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Color in Renaissance Paintings and Their Effects on Emotions

In 1477, Pope Sixtus IV initiated the rebuilding of the Capella Magna, which was then named the Sistine Chapel. He had then commissioned painters to decorate the chapel, which was just a simple blue sky with stars. In 1508, Pope Julius II ordered Michelangelo to repaint the Sistine Chapel, much to Michelangelo's contempt. In 1536, Michelangelo was again requested to return to the Sistine Chapel to paint "The Last Judgment" behind the altar. Although Michelangelo considered himself to be a sculptor and not a painter, these frescos are still admired today and some of the most noteworthy pieces of art produced in the Renaissance.

People often enjoy looking at artwork, whether it is a photograph, a drawing, a painting, or any other aesthetically pleasing creation. From ancient Egypt to the modern age, people have been surrounded by art, although the medium and technique to produce art may change, people's willingness to produce and appreciate art has endured. This was no different in Renaissance Italy, artists emerged during this time with the assistance of the guilds. Art in the Renaissance focused on the figure of the human body through bright and vibrant colors. The colors not only represented the rebirth and cultural revitalization but also conveyed the artists' emotions.

Before the Renaissance, from the late 400s to the mid-1400s, Middle Age artisans produced works that were often drab in color, and the subjects often appeared flattened or two-dimensional. After the bubonic plague wiped out most of the population in Europe, the people no

longer wanted to be completely devout, the people wanted to be worldlier. This change ushered in Humanism, and the people focused on this life rather than the next, as they have done in the past; as such, the people wanted to live lavishly. During the Early Italian Renaissance, myriad paintings portrayed people, but these compositions often used dull and lackluster colors. Yet the perspective in these murals evolved from the flattened images that were in Middle Age art. However, throughout the High Renaissance, approximately from the late 1400s to the late 1500s, people did not crave simple portraits that were common in the Early Renaissance. They sought to boast and impress others. They possessed impressive paintings commissioned to decorate their houses which used bright and vibrant colors. Hence, the change in the people's desires triggered the revolution in art style and the use of colors in paintings.

When we go to an art museum and look at the pieces on display, many of them are accompanied by a small plaque, giving insight into the meaning or what is portrayed. In our day-to-day lives, we encounter many colors, from the walls of every room we enter to the advertisements we see when we leave our houses. Today, we often take for granted the professional observations made on a piece of art, and we are often unaware what the colors we see do to our frame of mind. However, colors in Renaissance paintings captivated the viewers with the new color combinations and techniques; and it revolutionized the way people interpreted feelings.

Although perspective is usually considered the most significant part of Renaissance paintings, I argue that the artist's use of color surpassed perspective. The new use of colors in the Renaissance helped the people and the artists transition into and embrace the Renaissance. When looking at a piece that focuses on perspective, the viewer can see and understand the object the artist is trying to portray. If someone was to look at a statue, or a black and white picture, the

viewer can gather some information based on the figure's stance. However, when color is used, different emotions can be evoked from the spectator. The audience can feel these sentiments and fully understand what the artist is aiming to portray with their work. Color in Renaissance paintings was vital because it not only shows the *rebirth* of the time, colors can also show unspoken feelings. The combination of the bright and lively colors altered people's sentiments, which, I propose, was the most crucial part of Renaissance art.

In this paper, I explore themes in Renaissance artwork and in color theory. I present a brief insight into how different paints were made during the Renaissance. I succinctly examine why there was a change in painting mediums, from tempera to oil, and why this was a beneficial change for the Renaissance. I also detail how humans perceive colors and how we innately see and interpret the meaning of pigments. I briefly analyze a few of Da Vinci's notes for information about light and dark colors and how they were used in Renaissance paintings. Using this information, I examine Renaissance paintings and the artist's use of color, while drawing conclusions.

Harald Kuepper's book, *The Basic Law of Color Theory*, and Deborah Sharpe's book, *The Psychology of Color and Design*, go over the meanings and perceptions of colors. Bruce Cole's book, *The Renaissance Artist at Work*, offers information about the process of making the materials needed for painting and where the colors came from; it also offers insight on using layers of different colors to achieve a specific hue. This information on its own does not offer much for colors in Renaissance paintings; however, I take this knowledge and apply it to specific Renaissance paintings to analyze them. Charles Mack looks at changes in the Renaissance in his essay, "Virtual Reality" in his book *Looking at the Renaissance*. In *Sixteenth-Century Italian Art*, there is an essay, "Virtue Reconciled with Pleasure" by Edgar Wind, the author analyzes the

subjects of a piece of art that I am looking at, *Mars and Venus United by Love*. Wind looks at and explains, the relationship of the two deities. He conveys the aspects of the two appearances and what the relationship represents; I apply this interpretation to our current meanings and effects of colors to show that this time revolutionized the way we see colors today. In the same anthology, “Leonardo’s Color and Chiaroscuro,” by John Shearman, he discusses pigments, forms, color, and light. I criticize how these factors play into how people look at the paintings and how it makes them interpret the meanings.

The theory of hermeneutics is important when looking at art and attempting to appreciate it. To fully understand an art piece, one must grasp the parts that make it up. This perception of the parts leads to a deeper knowledge of the piece altogether. With a new appreciation for the artwork, more information of the pieces that make it up can be gained. When we have a deeper understanding beyond the image that is portrayed to us, we can determine what the artist is trying to convey to us. Rather than just looking at the colors in the paintings, we are looking at what they mean. After we know what the colors mean, we can understand what the subjects in the paintings truly symbolize. Only after we interpret all of this, we can grasp what the artist is portraying.

The first of three paintings I am examining is *Mars and Venus United by Love* by Paolo Veronese. This painting uses warm and cool colors that are bright and vibrant. With knowledge of what colors mean and what feelings they evoke, which I will explore later in this paper, I make assumptions of what emotional state Veronese was trying to evoke from the viewer. Along with Wind’s analysis of Mars and Venus’ relationship, I analyze how our ideas of color meaning were formed by Renaissance art. I chose this painting because of Wind’s analysis of the deities’ relationship; it will allow me to confirm my theory about the use of color in art and the effects on

the viewer's perception of the painting. The second painting I am observing is *Portrait of a Man in Armor* by Sebastiano Del Piombo. The aforementioned portrait uses predominantly bleak paints to portray the subject. The use of dull colors and the subject matter of the artwork were common in the early Renaissance. I chose this work because it offers an acceptable comparison to other works done in the High Renaissance, as well as the other paintings I am examining. The final painting I am considering is *The Lovers* by Giulio Romano. This piece is an example work from the High Renaissance, however, unlike the first painting I am looking at, it predominately uses cool colors to convey emotions, rather than warm colors. As such, *The Lovers* is a nice contrasting piece to *Mars and Venus United by Love* and is the reason I chose to look at this painting.

Renaissance artists were not just people who picked up a brush and started painting; it took years of apprenticeship and studying under their masters to become master craftsmen themselves and understand the materials of trade (Cole 57). To create a paint, the artist had to grind pigments into a paste, which was then added to either an egg-water mixture or oil, depending if it was tempera or an oil medium. Each pigment came from different minerals, vegetables, or salts, and as such, each color had different characteristics (Cole 67-68). Apprentices learned these characteristics from their masters, who were in turn masters at painting with tempera. Tempera paints were used more at the beginning of the Renaissance until oil painting became popular. Tempera paints have different properties from oil paintings, and many artists preferred the different properties that oil paints offered, such as being easier to combine on the canvas. As such, artists started to use oil paint as their medium of choice. This change in painting mediums can be used to signal the transition from the Early Renaissance to the High Renaissance.

The artists who used oil painting were the apprentices of the *tempera masters*, and as such, in the beginning, these artists used both tempera and oil in their artwork. Oil painting became a popular choice for these artists in the late 1400s, as it allowed more freedom to the artists. Oil paints dry slower which allows colors to be blended on the canvas, rather than using thin layers of different colors to achieve a hue. The canvases that were used for oil paintings did not have to be primed with a white color like tempera needed; Oil canvases could be primed with dark colors. This dark priming and ability to work different paint layers together allowed for more colors, and for the colors to appear brighter (Cole 72-75). The change from tempera paints to oil paints not only allowed artists more freedom but helped to fuel the Renaissance with bright and vivid colors. Oil paints allowed more freedom and captivating colors than tempera did, and so the Renaissance artists adopted this new medium for painting.

As the Renaissance endured, people's desires changed, from wanting to immortalize themselves in paintings, to boasting and showing off what they possessed to others. This change in the people's mentality helped incite artists to alter their medium of choice and how they portrayed art. They shifted their focus from a particular subject to pieces that were composed of multiple elements. The artists exchanged the drab backgrounds from Early Renaissance artwork to focus on the environment in their pieces (Mack 36). The populations change in mindset, combined with the freedom oil paints provided, allowed artists to express the essence and spirit of the Renaissance.

Colors influence human emotions. After reviewing multiple research projects, Deborah Sharp established that warm colors, such as red, yellow, and orange, are stimulating, exciting, and often associated with aggression. Cool colors, such as blue and green, are calming, restful and often associated with peacefulness (Sharpe 55). These observations are very general, but we

can look at each color individually, in a broad sense to understand what each color means. Red colors are perceived as hot, relentless, and vivid. As such, reds represent passion, love, and anger. Blue colors represent reserve and dignity. Yellow colors are eye-catching and represent laughter and energy. Green colors are lively, yet dignified. Purple colors are regal and as such represent wealth, magnificence, and dignity. White often represents purity and innocence. Black is a mysterious color, but also rich and distinguished. Grey colors are calm colors that often take on the characteristics of surrounding colors (Sharpe 91-92). From this, I can deduce that the favorite colors of the Renaissance were red, green, and neutral colors, such as grey and brown. The red colors were favored as they easily conveyed the passion that was present in this era. Green was preferred as it not only showed a connection with nature, it also let a painting and the subjects within it retain dignity. Even if the subject was to appear nude in a painting, green colors would allow them to retain their honor. Neutral colors were selected as they could extend the effects of another paint without having to overuse that hue. This helped with letting the artist distinguish between colors and use a wider spectrum of paints.

The amount of time we look at a piece of art can change what we perceive. For instance, when looking at a pigment for a while, then looking at another color, the new paint is perceived to be mixed with the old hue. Colors in the background and foreground cannot be picked arbitrarily either, as they can affect how the other is perceived (Kueppers 22-24). There are people who have, "highly developed color tastes" meaning that these people are more aware of colors and color combinations (Kueppers 193). I believe that most of the Renaissance artists had such color awareness, or awareness in the field they specialized in, partially, if not fully, because of the years they had to work as an apprentice to learn things, such as the different characteristics of colors and how to apply paint.

Theophilus Presbyter was a German monk who wrote about the different techniques of crafts that were known in the 1100s. The crafts he detailed ranged from painting to bookmaking. Using his writings, we can look at the process of mixing and painting with oil paints. In his book, *On Diverse Arts*¹, he covers the various stages of painting, as well as how to make different pigments that were mix with oils. In the following excerpt, Theophilus describes working with oil paint, “OMNIA genera colorum eodem genere olei teri et poni possunt in opere ligneo, in his tantum rebus quae sole siccari possunt, quia quotiescunque unum colorem imposueris, alterum ei superponere non potes, nisi prior exsiccet, quod imaginibus diuturnum ac taediosum est nimis.”² Although Theophilus’ writings were completed before the Renaissance, they are still useful. The works exemplify the technique that may have been used in the Renaissance that an apprentice would need to learn through years of training, as well as illustrating how difficult it is to paint with oils.

Many Renaissance paintings used many colors that stood out, rather than a single color to act as the focal point. John Shearman discusses the stylistic use of color in his essay, *Leonardo’s Color and Chiaroscuro*. To distinguish between objects and lines, artists had to use sharp transitions in their color choice. Each object in a painting would have to be different from the colors next to it so they did not blend together (Shearman 411). Shearman also looks at Leonardo da Vinci’s *A Treatise on Painting*³ as he discussed colors, shadows, and light. Da Vinci noted in *A Treatise on Painting* that,

¹ A printed edition, with the original Latin and English translation can be found at <https://archive.org/details/theophiliquietru00theouoft>

² Chapter 3

All sorts of colours can be ground and laid upon woodwork, with the same kind of oil, in those things only which can be dried in the sun; because each time that you have laid on one colour, you cannot super pose another upon it until the first has dried, which, for figures', is excessively long and tedious.

³Printed editions of Leonardo da Vinci’s *A Treatise on Painting* can be found at <http://www.treatiseonpainting.org/cocoon/leonardo/printEd/all>

L'azzurro & il verde non è per se semplice, perché l'azzurro è composto di luce e di tenebre, come è quello dell' aria, cioè nero perfettissimo, e bianco candidissimo. Il verde è composto d'un semplice e d'un composto, cioè si compone d'azzurro e di giallo...

Delli colori di egual perfettione, quello si dimostrerà di maggior eccellenza che fia veduto in compagnia del color retto contrario, & il pallido col rosso, il nero col bianco... azzurro e giallo, verde, e rosso, perché ogni colore si conosce meglio nel suo contrario, che nel suo simile, come l'oscuro nel chiaro, il chiaro nell' oscuro...

Dico che'l bianco che termina con l'oscuro, fà che in essi termini l'oscuro pare più nero, & il bianco pare più candido.⁴

The colors blue and green are not *simple* pigments, as blue is composed of materials that are *light* and *dark*, and as such blue was probably the most *complex* paint to blend during the Renaissance. Green is not a *simple* hue either, as the most complicated color, blue, is used to create this tincture. Colors that were *light in nature*, such as white, yellow, and red, needed slight adjustments to make a paint to contrast it and act as a shadow. However, colors that were *darker in nature*, such as blue, brown, and green, were best to use in their *pure* form when increasing the shadows (Shearman 416). This means that when an artist wanted to use a lighter form of a dark color, the paint needed to be altered, such as mixing the pigment with white or applying the color in thin layers. Since mixing the pigments for a paint was an arduous task, the artist wanted to showcase the flawless color by placing that pigment near its complementary hue. As a result,

(English) Chapter 156, (Italian) Chapter 162 –

Azure, and Green are not simple Colours in themselves, the former being composed of Light and Darkness, that is, of a perfect Black and a perfect White... and the latter, of one simple Colour, and one Compound, to wit, Azure and Yellow, which together, form a Green...

Of Colours equally excellent, that will appear the most perfect, which is seen nearest its direct contrary: thus, a pale Colour, near a Red one, Black, near White... Gold, near Azure; and Green, near Red, appear with Advantage; it being a natural Property of all Colours, to show themselves more, near their Opposites, than near those alike to them...

When a bright Colour terminates upon an Obscure one, the Extremities of the former will by that means become brighter, and more vivid; and those of the latter deeper and more obscure.

red colors would often be placed near soft tones and dark colors would be positioned near light colors.

In Edgar Wind's essay, *Virtue Reconciled with Pleasure*, the author explores the relationship between the two deities Venus and Mars, as portrayed through paintings. In serene paintings, Venus is portrayed as the one to subdue the fighting Mars by using love; it shows that love is more powerful than conflicts. Mars, even when retained by Venus, still holds boldness in some form, even if he is portrayed as being completely passive. When Venus occasionally takes Mars' armor and weapons, she represents the "warfare of love" but she can also represent that "strength comes from love" and to be charitable to gain power (Wind 45-47). With this knowledge of what Mars and Venus' relationship represents, and what feelings the colors can evoke, I will combine the two and look at the painting *Mars and Venus United by Love* by Paolo Veronese.

With this insight that Wind provided, I will now look at *Mars and Venus United by Love* (see figure 1) by Paolo Veronese, and Veronese's use of color and determine if each deity, and their relationship, is displayed through the use of colors. This painting was completed around 1576, this was toward the end of the High Renaissance. During this time it was common for paintings to have multiple elements of bright and lively colors. This painting shows the beautiful Venus subduing the powerful Mars with her love and beauty. Venus is standing above Mars, her pale skin standing out against the dark background. The longer we look at Venus, the more she

takes on the quality of the colors that are around her, in particular, white and blue, and as such she embodies purity and peacefulness. Mars is seen submissive to Venus while donning his armor and being draped in a red cape. Even while he is physically represented as submissive to Venus, Mars is still shown to have his dignity and power because of his armor and cape. The armor itself shows his power, and we can use the color of his cape to understand Mars further. His cape has tones



Figure 1: Veronese, Paolo. Mars and Venus United by Love. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Oil on canvas.

of red and purple, and we can see that he embodies power, anger, magnificence, and dignity. After studying the painting and the color choices, we can see that their relationship portrayed in this painting is coherent with the relationship that Wind described.

Now that I have shown that colors can successfully influence our perception of a piece of art, I will now look at two other art pieces. The first is *Portrait of a Man in Armor* (see figure 2) by Sebastiano Del Piombo was completed around 1516, this was in between the Early and High Renaissance. In the Early Renaissance, people wanted to be commemorated through a portrait



Figure 2: Piombo, Sebastiano Del. Portrait of a Man in Armor. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford. Oil on canvas.

rather than wanting to amaze others with the impressive pieces that were commissioned. The colors in this portrait are dull and do not show the spirit of the High Renaissance. The foreground and the background both use dark colors and there is not an emphasized division between the subject and the background.

However, if there were no colors in this art piece, we would only see a man in a suit of armor, who, based on his stance, is dignified and has some power to his name. Since there are colors in this portrait, we can see this

man with additional certain qualities. The colors in this painting influence the way we view this man. The main colors in this painting are green and black. The green emphasizes his dignity and power, while the black gives him mystery and makes him appear even more dignified and contrasts well with the conservative use of the white pigment. The white shine on his armor offers him virtue, a highly desirable trait during the Renaissance.

The final piece I am looking at is *The Lovers* (see figure 3). This was painted by Giulio Romano and completed around 1540, during the High Renaissance. There are different occurrences in this painting, two lovers are sprawled nude on a bed while an elderly woman

peers in on them. The longer the viewer observes the lovers, the more the surrounding colors influence their pale bodies. They are encircled by green, red, white, and yellow. The green



Figure 3: Romano, Giulio. The Lovers. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. Oil on panel, transferred to canvas.

curtains bring life and dignity to the lovers while the yellow offers them energy and vitality. These colors bring life and energy between the two, even though they lay there motionless, it can represent the coital bliss between the two. The white linens that the two rest upon represents purity and shamelessness of the human body that was expressed during the High Renaissance. The red bed beneath them represents the love and passion between the two. The lovers are enclosed off from the outside world as the two are focused on the other and the woman to the right looks in on the two's world by opening a door to view them. The elderly woman is completely clothed, she appears more reserved than the two bare lovers. Her blue dress helps to show her dignity and modesty.

It is apparent that colors influence human emotions which alters the way we perceive art. Through the three paintings I have examined, I have shown that the chosen colors influence the way we look at the piece. As such, colors give artwork a deeper meaning opposed to a piece that

solely focuses on perspective. Although perspective may appear to be the most pivotal part of Renaissance art, the artist's use of color was more crucial. The artists had profound knowledge in the pigments they put onto canvas. The bright and vibrant colors not only represented the rebirth and cultural revitalization but also conveyed the artists' emotions and gave significance to the paintings. With hermeneutics, we can begin to comprehend what the artist is conveying to the viewer. By interpreting what colors can mean, we are given a key to understanding the meaning behind a work of art.

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