An Age of “Renaissance”? 

Week 4 - Lecture 1 

29 September 2004 

From Middle Ages to “Renaissance”: 
the BODY (and “NATURE” in general) 
In other words: not “Super-natural” 

Gothic: Measure of all things is super-human 

Gothic vs. Renaissance Architecture: 
Who or What is the measure of all things? 

Central Renaissance concept: 
HUMANISM 
“Man is the measure of all things.” 
• Michelangelo, David 
• 1486: Pico della Mirandola, Oration on the Dignity of Man 
• 1492: Columbus 
• 1466-1536: Erasmus of Rotterdam
Why Italy?

NB: Duomo in Florence: recovery of the ancient Roman dome

Why Italy???

A. “Italy” is a peninsula! The recovery of trade [after “barbarian invasions”] begins in Italy
(Francis of Assisi: father cloth merchant; poverty vs. new money)

B. “Italy” --- not a “nation”
Rather: a collection of independent city-states

- Autonomous and independent:
  - Holy Roman Emperor vs. Roman Pope
  - power vacuum: organize “communes”
- Competition between city-states
  - 1250-1400: intense wars
  - Peace of Lodi: 1454-1494
  - 1494: foreign domination; Machiavelli

C. Primarily urban: city-states [“republics”
 küçükres publicum: “public thing”]
Tuscany: 26% urban; England 10% urban
STATUS “social capital” --- not in LAND… rather, in precious goods (e.g., “art”)
Urban CULTURE = ideas and values

Retro vs. Metro America

Urban values: Humanism

- Studia Humanitatis: the art of persuasion
  - grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history, eloquence

- Reverse of Medieval Essentialism:
  - Theology / “eternal values” are useless for “citizen” in a republic
  - Needed: persuasion about the here and now

Cicero, not Airstotle!!!

“Renaissance” thinkers are not employed by universities; not monks (like Aquinas)

- Subject matter: not Thomism: e.g., “whether created intellect needs light in order to see God’s essence”?

- Rather: how ought I to live???
  - “Humanist”
  - Realist
  - Existential
  - 3-dimensional i.e., temporal, not “eternal”

What is the cultural meaning of “Humanism” in these city-states?

- Ideology to fit needs of urban ruling classes

- Virtue = power, wealth

- Rhetoric: “We are Republicans [humanists] against despots [those old essentialists].”
  - “compassionate conservatives”!

- Reality: one-family oligarchies [Medici]

Conclusions: Renaissance humanist --- POST-PLAGUE

Humanist skepticism about knowing eternal/certain/absolute / infallible
Rather: temporal / provisional / empirical / subject to further “dialogue” and observation
Parallel Example:
Angkor
Head of Jayavarman VII
[Cambodia, late 12th-early 13th c.]

8th Century

Move toward a humanist aesthetic: an appeal to legitimate your rule.
“We are truly humanistic rulers!”

8th c. ---> 12th/13th c
Re-naissance (“natus” = birth: nation)
= re-birth: a “rebirth of antiquity”
“Middle Ages” --- an in-between time
Raphael [1483-1520], “School of Athens”

Why appeal to antiquity?
Answer: for legitimation
The “Humanists” are upstarts!!! They’re doing something new and spinning it as the truly “old” and traditional thing
These people are outsiders out-of-town; upwardly mobile; lawyers the invention of “good taste” [“distinction” “new nobility!”]
Intellectual sub-class: not university people
Universitas: praise Imperial Rome
Humanitas: praise Republican Rome

Appeal to antiquity (cf. Fortuna): justify “new” humanism
[always be suspicious of “re-” ideologies!]
I. The shift from “hieratic” representations to “realist” ones

“Post Plague:
A passion for “realism”:
eyes turned to this world.

“What’s outside Pleasantville?”

• Bud: “There are some places that the road doesn’t go in a circle. There are some places that the road keeps going… Like the mighty Mississippi.”
• Renaissance: The shift from a world of “circles” [eternal / stylized / types] to a world of “lines” [historical / realist / narrative — stories]

“Hieratic”:

“Hieratic” = “priestly”:
stylized forms
— predictable, “eternal” poses

Frontal portraits of sacred figures

Two-dimensional: “flat”; w/o “depth”...
— lack of Renaissance “perspective” “realism”
— avoid representing God’s creation: idolatry

Roman Empire—> Byzantine Empire

Roman Empire

Byzantine Empire

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Portrait: Roman Philosopher, 400s — Icon: Christ, 700s
Hieratic / flat = deepest reality is beyond what is seen

NB: EYES in the hieratic style:
a window on to the eternal world behind the eyes...
“realism” only captures the surface; the reality lies deep within

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Romanesque art (“early” medievalism):
do not try to represent “reality” in a “realistic” way;
the thing itself [res; reality] cannot be seen

A World of Unchanging Order
[A world before Plague and Fortuna]
Two Davids
1295 -- 1425

David and Goliath, from Prayer Book of Philip the Fair, 1295

Ideological point:

David is a king <<<just like the owner of the prayer-book, Philip the Fair>>>
Ideological point: what is most human is most divine.

- SUBJECT
MATTER: Still mainly religious / biblical
  - but now in “realist” [not “hieratic”] poses
  - not “types” but now human actors in a temporal / dramatic / historical world

New: “pagan” subject matter as well -- Greek / Roman classical literature, e.g. “Birth of Venus”
  NB: still “eternal”… but not solely Xtn

What are the artistic devices used to convey a sense of “realism”???
e.g., in Pleasantville, move from b/w to color symbolizes introduction of unpredictability [basketball games], love, sexuality, suffering, death]

• From 2 dimensions to 3 dimensions:
  – 1) Architecture and landscape: use of perspective
  – 2) Light and dark gives volume: use of chiaroscuro
    • Italian: chiaro, "light"; scuro, "dark"
  – 3) Balance and weight in sculpture: contrapposto [“opposite”]
Renaissance: “realist” perspective. The “real” is here-and-now --- not somewhere beyond the eyes...

Gothic ---> Renaissance
Hieratic ---> Humanist
“3-dimensional realism”

Light and dark gives volume: **chiaroscuro**

“The Deposition of Christ,” Caravaggio
NB: he is looking at the viewer, but it is not *hieratic* — not “eternal”… rather, thoroughly historical: he is groaning under the weight and filled with horror at lifting Christ’s dead body; he invites you into his horror and awful task.

CHIAROSCHURO —

Allows for human *drama*, for the depiction of *suffering*, even of the Divinity; for the tragic moments of human history

CONTRAPPOSTO [*“opposite”*] = Balance and weight in sculpture

• Allows for theater / drama / representations of action: battles; suffering; *deposition* = in short, for human *history*
• RECAP: From 2 dimensions to 3 dimensions:
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    ["opposite"]

CAUTION!! DO NOT BELIEVE THEIR RHETORIC!!! i.e.,” overcoming the “dark ages” and returning to the glory of Greece / Rome
Remember: “The function of ideology is to cover origins…
And all origins are bloody.”

Don’t think of history in linear terms of “progress” ...

Renaissance perspectivism -- 20th-c. cubism

Picasso has more in common with hieratic than with perspective!

De Kooning
abstract expressionist

“Dark Ages” ---> “Re-birth”??
Don’t think in linear terms of “progress”; think in terms of meaning / significance / legitimation
Introduction to the
Italian Renaissance
O’Neill Media N 6915 .I58 1999