Italian Renaissance Art: From Abstraction to Naturalism

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-Exploring the significance of stylistic technicalities in this movement

INTRODUCTION

In order to dive into the discussion of Italian Renaissance art, one must first understand what the Renaissance actually was, along with the periods it superseded. Before the Renaissance, there was the Middle Ages and before that, the Byzantine era. Byzantine art was an eastern-style portrayal that developed in Constantinople (330 CE). Their style of painting was mainly characterized by dynamic lines, emotionless faces, and flattened/stiff figures. This gave paintings a geometric, abstract, and two-dimensional appearance. Before this, the Byzantines adopted a majority of their techniques and forms from antiquity – ancient Greek and Egyptian art – whose styles were also flat and stiff. Byzantine art was exclusively concerned with Christian art, but what they seemed to lack was narrative and personal meaning. Byzantine art was meant to be impersonal, ceremonial, and symbolic (Mango, 256). As this era came to an end, their style of art continued on throughout the Middle Ages (500-1400) up until the Renaissance when there came a dramatic shift in the meaning of art.

The Renaissance, meaning "rebirth", was a period in Europe that lasted from the 14th to the 17th century. There were many different movements founded during the Renaissance such as Mannerism (1527-1580) and Baroque art (1600-1750). It was during the early Renaissance when artists shed the style from the Byzantine era and took inspiration from the classical ideals of Ancient Rome and Greece (Mango 253). During this period, artists wanted to achieve a more relatable and personal connection with their art, the subject, and its audience. They did this by changing the traditional rigid forms of people, adding expression and emotion to faces, adding fluidity and movement in the composition, adding a realistic sense of space and environment, amongst many other things. Specifically, during the Early Renaissance, artists developed a more naturalistic approach to the organization of figures in a landscape, while considering depth and perspective. This can be seen through the chronological analysis of the Madonna Enthroned paintings. For example, Cimabue's Madonna Enthroned of 1280 shows a very unrealistic positioning of the angels flanking Mary and the Christ child, versus Fra Angelico's version in 1430 where the angels are positioned in a realistic manner in relation to each other and the throne.

It was during the High Renaissance, where artists applied the intellectual knowledge associated with the Renaissance, such as correct anatomical forms with scientific accuracy, and the realistic rendering of color, light and composition (Hart & Wilkins 544). Whereas during the Early Renaissance (late 14th century ~ late 15th century), artists paid little to no attention to these details. Artists were novices at accomplishing the certain techniques needed to achieve this style because it was a generally new movement during the Early Renaissance and not much was known about it. Also, there was not a lot of previous artworks that emulated these ideals to work off of. As a result, paintings during this time seem more flat due to the lack of shadow/light rendering. Because they could not get this right, bodies were portrayed unrealistically.

During the span of the Italian Renaissance, one can see the gradual transformation in of style rendering to represent their work in a more natural and realistic manner, rather than an abstracted manner from which it began. This development was achieved through the innovation of different techniques, which made forms, and figures look more life-like. Some of these techniques include the use of orthogonals and one-point perspective to create a realistic sense of space in relation to the forms in the painting. Another technique that helped achieve a more realistic sense of space and depth was the use of mathematical precision when dealing with perspective. The use of foreshortening was also used when painting figures, because it gave the audience the illusion of a 3D space in which the form is rendered.

When looking at this gradual shift from abstraction to naturalism, it is important to consider the influence that artists had on each other during that time, often improving/perfecting each other's techniques (the passing on of style and techniques). We see this a lot when looking at the relationship between master and apprentice. The apprentice, having learned under their master, almost always adopts his master's style and technique. In a few cases like Leonardo da Vinci and Verrocchio, Cimabue and Giotto, the apprentice grew to outshine their masters. It just goes to show that there is always room for improvement. An artist will master something like an image or technique, and another artist 10 years from then will see their work and make it better. That is why art knows no limits.

INNOVATORS OF STYLE

Cimabue (1240-1302) was one of the first painters of the Italian Renaissance to take the first step in the movement towards naturalism. It was common for Florentine art to imitate Greek antiquity in painting style, but what Cimabue did was take the Grecian style and improve it. He removed the "awkwardness" from Greek style, abandoned old methods, made works look more vivid and alive, and used a style that was softer than the Greeks. He did all of this in a manner that had not been seen by anyone before (Vasari, 8). This is the first step we see in this movement towards naturalism. It goes to show that although one may not see his works as emulating naturalism, he was one of the first artists of this time to be conscious and aware of the thought of embodying realistic and natural figures. From Cimabue, more artists start to develop this consciousness of trying to create Earthly and relatable scenes and figures.

Figure 1: Cimabue, *Maesta,* 1285, tempera on panel, 424 x 276cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

As stated before, it is important to recognize the influence that artists have on each other. In the case of Cimabue and Giotto (1267-1337), one can definitely see the relationship between master and apprentice. This relationship shows the passing on of style and technique (Vasari, 12). Also, it shows the constant improving of previous artist's styles throughout. How Cimabue greatly improved the 'awkwardness' of ancient Greek painting, and later Giotto overshadowed Cimabue with his own improvements of Cimabue's improvements. Similarities and differences can be seen in both artists' rendition of *Madonna Enthroned (*fig.1)*. Compared to the Byzantine renditions of the Madonna and child, Cimabue's shows greater attention to the gradation of colors, which helped soften the harsh lines that were symbolic of the Byzantine era. Giotto furthered this notion by adding more shading to
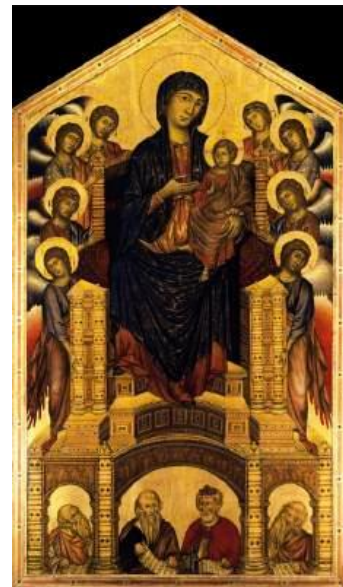
figures so that they no longer seemed flat. He also one-upped Cimabue by applying this consciousness to the background elements, like the throne.

Another innovator of technique that contributed to this ongoing process was Filippo Brunelleschi (1337-1446), who brought forth architectural realism. He was one of the first to carry out experiments that led to the mathematical theory of perspective. He also applied this theory towards architecture. By doing this, it gave the painting an illusion of real 3D space. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), being influenced by Brunelleschi's initial theory, published a treatise called, *De pictura* in 1435. His work focused on the scientific study of perspective and had a tremendous impact on the rendering of 3-dimensional space in the arts. In his book, Alberti focuses on the attributes of a good painter. He writes that "the whole of painting" consists of three parts – circumscription, composition and the reception of light (Alberti, 85). He has written down in words and gone into great scientific and mathematical detail of a technique that painters before his time tried hard to master. This contribution was huge to the movement of naturalism, because it made the composition in paintings more realistic with the figures in relation to the space given.

Through the passing on of style, we see another master Fra Angelico (1395-1455), incorporate orthogonals to convey one-point perspective. This technique also adds depth to a painting, using its limited canvas to portray a seemingly large scene/environment. This is evident in his painting, *The Annunciation* (c. 1438-47). He depicts arches and columns receding in size as it reaches the background. He then colors and shades them in a way that makes it seem to fade into the background. He furthers the canvas by adding an open room in this background.

Figure 2: Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, 1450, fresco, 194 x 194cm, Convent of San Marco, Florence

Masaccio's techniques of foreshortening and one-point perspective were a tremendous milestone in art history. Masaccio (1401-1428) was a man who saw the beauty in the simplicity of nature. So as man of his beliefs, he tried his best to paint the beauty of expressions of gestures as closely as he could to the real deal. He achieved his new outlook on naturalism through techniques using perspective (Vasari, 101). He took into notice things like when a figure seemed to be floating in space, or when the rendering of the body didn't portray what it was implying. An aspect of perspective that he used was foreshortening, which rendered figures to convey the illusion of three-dimensional space. The absence of foreshortening in paintings makes the figures flatter and more two dimensional (awkward when you look at the painting from the ground for example), whereas the use of foreshortening gives it depth from multiple angles (if you are positioned at the ground, a foreshortened angel will look like he is literally floating above and in front of you). This style technique gave paintings a three-dimensionality that was evident from different points of views.

Figure 3: Masaccio, *Holy Trinity*, 1424, fresco, 667 x 317cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence

An example of his use of perspective is his *Holy Trinity* painted in 1425 (fig. 3). To the viewers looking at this painting, they are well below the whole scene with Christ's gaze looking down upon them.

This, along with his precise and symmetrical use of orthogonals and flanking figures, brings forth Christ as the main subject with the Holy Father subtly behind him. This use of perspective lets us know the main subject of the scene (content), while rendering it in a point of view that adds to the importance of the content of the piece. If you follow the orthogonals in this painting, it leads to Christ's feet. This painting was located in the church of Santa Maria Novella. The fact that the viewers are led to the feet of Christ, invokes this feeling of guilt, prayer, worship etc.

His use of these techniques served as a foundation for later artists who improved those same techniques, as it is evident when looking at artwork produced towards the end of the renaissance. It shows the artist's perception to making figures look more natural and realistic in a believable space versus looking flat. By understanding this concept, it brought art from the abstracted forms from the medieval ages and antiquity into the modern.

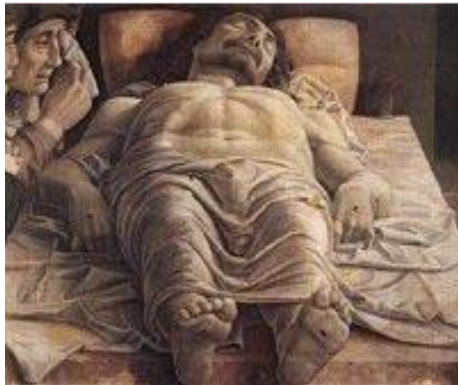Painter, Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), produced one of the first paintings that used a new point of view not seen before. His use of depicting the subject from unusual vantage points (like looking at figures from below) is a new way of looking at subject matter from the point of the viewer (Vasari, 245). His 1480 painting *Lamentation of the Dead Christ* (fig.4), used deep foreshortening which places the viewer at the scene (at Christ's feet), which adds to the viewer's empathy/pathos. This style innovation brought a lively quality to works of art. No longer were figures depicted in a stationary, frontal manner, with no varying poses. We see more realistic body positioning that seems to emulate a kind of movement in the piece (more life-like and relatable).

Figure 4: Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation of Dead Christ*, 1480, tempera, 68 x 81cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

LOOKING AT THE MADONNA ENTHRONED

We can apply all of these characteristics when looking at different *Madonna Enthroned* paintings throughout the Renaissance. We start off with our first rendition by Cimabue in 1285 (fig1.). Mary is seen in her iconic blue robe with the Christ child sitting on her lap. It seems as though they are both floating in space, when it appears they are to be sitting on an elaborate gold throne. Although a little awkward, a sense of depth is somewhat created with the towering of the throne at different heights. The angels flanking Mary and the Christ child are positioned in a way that is not natural, like they are just pasted directly behind and on top of each other. Note that every facial expression appears to be the same; very simple, impersonal, and unmoving. We move on to Giotto's version painted in 1305. Right away, one can notice the changes in his rendition that make the painting look more naturalistic than Cimabue's. We can see that Giotto places Mary and the Christ child in a way more elaborate, realistic, and intricately designed throne. The sense of place of Mary seems as though she is actually sitting on the throne and not 'floating in

Figure 5: Giotto, *Ognissanti Madonna*, 1310, tempera, 325 x 204cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

space'. The angels are also positioned in a more realistic group setting and not directly above one another. We can also see a more natural rendering of light and shadow, especially when looking at Mary's clothing and draperies.

We jump to Fra Angelico's version painted in 1430 (fig. 6). In Fra Angelico's piece, we finally see some emotion and expression on the figure's faces. No longer are the characters' faces uniform in position, color, and expression. A same recurring element is the elaborate throne on which Mary is seated on. In this painting, we get a real sense of environment as we witness the group of angels actually 'huddled' around Mary and the Christ child, seeing the backs and profiles of some of the angels. We also see the use of a more vibrant color palette. Jumping to Giovanni Bellini's rendition in 1478 (fig.7), we get a painting that masters a lot of the said techniques. The geometrical composition of the setting seems very realistic as well as the details of the throne and columns. It almost looks like real carved out marble. The rendering of light and shadow in the dome and background seem realistic in relation to the curvature of the dome and back wall. The figures are also shaded correctly in correspondence to the light source coming from the right side of the painting. The expressions on all of the figures seem to evoke a sense of emotion. The positioning of the figures also seems natural. The body forms and draperies are also drawn to mastery that was not present in the earlier painting. The fabrics seems to cling to the body in a realistic manner. We also see the presence of *sfumato* in this painting (the subtle blending and gradation of tone and color; produces softened outlines).

Figure 6 : Fra Angelico, *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Twelve Angels*, 1430, tempera, 37 x 28cm, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Figure 7: Giovanni Bellini, *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints,* 1478, oil on wood, 467 x 254cm, Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice

Giovanni Battista Cima de Conegliano's 1505 version is a similar version to Bellini's (fig. 8). In his rendition, we see way more attention to detail in the background space (marble patterns look like actual marble). The figures in this painting also show a subtlety in expression that evokes emotion. The draperies, however, seem to be more natural in Bellini's version (looks frumpy and creased versus hanging naturally), whereas the architectural space looks more realistic in Conegliano's. Finally, we look at Lorenzo Lotto's 1516 rendition of *Madonna Enthroned* (fig. 9). In this version, we truly see a mastery of techniques strived for during the Renaissance. His sense of composition is balanced and natural (figure positioning). His use of orthogonals is seen in the floor tiles as well as one-point perspective in the receding columns. Each column is shaded darker and darker as it recedes into the background. The total blacking out of the deep background

Figure 8: Giovanni Battista Cima de Conegliano, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints, 1505,* oil on wood, 206 x 135cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

places a dramatic emphasis on the main figures – Mary and the Christ child. The two angel figures are shown in foreshortened view, where their shadows are casted on the figures below them. Architecturally, the dome and ribbed vault is drawn to a mastery that is not present in any of the other *Madonna Enthroned* paintings. The different facial expressions evoke emotion in a truly awe-inspiring and captivating way. Considering this and the color palette along with his use of s*fumato*, adds a lightness, serenity, and grace to the painting in relation with the event being portrayed. So, when looking at Cimabue's *Madonna Enthroned* next to Lorenzo Lotto's, we can see the progress from abstract to naturalism; the geometric Byzantine style to the realistic humanist styles of the High Renaissance.

Figure 9: Lorenzo Lotto, *Enthroned Madonna with Angels and Saints,* 1516, oil, 268 x 287cm, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, Italy

CONCLUSION

When looking at the different artworks produced during the Renaissance, one can tell the difference between a work created in the Early Renaissance from a work painted during the High Renaissance. Art during the Early Renaissance is usual abstract and idealized with its forms, whereas the High Renaissance depicted their characters in very natural and realistic ways. Art before this time was all rendered in the same style of the Byzantine. Then the Renaissance came and people wanted to make their paintings look more human and realistic, possibly to empathize with their viewers depending on the scene being depicted. This transition from abstract rendering to naturalistic art was a gradual one. Through the innovation and mastery of the styles listed above, art was finally able to shift into the natural and realistic form that we see during the High Renaissance. But it didn't just stop there, artists would take those techniques and keep improving on them. This goes along with the Renaissance theme of constantly trying to learn and improve their ways. With each technique, a distinctive style can be named along with its period. It is evident that with each passing year, decade, or century, these techniques seem to never stop reaching a certain level of mastery, but instead keeps on developing and perfecting itself.

Works Cited:

1. Vasari, Giorgio. *The Lives of the Artists.* Trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella. Oxford University Press, 1991. Print

    - Talks about the lives of the artists and what they have accomplished. This helped with my research, because it also talks about the influences that other artists had on each other (development of a style).

    - Giotto, p15; Cimabue, p7; Brunelleschi, p110; Filippo Lippi, p19; Andrea Mantegna, p242; Masaccio, p101

2. Cyril Mango. *Byzantium: The Empire of the New Rome*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980. Web.
    - Discusses the history of the Byzantine Empire as well as different aspects including art and architecture.

3. Hartt, Frederick, and David G. Wilkins. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture.* Prentice Hall, 2011. Print.

    -Discusses the upcoming of art and architecture during the Italian Renaissance (1250-1600). Also talks about the works of art in relation to the artist and the city/culture the art/artist were brought up in. In relation to my essay, it talked about the many different outcomes of this period in Italy.

4. Alberti, Leon Battista. *On Painting.* Trans. John R. Spencer. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1970. Web.

    -Separated into three books, Alberti discusses the principle of perspective in relation to painting, science, mathematics, and humanism.