

Laura Yao - 79202 Final Project

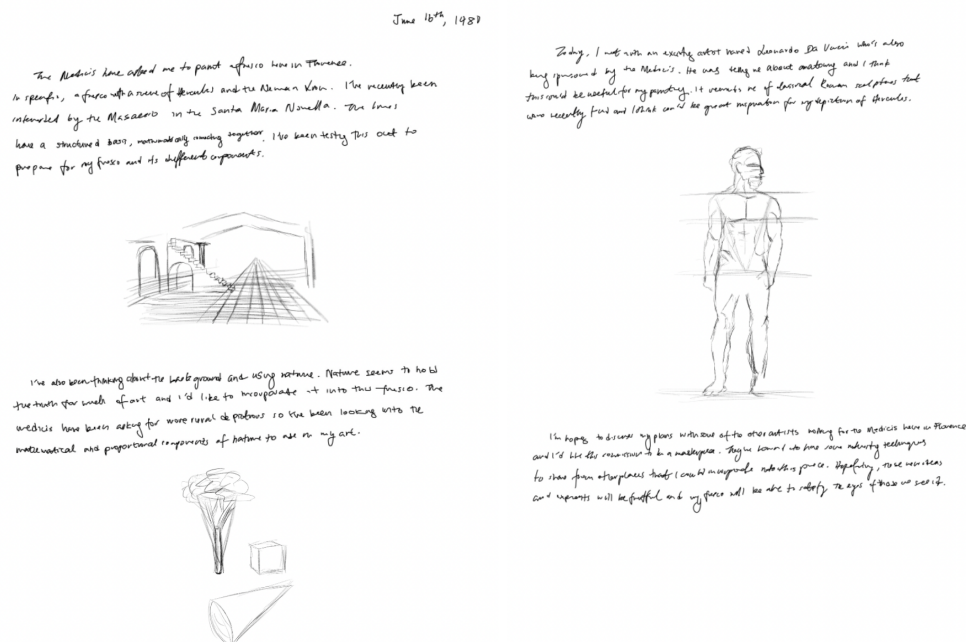


Figure 1: Marco Rossi's journal excerpt describing his thoughts on his new commissioned artwork in Florence and his initial inspirations

The text has been reproduced below:

Page 1:

June 16th, 1480

The Medici have asked me to paint a fresco here in Florence. In specific, a fresco with a scene that includes Hercules and the Nemean Lion. I've recently been interested in the Masaccio in the Santa Maria Novella. The lines have a structured basis, mathematically connected together. I've been testing this out to prepare for my fresco and its different components.

[Drawing of structures]

I've also been thinking about the backgrounds and using nature. Nature seems to hold the truth for much of art and I'd like to incorporate that into the fresco. The Medicis have been asking for more rural depictions so I've been looking into the mathematical and proportional components of nature to use in my art.

[Drawings of Trees overlaid with geometric figures]

Page 2:

Today, I met with an exciting artist named Leonardo da Vinci who is also sponsored by the Medicis. He was telling me about anatomy and I think this could be useful for my painting. It reminds me of the classical Roman sculptures that were recently found and I think could be great inspiration for my depiction of Hercules.

[Drawing of a man with focus on proportions]

I'm hoping to discuss my plans with some of the other artists sponsored by the Medicis here in Florence and I'd like this commission to be a masterpiece. They're bound to have some interesting techniques to share from other places in Italy that I could incorporate into this piece. Hopefully, these new ideas and experiments will be fruitful and my fresco will be able to satisfy the eyes of all who see it.

The development of Renaissance Artwork through the lens of Marco Rossi

The renaissance period lasted from the late 1300s to the late 1500s in Italy, marking a drastic change in politics, economics, and culture overall. One methodology that rose to prominence during this time was the “ad fontes” methodology, where Renaissance scholars went “back to the sources” and reexamined classical ideals. This methodology not only affected the education system and values of Renaissance scholars but also permeated into the artistic world. Renaissance art explored a completely different sense of style when compared with medieval artwork and evolved greatly throughout the period with key figures such as Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo providing a new outlook into art. The renaissance also brought about prosperity for many Italians because of the plague and the redistribution of wealth that followed it. Another key shift was the new political atmosphere that was apparent at that time with the creation of city republics and other new governments. With both “ad fontes” and the massive shift in economic status of many people as well as the new power dynamics, there was a renewed interest in luxuries, leading to a boom in artistic innovation that not only expressed a deep value in classical perfection, but also investigated the connection between nature and math with producing art which can be seen through Italian renaissance artist Marco Rossi’s journal at the midpoint of the renaissance (1480) in Italy.

Marco Rossi’s journal entry is dated to 1480 which is at a similar time to Leonardo da Vinci’s art career as well as his presence in Florence with the Medici family¹. During this time period, artists were primarily supported by patrons which can be seen through the first section of Rossi’s journal entry where he mentions being commissioned to create a fresco for the Medici family. The Medici family was extremely influential in Florence and were one of the most

¹ “Leonardo Da Vinci,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/empires/medici/renaissance/leonardo.html>.

prominent patrons of the time, sponsoring many artists like Marco Rossi. This patronage allowed for artists to innovate and create art without worrying about financially supporting themselves. Furthermore, it brought together artists throughout Italy (and around Europe) to share ideas with each other as referenced in Rossi's journal entry where he discusses speaking with Leonardo da Vinci as well as other artists that are being sponsored by the Medicis. Around this time, the Medici family also sponsored Michelangelo, allowing him to develop his skills as a young sculptor².

Patronage continued to be a main aspect of the Renaissance with wealthy and powerful figures commissioning grand pieces of artwork as a demonstration of power or to convey a specific message, demonstrating the importance of artwork at that time not only as a status symbol for families like the Medicis but also for figures such as the Pope. This can be seen through the art that the Pope commissioned from Michelangelo such as his work in Sistine Chapel from Pope Julius and the pull such artwork had on both the wealthy/powerful class as well as the people of Rome, with "the whole of Rome flock[ing] to see it"³. These patrons would request artwork from these artists that they sponsored, such as the backgrounds and fresco scene that Rossi was commissioned to create and this also generated competition between these artists that helped them achieve and discover many techniques during the Renaissance. Thus, from Marco Rossi's journal, the impact of patronage is highlighted on the artist's side and this patronage also allowed for art to spread across Italy, develop immensely, and become much more important during this time period.

² Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Anthony Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 413.

³ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Anthony Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 421.

In the first section of Rossi's journal entry, he references the request for the fresco to include a depiction of Hercules and the Nemean Lion. This reflects the 'ad fontes' methodology that defined the Renaissance. 'Ad fontes' refers to looking back to the sources which means that Renaissance scholars idolized the work of classical philosophers and scholars such as Aristotle and Plato, wanting to reexamine topics from the source (ancient Greek and Roman literature). This can be seen through the opinions of scholars and philosophers such as Petrarch. They considered those that were ignorant of the classical legacy as "vulgar" and referred to medieval teachings as "crude" and "unfinished"⁴. With this reexamination of ancient Greek and Roman figures, these stories (such as the one with Hercules) became popular again, with artists pulling inspiration from such figures and re-depicting them within their paintings and sculptures. In the *Life of Michelangelo* by Vasari, it is mentioned that Michelangelo supposedly "treated the statue so that it looked like an antique" in an attempt to imitate this Roman aesthetic and ideal that was the "authority" on art of the time⁵. This can also be seen later within Rossi's journal entry where he discusses the classical Roman sculptures that were uncovered and the inspiration he took from it. The classical ideal that these sculptures and figures represented became incredibly important throughout the Renaissance and in Renaissance artwork, especially when connected with the change in education of the higher class and the renewed focus upon this ideal. This can also be connected back to patronage as these values permeated through the upper class and those who would have likely sponsored artists (such as the Medicis) as expressed in the fresco scene that they requested for Rossi.

⁴ James Harvey Robinson, *Petrarch The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1914).

⁵ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Anthony Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 416.

This was the core of Renaissance humanism, recognizing the fact that they no longer wanted to rely on received authorities and instead wanted to go back to the source. Other renaissance humanist ideas were also used by artists, with both Michelangelo and da Vinci being influenced by poetry and moral philosophy stating “if poetry deals with moral philosophy, painting deals with natural philosophy”⁶. Artists took humanism beyond simply reusing ancient Greek and Roman art concepts, looking more into nature and attempting to render and reflect nature into art. Leonardo da Vinci referred to painting as the “imitator of all works of nature” and the “grandchild of nature,”⁷ basically highlighting the value of taking inspiration from nature and trying to make art mimic that as closely as possible. In Rossi’s journal entry, each of the included drawings demonstrates an awareness for proportion and mathematics. The first image focuses on linear perspective which is a mathematical system that creates an illusion of depth within the painting. This was a key component in making art seem realistic as when people see something, they are able to perceive the depth of different objects and create a layered perspective. This focus on the eye as “the central sense” that “can most completely and abundantly appreciate the infinite works of nature” was also seen in da Vinci’s notebooks, demonstrating this renewed interest in portraying the world as close as possible to what actually exists⁸. Rossi also brings this mathematical basis into his drawing of a tree in the second image being combined with a cone shape, demonstrating the direct connection between nature and math in art that was being explored during the renaissance. Techniques involving perspective, mathematics, and replicating nature became more and more relevant throughout the renaissance such as aerial perspective or sfumato. These were seen in prominent artworks from the renaissance such as the Mona Lisa, where the blurring of outlines gives the background depth and makes the painting seem more

⁶ Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

⁷ Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

⁸ Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

‘natural’. This implies that Rossi was able to take in the changing artistic ideals of the Renaissance era and apply them to his work.

Rossi also discusses the impact of anatomy on his art with both his drawing of a human figure as well as within the text of the journal. Anatomy started to develop during the Renaissance with artists like da Vinci pioneering innovations in this field⁹. This demonstrates the changes that were occurring in art at the time. Artists were not only looking back to the sources (both nature and ancient Greek and Roman influence), but also developing many of their own new techniques and ideas. With the support of patrons, artists were able to innovate and experiment without the burdens that artists had before. Additionally, as mentioned in Rossi’s journal entry, the sharing of knowledge with artists coming together under a certain patronage allowed for a free flow of ideas and knowledge in a way that wasn’t possible before. Looking past Rossi’s journal entry, Vasari describes Michelangelo’s art as a departure from “the kind of art regulated by proportion, order, and rule which other artists did according to common usage and following the works of antiquity” and that he broke other artists away from this specific version of ‘perfection’¹⁰. This demonstrates the ability of artists to both communicate with each other and change their styles based off of that but also how the Renaissance was able to promote this sort of development within the art world.

The journal entry left by Marco Rossi offers insight into the life and inspirations of a Renaissance artist of the time. It also demonstrates the importance of various concepts such as nature and classical art within the paintings and sculptures during the Renaissance period, connecting these with the impact of patronage upon artist’s lives. With this patronage, artists were able to innovate in a way they weren’t able to before but also increased the exposure that

⁹ Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

¹⁰ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Anthony Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

these artists had on the outside world and general public, with art appearing in chapels and guilds across Italy. This also allowed artists to communicate and compete with each other because of the resources they were given and the locations that they found themselves in (congregating in these main city republics). The effect that Renaissance humanism had on the art of the time is also reflected within the journal entry as Rossi was inspired and tested out drawing many styles adjacent to the values of Renaissance humanism. The obsession with nature and the 'truth' in art that would come from nature was also highlighted throughout the Renaissance as they looked to create art from the original source. These changes and key values of art during the Renaissance can all be seen through the drawings and journal entries that were left behind by Marco Rossi as an Italian Renaissance artist during the middle of the Renaissance period in Florence, Italy.

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