters. Gives subtle movement and sense of interaction with viewer.

Flemish art influential throughout 15th century, work exported throughout Europe.

Italian art differences: poses in profile (like coins), natural but still more conceptual . Flemish preferred 'natura naturata' the created world; Italians 'natura naturans' the creative force behind the world. (p430-31)

In North, sculpture and architecture little affected. (p431)

Architecture in Italy

'Template' for Florentine townhouse in Palazzo Medici; bold, austere, (almost prison-like?). Minimal ornamentation, solid construction gives impression of impregnability, permanence. Patron, Cosimo de' Medici creates visual expression of wealth, stability, immoveability, prudence, appropriate to instilling confidence in a handler of other people's money. Cf. Jacques Coeur's property in France; archetypally Gothic, flamboyant, highly decorated, almost quirky/eccentric. Gives impression of a building being added to and built onto not one composed as a single, comprehensive design. No recorded architect (common in Gothic period). (Style is reminiscent of Manchester Town Hall). (p430-31)

Alberti

Scholar, artist, architect, scientist, lawyer, moralist, poet, writer and thinker. Illegitimate son of noble family but well-educated. Elevated himself through intellect and breadth of knowledge. Arguably might be accredited with creating the definition of the Renaissance Man. Treatises on architecture, sculpture, painting highly influential. Beauty based on practice of the ancients and 'laws of nature'.

One of greatest achievements: Taking concept of walls as infill between columns and making walls spaces pierced by openings.

(p431)

S Francesco church. 'Clad' medieval church in marble; used pure Roman classical design but not a Roman copy; infused with own creativity; shows thorough understanding of rules of classical architecture. Project not complete.

Circle of Piero della Francesca, An Ideal Town. Illustrates ideals of Italian architects; idealised town is spacious and open, buildings individual but complementary, no unnecessary ornamentation; restrained style. V different from medieval style. (p432-33)

Sculpture in Italy

Donatello – revives Italian sculpture. Starts with church work, moves on to freestanding pieces. Few freestanding commissions due to construction costs so Equestrian monument to Gattamelata particularly

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special. Bronze-cast, figure's perspective is cleverly distorted as to be seen from below. Horse powerful, full of energy. Lamentation over the dead Christ figures passionately real, foreshortening and perspective exquisite.

New departures

15th Century Italy, appearance of 'medals'. A rebirth of the antique coin but not as currency, rather as tokens indicating personal renown. Often allegorical, designed as private works of art, only to be understood by an educated elite. Intended to stimulate intellectual thought not pious devotion. Decorated on both faces with greater depth than coinage, frequently image on one face, allegorical image on reverse.

Also emergence of private art; small pieces for individual, private enjoyment. No necessary message or purpose, 'ars gratia artis' although in some cases, representing the purchaser or an allegorical subject. Truly 3-d; to be handled and inspected up close not admired from afar. (p434-435)

Christian and humanist realistic portrayals incorporated alongside each other albeit not truly integrated (eg: tombs with realistic figures topped with Virgin and Child/angels). Rarely busts 're-invented' from Roman origins but inc shoulders and tops of arms. Most popular reliefs of Madonna and Child; in marble/bronze or cast in terracotta and glazed so within reach of poorer classes; often coloured and attached to stucco.

Outside Florence more illusionistic depiction. Mazzoni's Lamentation stunning, lifelike figures in real poses. Bringing Bible to masses, akin to static scene captured from a miracle play. (p436-38)

Italian painting and the church

Dominican asceticism eschews much art as frivolous, amusing (monkeys, dogs chasing hares). Religious art pared back to simple images, clear and unequivocal. In defence, art described as being for: educating illiterate who can't read gospels; enlightening those not inspired by spoken word; images more readily remembered than words. Monastery stucco walls decorated with simple, pious Bible imagery. Artists (eg Uccello) experimenting with complex perspectives and geometry. 'Golden Section' a preoccupation at time. Financial constraints and move away from ostentatious display of wealth see landscape backgrounds overtake gold. 'Empty spaces' filled with scenes/land/skyscapes. (p443)

Secular painting

Secular art increasing in late 15th century but religious predominates. Simpler renaissance style probably owes much to financial and resource constraints. Many goldsmiths (Botticelli) became painters. Cassoni (marriage chests) still painted with Gothic style panels until mid 15th century. (p443-445)

Botticelli

Large tapestries v costly, depicting medieval, chivalric themes. Botticelli works may have been painted interpretations (albeit with mythological themes) in lieu of tapestry for less wealthy.

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Astrology popular (since 12th century). Some disapproval by humanists (liked to believe man in charge of own destiny) but most (including church) accepted planetary and constellation movements as evidence of God's intention or concealing the future/fate. (p448)

Printing with movable type established mid-15th century (China 11th). 1st major work Gutenberg bible. Humanists slower to accept until end century when 1st Greek and Latin texts printed. Revolutionised intellectual life of Europe. (p449)

The Venetian Synthesis

Mantegna and Bellini

Produced pieces heavily influenced by Greek/Roman sculpture, many examples of which in Venice. Bellini fuses Flemish and Florentine art – infuses art with Venetian light and colour, gives saints human touch and arranges in more real groupings.

1474 Gentile Bellini commissioned to create pieces on canvas for Doges' Palace. Pictorial style, scenes from Venetian history. Fine detail, realism of Flemish art, without overt symbolism; balanced structures of Florentine but with focus on main subject not obsessed with perspective. Came to be popular 'eye-witness style'. Scuole 'schools' commissioned art to commemorate miracles achieved by relic – fragment of Christ's cross. Real people, not supernatural so more accessible. (p449-53)

International humanism

Some Italian art in N Europe but mainly through illuminated manuscripts/books.

Durer introduced Renaissance to N Europe. Originally goldsmith, later painter, works primarily religious or portrait. Excelled in prints, natural combination/development of engraved silver and woodblock. Drew prolifically, including self-portraits and own body. Signed work (rare even on finished pieces). Held self in high esteem – artist as 'gentleman' (p454-56)