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Defining the High Renaissance

Artists embody the High Renaissance: Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Giorgione, and Titian. Their fame came not from conquest, but the contemplative activity of painting. Today, the public views the High Renaissance as a gilded portrait gallery, each artist framed and isolated from the world outside. This idealized viewpoint lacks grounding. From the High Renaissance time period, spanning Leonardo's birth in 1452 to Titian's death in 1576, artists worked within the machinations of their society. In content, artists often failed to depict wars, social turmoil, and disease to please patrons and fulfill graceful visions. In truth, the High Renaissance encompasses a myriad of artists often working in contradictory styles. Many artists transgressed boundaries between the Early Renaissance, the High Renaissance, and Mannerism, delineated by later art historians.

Popular culture distills the High Renaissance into select images, and they appear in ways foreign to their original context. The omnipresent *Mona Lisa* smiles on t-shirts and coffee mugs, *David* magnets adorn refrigerators, and Raphael's cherubic, pouting, almond-eyed *putti* accompany the letters *L-o-v-e* on Valentine's Day postage stamps. Few know of the tradition of portraiture that Leonardo confronted, and violated, when he painted *La Gioconda*; few are aware of the political associations of Michelangelo's colossal biblical statue; still fewer know that Raphael's *putti* rest mournfully on a sarcophagus as part of a much larger painting, the *Sistine Madonna.* The twentieth-century philosopher Walter Benjamin notes that in the technological era, art falls subject to mass reproduction. In this way, an individual work of art forfeits the aura it once had

before the mechanical age.

As the modern audience loses sight of the art's original intent, it ironically elevates and celebrates the status of the artist. Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo wield heroic names. On a trip to Italy, a bewildered Mark Twain once quipped that he was relieved to find out Michelangelo was dead. However, the idea of the elevated artist traces a long way back to the Renaissance itself. Certainly, the high-class artist remains a signature of the High Renaissance. Previous to the *Cinquecento*, Early Renaissance artists were rough-hewn craftsmen, not men capable of innovation and even genius. An Cennino Cennini's Craftsman's Handbook, from To be sure, there were celebrated figures from the *Trecento* and the *Quattrocento*— Giotto and Donatello, to name but two. For the most part, however, this Early Renaissance perception held true. Giotto's name is not even on the Arena Chapel contract; in Michelangelo's contracts, his name abounds.

Though celebrity seems tethered to modern times, the practice of idolizing and elevating artists had already begun in the High Renaissance. For modern readers, the definitive book on High Renaissance art remains Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. After all, Vasari, an artist and writer from Arezzo, near Florence, knew Michelangelo and met Titian. At times, Vasari preserves and creates Italian art history. For modern audiences, Vasari has given a name to Giorgione, the mysterious Venetian painter of soft huddled shadows and brooding, lightning flecked skies.

The second edition of *Lives of the Artists*, published in 1568, begins with the life of Cimabue, and concludes with the life of Titian. As he writes biographies of the famous Italian artists, Vasari covers nearly three hundred years of history. He charts that history solely in terms of art—sculpture and painting evolve from primitive Byzantine art to the

fully realized state of Michelangelo. Clearly, Vasari succumbs to prejudices. Vasari's opinions reflect the prevailing artistic attitudes of his day. He maligns Byzantine art by judging it only through current ideas of what art should be. Icons lack *natura* and *grazia*, key elements in the artistic discourse of the High Renaissance.

As the modern critic can discern, this view seems anthropomorphic. Vasari critiques the art without concern for the traditions and the standards of its day. He also disparages Venetian working techniques that shun Florentine *disegno*, revealing his influences and Tuscan biases to the reader. Furthermore, Vasari sees the Renaissance as an era of determined progress, where innovation topped innovation, until art reached the "summit of perfection." In Leonardo, Raphael, and especially Michelangelo, artists do not merely rise in social status and public esteem—they achieve a palpable divinity.

After twentieth-century movements such as expressionism and abstract expressionism, the public perceives art as something personal; the canvas expresses the inner life of the artist. Think Van Gogh or Jackson Pollack. While reading Vasari, one must dispense with this modern notion. Because Vasari transforms his favorite artists into near mythic beings, it is tempting to either romanticize the artist or to disassociate his art from its larger context. When this happens, the myth of the lone genius arises.

No artist is capable of monumental achievement without relying on others—not even Michelangelo. The popular story of how Michelangelo painted the Sistine ceiling by himself after locking his servants out, is probably just that, a story. In his article, *Michelangelo's Assistants in the Sistine Chapel*, Professor William Wallace notes that Michelangelo enlisted the aid of friends and artists in working on the ceiling. Indeed, master artists had workshops, and for any great task, it was common practice to let other

hands do the more menial and preparatory work. Without a doubt, Michelangelo took over the finishing stages of the monumental fresco. The ceiling is his. But the myth of the lone artist exists nonetheless.

There is also a mercantile context in which to place High Renaissance artists. During the High Renaissance, artists were subject to patrons who commissioned the works and predetermined the subject matter. Even heroic artists—those who propelled art into a new era (Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian)—could not work autonomously. Through the work of art, the patron could propagate his or her social status and concerns. Patrons came from positions of power: they were the Church, the court, or the wealthy middle class. Smaller paintings, such as Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo* and Titian's *Venus of Urbino* were made for private residences, while larger works were displayed to a wider audience.

The worldly role of High Renaissance art is all the more clear in large, narrative frescoes. For instance, Raphael's frescoes of the School of Athens, the *Disputa* and *Parnassus*, circa 1510-11, not only express the artist's values and the values of the Renaissance, they serve to give a specific place, the Stanza della Segnatura, an authority worthy of the ancients. Painted with grace and naturalism, and intermingling with contemporary Renaissance figures, Raphael's ancients convey much of what the High Renaissance was about: the rediscovery of classical knowledge, and the expansion upon it. Photographic reproductions of the work reveal all of this very clearly.

Yet take the frescoes in situ. Their greater function then becomes obvious. They give the Vatican a timeless prestige. Popes dwell with long dead theologians, poets and philosophers. Such a statement was achievable only through the lasting medium of visual

art. Other frescoes adorned more accessible churches, where the audience would be less learned. These works can be seen in churches throughout Italy; their frescoes span from the Early Renaissance to later eras. When rendered convincingly, narrative art holds a primary and unparalleled communicative role.

Titian's large work, the *Assumption of the Virgin*, from 1516-1518, displays the concerns of the fresco artist through the medium of oil paint. A crowd gathers beneath the heavens to witness the event, while God flies from above. Titian paints with brilliant colors, and structures the painting vertically, constructing a visual hierarchy that places the mother of God in her rightful place. It's an impossible vision made real and believable through the artist. Though frescoes and altarpieces were painted for an elite patron, they served to propagate Christianity or political values to the masses. Today, art and propaganda do not walk comfortably hand-in-hand. But in the High Renaissance, art could service this role and still maintain its purity.

A paradox emerges during the High Renaissance: artists painted and sculpted with an eye towards the harmonious, even as the world outside fell into strife and chaos. Florence, the cradle of the Renaissance, fought Pisa in an unending war, and suffered from political instability. The corrupt Pope Alexander VI ruled a decadent, chaotic Rome while his murderous son Cesare Borgia conquered Italy. Pope Julius II, the most famous patron of the arts, had to conduct military campaigns to vanquish unwilling city-states. Even wealthy Venice, the cross-waters of European trade for some time, was not immune to strife. The Doge's republic fought vying powers, namely France and the Holy Roman Empire.

The High Renaissance can be idealized simply because it produced so many

masterpieces of art, but the reality was far from idyllic. The Urbino of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* remains the most famous portrayal of an idyllic High Renaissance city-state. It is noteworthy that Castiglione places that serene society in the past; the conversations take place in the memory of the narrator. Beautiful Urbino seems nostalgic, almost fictional. It's crafted and ordered in the manner of a Piero della Francesca.

Art offers a new reality. Perhaps this explains why much of High Renaissance art does not reflect grim social truth—whether for political or religious applications, art may advertise a certain way of life. Social realities consciously emerged in art only on rare occasions, and they usually found form in depictions of war. Yet war offers no better opportunity for propaganda. In many works, brutal images are nevertheless romanticized.

Both poles of High Renaissance life—the beautiful and the ugly—usually cannot be found in its art. But of all the artists, Leonardo exhibits the High Renaissance dichotomy most aptly. Even though he repeatedly painted images of ideal beauty, Leonardo was no idealist. Leonardo worked briefly for Cesare Borgia, and he devised military weapons for the Milanese ruler Ludivico Sforza. He saw firsthand mankind's propensity towards violence and cruelty. In his notebooks, Leonardo noted *la mala natura* of man—the evil nature of man. This more realistic world-view finds visual expression in Leonardo's notebooks, at times, a perverse playground for sketches of grotesque physiognomies. Sketches for the never completed fresco, *The Battle of Anghiari*, also reveal the artist's beliefs. One soldier snarls like an animal baring fangs. The image strikes fearsome but hardly seems glorious, even though the battle scene was to serve as propaganda in the Hall of Five Hundred in Florence. Leonardo hoped to show man as loathsome and primal.

During the Renaissance, artists returned to observing daily life, and then applied

their naturalistic concerns in their work. This statement is true stylistically: it signals the schism between the abstract rhetorical art of the Middle Ages and the more psychological figurative art of the Early Renaissance. For instance, Giotto's biblical figures in the Arena Chapel are real people; he portrays emotion tenderly and painfully, and even sneaks a furtive goodbye kiss between two characters in one of his frescoes. Massaccio's Adam and Eve, meanwhile, stride naked and seem almost unbearably ashamed. He even includes a cripple on the streets in a larger biblical fresco. Yet in terms of content, this claim doesn't entirely find validation in the High Renaissance. Wars, political turmoil, and pestilence plagued Italy during the High Renaissance. The ethereal harmony that Raphael expressed in paintings such as the *Disputa* arguably could not exist further from reality; it remains as removed from the real world as the artist's later, more mystical visions. And Leonardo's greatest paintings, such as the *Mona Lisa* and the *Madonna of the Rocks*, aspire to an otherworldly, almost mystical mystery. With regard to content, High Renaissance artists were never really naturalistic in the strictest sense of the word.

When artists broke free from the bonds of figurative and stylistic naturalism, they ended the High Renaissance as an historical era. Historians typically write that Mannerism overtook High Renaissance art, and that the Mannerists were the bridge between the High Renaissance and the Baroque period. Mannerism derives from the Italian word *maniera*. Its very name implies a deep concern with style. This self-referential concern often overwhelmed observational or rational approaches to art. Forget restraint and harmony—a Mannerist work of art seems convoluted, emotional, and even irrational. Such art augments the increased scales of High Renaissance art, and it eventually breaks free from framing devices, or incorporates them into the pictorial

scheme. An exemplary Mannerist painting would include a mass of figures crowding the picture plane. They are often impossibly contorted in different states of action. The High Renaissance concern for perspective vanishes. Figures stack on top of each other in a manner defiant of realistic space and even one-point perspective vanishing points.

Like a Mannerist painting, history often seems distorted, complex, and unclear. In truth, the boundary between High Renaissance and Mannerist art remains far from linear. Historians have imposed these boundaries after the fact: the Middle Ages gives way to the Early Renaissance, the Early Renaissance turns into the High Renaissance, and then the High Renaissance is supplanted by Mannerism, which in turn gives way to the Baroque. Because people make history, names have come to be attached with each new era. Cimabue was the first Early Renaissance artist; Leonardo, the first High Renaissance artist.

By checking biographical dates, one sees that this division is made more for convenience than accuracy. Andrea Mantegna, a northern painter from the Quattrocento, still worked well into the High Renaissance. His works were precious and archaeological in detail, but are not considered to be products of the High Renaissance. He did not die until 1506, after High Renaissance masterpieces such as the *Mona Lisa* and the *David* had been completed in Florence. Titian is considered a High Renaissance artist—if perhaps the last High Renaissance artist. Yet Titian did not die until 1576, a date close to the Baroque period. Mannerist artists were in full production decades before Titian finally settled his paintbrush.

Parmigianino's iconic Mannerist painting, *Madonna and Child with Angels*, now known as the *Madonna of the Long Neck* (for obvious reasons), dates from 1534-1540,

about forty years before Titian died. Pontormo—he of the bright colors and of the elongated, anatomically impossible bodies— produced Mannerist works even earlier than that. His *Entombment*, a Mannerist painting if there ever was one, dates to the 1520's.

The confusion only increases upon considering Raphael and Michelangelo. These two artists beautifully embody the High Renaissance, but they also could be considered the first Mannerist artists. In fact, Roman Mannerists began their studies with these two artists, and the Mannerists spread throughout Italy after the sack of Rome in 1527. Shortly after he finished the High Renaissance frescoes in the *Stanza della Segnatura*, Raphael painted frescoes in two other Vatican rooms, the *Stanza dell'Eliodoro* and the *Stanza dell'Incendio*.

Two of these frescoes, the *Expulsion of Attila*, from 1513-1514, and the *Fire in the Borgo*, look exactly like Mannerist works. *Expulsion of Attila* is a dense, crowded war scene or rearing horses and soldiers. It's vast and complicated, and has no overall focus—the eye sweeps over the grandiose picture plane. Classical harmony has vanished. As Frederick Hartt writes in *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, Rubens could have painted this fresco. *Fire in the Borgo* showcases a similar pictorial complexity, and it has the irrational quality of many Mannerist works. A nude male escapes from the burning building by scaling a wall that is not much taller than him, even though there is an opening right next to him, where others escape. Like all good Mannerists, Raphael seems to show off his figurative skills through exaggeration. The nude figures evidence an articulated musculature, even the old man carried out of the burning building. They seem rhetorical and out of place rather than naturalistic. The disciples of Raphael would continue this stylistic trend, as seen in Giulio Romano's large frescoes.

Without a doubt, Michelangelo influenced Raphael. Most critics cite the large, frameless *Last Judgment*, painted in 1536-1541, while many other Mannerists were working, as Michelangelo's definitive Mannerist work. The picture plane is not overly concerned with depicting realistic space. Instead it holds a mass of figures, who have all attained heroic if exaggerated anatomical proportions. But Michelangelo probably did not consciously work within any stylistic movement. After all, he influenced the Mannerists, not the other way around. Professor Wallace even argues that the Sistine chapel ceiling, painted from 1508-1512, shows more Mannerist tendencies than the *Last Judgment*. The ceiling epitomizes the High Renaissance, and in its framing, the individual scenes achieve a classical clarity of vision. But Michelangelo distorts the anatomy of his figures to achieve perspective effects. He also subtly breaks his figures from their architectonic, *tromp l'oliel* frames. Beyond that, the ceiling must be viewed in its entirety—at a first look, it appears overwhelming and unified. The viewer is forced to look multitudinous directions before focusing on any one scene. The Florentine Academy was founded off of many of the principles that Michelangelo explored on the Sistine Ceiling.

Vasari was right: artists like Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo and Titian were innovative geniuses who set the High Renaissance apart from other eras. Today, the High Renaissance has disseminated to the public only through select images. By mechanical and commercial reproduction, these images lose their unique aura. They do not reveal to their audience the original context from which they were produced; their afterlife does not reflect their life. High Renaissance artists are also famous, and like their art, they are perceived as autonomous from the larger social structures of their era.

These artists, though, had to rely on wealthy patrons, who in turn could augment

their power through the propagandistic benefits of art. Like any time period in history, the High Renaissance exhibited both the good and the bad of human nature. Because the art that came from Florence, Rome, and Venice is so timeless in its beauty, the social ailments of the High Renaissance often fail to captivate the imagination. Mannerism shows less classicism and harmony—mankind seems irrational and at times brutal. Yet upon a closer look, the boundaries between the High Renaissance and the Mannerist period blur and seem arbitrary. One cannot understand the Italian High Renaissance by isolating portraits of its artists. For a more realistic picture, these artists belong together in a single, nuanced panorama.