How Minute Differences Cause Similar Iconographical Works to Become Pairwise Distinct.

James Richardson  
155520

Dr. Rodney Nevitt

Arth 138  
Monday/ Wednesday 9:30 am - 11:00 am

European paintings from the fifteenth-century generally share much commonality, especially in regards to iconography and purpose, though subtle regional differences can be observed when close attention is paid to paintings. Nearly all paintings from throughout Europe during this period are images which depict either biblical scenes, saints, or other heavenly figures. Though almost all of these biblical images contain Jesus in some shape or form, the most common way in which he is depicted is as a child, generally being held or seated right next to his mother, the Virgin Mary. Paintings influenced by biblical scenes or figures, such as the Madonna and Child or Christ on the Crucifix, are often created for the sole purpose of being a devotional piece in front of the altar at some church or chapel. These aptly named altar pieces are paid for by some donor (either a rich individual or family for their own private chapel) or by an official in some church to be used at their house of worship. These Though many of the paintings all throughout Europe depict many of the same scenes, the way in which these scenes are represented or displayed to the viewer differ among various regions of Europe, specifically between Northern Europe and Italy. Though the overall iconographic aspects of paintings from the fifteenth-century are identical between Northern Europe and Italy, there are subtle differences between the ways these images are depicted and presented to the viewer. In Rogier van der Weyden’s Virgin and Child (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) of 1454 and Antoniazzo Romano’s Virgin and Child with a Donor (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) of 1480 the overall iconography is the same and the realism of the images, emotional state of the individuals depicted in the paintings, medium used to construct the work of art and allusions to other works (either classical or not) must all be considered when comparing the two paintings; the often subtle differences between the two images can often be traced to the hailing regions of the artists and can be observed in other pieces of art originating from that same region at the same period of time.

Both Romano and Weyden’s paintings depict the same image: Virgin Mary with her infant child Jesus Christ. These two are arguably the most significant figures in the Catholic Church as the birth of Christ marked the beginning of the Christian faith and Jesus could not have been born as a human if not for his mother, Mary. Though obviously both of these figures are considered divine (Jesus literally being God and Mary being the highest of saints) only in Romano’s painting do we get any sort of depiction of this. The golden halos around both the Madonna and child’s heads in Romano’s painting show the spiritual significance and purity of the dynamic duo. In Weyden’s image, they are depicted only as humans. Someone completely unfamiliar with the Christian faith could easily assume that Weyden’s painting is of some general mother and her child, while in Romano’s painting, there is an implicit hint at the divine nature of the individuals. In addition, the dove being held by the Christ child in Romano’s painting represents the Holy Spirit and is yet another divine aspect present in Romano’s painting but not Weyden’s. Both of these images were commissioned by some patron to be used as a small devotional piece in a chapel, we see this patron depicted in Romano’s painting. Patrons were more often present in southern European altar pieces from this time, this aligns with the fact that Romano is from Italy.

The most significant set of differences between the two paintings is the amount of realism present. Both of the images try to be somewhat realistic, we see both artists trying to depict realistic individuals in a three dimensional space, but the level of realism in Weyden’s painting is far above that of Romano’s. In Weyden’s painting we see the ‘hyper realism’ common among Northern European painters of this time. The individual strands of the Virgin’s hair can be seen coming from her scalp, the jewels on her head band reflect light shining from above and look as though they are actual gems and not just a painting. The texture of Mary’s hood is also astounding; the fabric has a pattern cut out all throughout and we can see not only her hair though this cut out pattern but also the darkness behind the figures. In addition, the eyes of both Christ and Mary in Weyden’s paintings are hauntingly real. Much attention was paid by the artist to the smallest of details: The finger and toe nails of both the virgin and child are painted precisely as well as the wrinkles in the joints of the virgin’s fingers. By contrast Romano’s painting almost takes the opposite approach. The small patron in the bottom left throws away any initial sense of realism when viewing the image due to his odd proportions and strange placement in front of the virgin. Though not a visual lack of realism per say, the fact that the infant Christ child is standing and seemingly walking is rather unrealistic as children do not begin walking until much past infancy. There are attempts at realism in this painting though: we see The Christ Child’s baby fat bunch up around both his wrists and ankles. To be completely concise, both of these paintings are realistic, but Weyden’s has hyper realism - a level of realism far beyond that of Romano.

Part of the difference between the levels of realism of the two paintings can be attributed to the medium used to create the work. In the case of Weyden’s painting, oil was used as the base of the paint whereas fresco paint was used by Romano in his painting. Oil paint was relatively common in Northern Europe at this time, and not used much in Italy. Oil paint, though taking much longer to dry when applied to whatever surface, has the advantage of allowing the artist to depict significantly more detail, and thus realism, in their paintings.

Beyond just the realism aspect of the depicted paintings, we can see differences in how the figures are represented. In Weyden’s paintings we see the elongated filages of both the child and mother - long slender fingers and toes whereas in Romano’s painting the figures and toes of the the Mother and Child are much shorter and fatter. The slender, delicate features of Weyden’s painting are common among Northern European paintings of this time.

Another common theme in Northern European paintings of this time is the compassion of the Virgin: a way of representing the Virgin Mary in which her emotions (particularly her strong feelings towards her child) are shown very explicitly. This can be seen in another of Rogier van der Weyden’s paintings: The Descent from the Cross (Museo del Prado, Spain), of 1443. In The Descent from the Cross the emotional hardship of the Virgin after viewing her crucified son is so great that she faints and turns pale. The emotional depiction of the Virgin is significantly different in Weyden’s Virgin and Child then in his Descent from the Cross, a face of love and happiness in one and a face of pure tragedy in the other. The deep, deep love she has for her child can be seen strongly on Mary’s face in Weyden’s Virgin and Child - there is no denying the strong emotions she has for the child in her hands. The subtle smile and the way she holds the child so tenderly and so close to her face as well as the content and blissful expression on her face are what depict this ‘compassion’ to the viewer. The image seems to be the capture of a real scene between a mother and her child, not some image obviously created for an audience. This is not the case in Romano’s Virgin and Child with Donor. There doesn’t seem to be much emotion depicted at all in the image, rather the image seems to obviously be constructed for the viewer. This can be seen easily by the fact that both the mother and child are looking directly at the viewer. In Weyden’s painting, the Virgin is in deep thought and not even aware of the viewer but in Romano’s painting the Virgin and Child are posing for the audience.

Though both of the paintings considered are of the same general Iconography and scene, many subtle differences (many of which stem from the different regions which the artists hail from) set them apart from one another. Though it could be argued that the medium is a cause of many of the differences between the two paintings, it is much more likely that the regional differences are the main source of these differences. Weyden seems to be much more concerned with the depicted beauty of his image, specifically in the way that the painting is meant to emulate reality as greatly as is possibly can - a commonality among Northern European painters of this time. This attempt at representing reality can be seen not only in the three dimensional space of the image and the attention to minute details of the Virgin, the child and their garb, but also in the emotional depiction of Mary - an emotional state that any mother with a newborn child could easily relate to. Romano seems to be significantly more concerned with the target audience - the parton depicted in the bottom left of the image. Not only is the patron’s presence in the image an indicator of this, but also the fact that the Virgin and Child are looking directly at the viewer. Though the iconographical aspects of these paintings are almost identical, common differences between Northern European and Italian art of this time such as realism, emotional state, allusion to the antiquity and medium used can be identified and allow the viewer to contrast the two images when close attention is paid.