

Chapter 22

BEAUTY, SCIENCE, AND SPIRIT IN ITALIAN ART

The High Renaissance and Mannerism

Summary:

Sixteenth century Italy saw the Protestant revolt against the Papacy and the practices of the Church that were corrupt. The abusive practice of selling church positions, indulgences (pardons for sins committed) and the lavish lifestyles of the Church hierarchy caused dissent within the ranks. The Reformation or reform movement begun by Martin Luther resulted in a complete break with Rome and the formation of the Protestant sects, for example, Lutherans and Calvinists.

In addition to the religious revolt, the Papacy was also combating its loss of secular power as well. The European monarchies resented papal interference in the affairs of their respective countries. The list of monarchs and countries, which broke with Rome, had to produce a proactive response from the papacy.

The Council of Trent (1545-63) initiated reforms, which countermanded many of the Protestant issues and the Council reviewed the more controversial Church doctrines, but still supporting many. The Society of Jesus (Jesuits) founded in 1540, was very effective in launching a campaign to reassert the power of the papacy. The order established numerous schools and sent missionaries abroad to convert the “pagans”.

The Jesuits were very effective in converting the indigenous populations, which were part of the colonies established in the Americas, Asia and Africa. This was the intellectual reaction of the papacy to the Protestant Reformation; *the visual reaction was the prominence of papal commissions that visually defined the Church’s position as spiritual leader.* These commissions employed many of the 16th century artists who took the developments of the 15th century artists to a fully matured style. Their work not only glorified the Church; but it also created an image of the artist as almost godlike. This was especially true of the work of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian. They came to exemplify the High Renaissance, work that was created with such authority and power that later generations came to use them as instructive tools in gaining an understanding of art and how the performance of art should be engaged.

I. Lecture Model

1) Leonardo said painting could give a more complete description of nature, and he did so by synthesizing the developments of the 15th century. Leonardo da Vinci is credited with making the first monumental statement of the High Renaissance.



22-03

a, b LEONARDO DA VINCI, Last Supper (top, uncleaned; bottom, cleaned), ca. 1495-1498. Fresco (oil and tempera on plaster), 29' 10" x 13' 9". Refectory, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan. Dramatic narrative

In his *Last Supper* c.1495-98 (22-3), the artist created the scene of the Last Supper based on the moment Christ tells his disciples of the coming betrayal.

- This is one of the most powerful moments in the context of Christianity, for it is this event that will lead to salvation.
- Leonardo has removed the melodrama from the scene and has, instead, replaced it with the gravity of drama and passion.
- He has fused this tense moment with a deep psychological meaning by presenting the Apostles in groups of three gathered on either side of the central figure of Christ. He has placed the betrayer, Judas, in close proximity to Christ.
- Judas is on the right side of Christ, seated with Peter and John. No longer is Judas separated from the group and clearly defined by that separation as in Castagno's version (21-37).



- Because of his sin of betrayal, Leonardo, has placed Judas in the shadow, leaning back and not asking, according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, "Lord, is it I?" Leonardo adds more **psychological drama** to the scene by showing Judas's lack of participation. He alone is neither gesturing nor questioning.
- The work was painted in the refectory of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan and Leonardo used the **symbolism of numbers** to augment the impact of this fresco.
- He has *created four groups of three centered on the pivotal figure of Christ*. **The significance of three is the Trinity; four represents the number of the gospels and the Cardinal Virtues.**
- An even deeper meaning is created for the numbers by adding and multiplying, **four plus three equals seven, seven also represents the number of joys and sorrows of the Virgin and four times three equals twelve, the number of the Apostles.**
- This spiritual synthesis can also be related to the **secular life cycle**: *seven refers the days of the week, twelve refers to the months of the year and the hours of*

day and night, all revolving around the central figure of Christ, the light of the world.

■ The perspective focus centers on Christ backed by the second window; Christ is also the second person of the Trinity.

■ Leonardo unified his interest in empirical reality and the mathematical ordering of space into this single context. He tied both the spiritual and the temporal worlds together in this single work, thus synthesizing the developments of the 15th century and creating a truly mature and focused work that shows idea and reality merged into a grand and powerful concept.



22-04 LEONARDO DA VINCI, Mona Lisa, ca. 1503-1505. Oil on wood, approx. 2' 6" x 1' 9". Louvre, Paris. (Enigmatic, spatial)



22-01 LEONARDO DA VINCI, Virgin of the Rocks, ca. 1485. Oil on wood (transferred to canvas), approx. 6' 3" x 3' 7". Louvre, Paris.



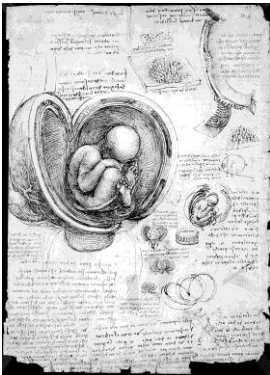
22-02 LEONARDO DA VINCI, cartoon for Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and the Infant Saint John, ca. 1505-1507. Charcoal heightened with white on brown paper

Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* c.1485 (22-1) sets the stage for the coming event.

■ He has included the two infants, Christ and John the Baptist, cousins, as protagonist and precursor.

■ He has unified them with the gesture of the Virgin tenderly embracing the young Baptist and raising her hand in protection over the head of her son.

- Leonardo has illustrated the text of Christianity by showing the principle to the prophecy and the witness; the angel in the right foreground is inviting the viewers to become witnesses as well.
- Leonardo uses a pyramidal shape to also hint at the Trinity, the triangle was a Medieval symbol for the Trinity, three sides equal in one.
- The background landscape becomes an atmospheric environment for the coming events, John's beheading and Christ's crucifixion. Leonardo uses chiaroscuro to create a landscape that is at once shadowed and expressive.
- But he transforms this landscape from an ethereal world into a landscape that has atmosphere, the interplay of light and shade as he observed that phenomenon.
- Leonardo's scientific studies indicate a wide and diverse range of interests.



He devoted his later years to illustration, for example in anatomical rendering, *Embryo in the Womb* c.1510 (22-5). **While this drawing is not accurate by today's standards it does demonstrate the quality of Leonardo's mind and ability not only to the pure science of observation but also rendering that observation in recognizable formats.**

In another series of anatomical studies, bust in profile, body in movement and horse, *Leonardo has combined these drawings on one page, showing the relationships between musculatures, movements and the differences between animal motion and human motion.*



22-09 MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI, David, 1501-1504. Marble, 13' 5" high. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.

A young Michelangelo worked in Florence and created for that city a powerful symbol in his rendition of the young David 1501-04 (22-9).

Michelangelo's vision of the Biblical hero went beyond the work of either **Donatello (21-23)** or **Verrocchio (21-24)**.



- Michelangelo married the two 15th century visions into a powerful and stunning exemplar of not only a defiant Florence, but also of the 16th century.
- Michelangelo's David shows a powerful young male, confronting the Philistines, unafraid.
- Michelangelo has created a magnificently naked male warrior, unlike Donatello's version, a naked adolescent.
- He has gone beyond Verrocchio's David, by showing him naked and armed, not with a sword, but with the simple slingshot; Michelangelo removed David from the position of captain of the army and returned him to the position of shepherd, maintaining a closer affinity with the Old Testament.
- This David looks steadily into the distance confronting the enemy, poised and ready for action.
- This figure also illustrates Michelangelo's lifelong fascination with the male body, the gradations of muscle and the stretch of taut skin over a defined body showing volume and mass, the pure physicality of the form.

This work not only defined Florence; but it also brought Michelangelo to the attention of the warrior pope, Julius II. The shift of artistic development went from Florence to Rome and the Papacy became the primary patron. Pope Julius II invited many of the

most prominent artists to Rome to create the necessary visual images to combat the Protestant Reformation. Sadly Leonardo was not among those artists invited to work for the Papacy, Francis I invited him to France and there he died in 1519. However, Michelangelo came to Rome and Julius II commissioned him to begin work on the pontiff's tomb. The initial design was monumental. However, before the project could be completed, Julius interrupted Michelangelo's work, perhaps due to budgetary constraints, and had him work on the Sistine Chapel.



22-13 MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI, ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Rome, Italy, 1508-1512. Fresco, approx. 128' x 45'.



A very reluctant Michelangelo began the ceiling frescoes in 1508 (22-13) and completing them in 1512.

This work created a synthesis of Church doctrine with humanist interpretation; Michelangelo combined the reality of humanism with the spirituality of religion. He created a visual document that stated unequivocally the value of images not only as teaching tools but also as vehicles for religious propaganda.

His work created a vision of Genesis which could be realized and understood, for



example the *Creation of Adam* (22-14).

In this detail from the ceiling, Michelangelo has depicted the event with controlled drama and passion.

- On the left appears an Adam not yet given the breadth of life, streaming forth from the right comes a powerful figure of God. Michelangelo has chosen to represent that moment when life is conceived, by just a touch of the divine finger.
- Adam's hand is stretched across his knee limp and lifeless, while God's hand is shown as brimming with life, the divine finger is flexed and tense with the divine power.
- Enclosed in the divine embrace, is a naked female, perhaps Eve. She appears to be watching this event.
- Michelangelo has tied both figures together not only within the context of the religious event but also by the symmetry of the image.
- Adam reclines on the green surface of land, while God is enclosed in billowing red drapery, forming a circle. This symbol takes on multiple meanings; it is an icon for the infinite presence of God, no beginning and no end. *It also is a reference to the balance and harmony as it relates to the divine architect, the creator, in this case the creator of Adam.*
- If recent scholarship proves correct and the female is the Virgin, then the circle takes on even more significant value. The circle encloses the divine sequence of creation, birth, sin, salvation and redemption, which complements the humanism prevailing in Rome.

In keeping with this prevailing humanism, Julius II employed another artist to show that sentiment. Raphael was commissioned to paint the papal apartments. He created for one of the rooms (stanza) a document that was to be the summation of understanding in the 16th century.



The Philosophy (School of Athens) 1509-11 (22-17), focuses attention on the rediscovery of the ancient philosophers and thinkers.

Raphael has created a text to show both Plato and Aristotle conversing in harmony, sharing their knowledge and wisdom.

- Raphael shows Plato pointing up, indicating wisdom and knowledge come from above. Aristotle points down indicating that knowledge and wisdom are tied to experience.
- It could be suggested that these two philosophers could also be pointing to the divine for inspiration and the earth to tie that knowledge to humanity. It could also

be suggested that the gesture refers to the two roles within Rome at this time as well, spiritual and temporal.

- Raphael has used the quiet and eloquent gestures and postures to create an image of calm discourse. He has used psychological insights to create a tableau, which illustrates the intellectual atmosphere of contemporary Rome.

- The dialog among the various groups shows the excitement and passion learning and education brings.

- He has included his self-portrait (in the right foreground) among the students leaning from the master, Euclid, thought to be a portrait of Bramante.

- He has placed Michelangelo seated in the left foreground as Heraclitus, brooding.

- It is thought the figure of Plato is Leonardo, receiving the highest accolade from Raphael.

- Raphael has tied this work together using the double arches behind the central figures, creating two halves.

- He focuses the viewer's eye on the long barrel vault above Plato and Aristotle, further defining the space.

- It could also be suggested the three windows at the top of the larger arch represent the Trinity.

- Further focusing the efforts of the Church on combining humanism and religion into a coherent unified concept.

- By depicting the philosophers and mathematicians in the papal apartments, Raphael was illustrating the conviction of Julius II.

- He wanted Rome to re-emerge as mighty as ancient Rome once was. This reconciliation of concepts into a coherent and rational image was the triumph Raphael achieved.

- He not only reconciled the ancient philosophers, but he also reconciled paganism with Christianity. It could be argued that this work would also show the benefits of reconciliation for those feuding monarchs and Protestants who have left the Church as well.

In Venice artists were also synthesizing the elements from the fifteenth century into the sixteenth century.



Giovanni Bellini in his *Feast of the Gods* 1514 (22-32) is using an Arcadian background to create the halcyon days of the gods. Bellini has taken the themes of love and represented them as very human pastimes, juxtaposing the couples with attendants in a unified whole. Neptune (portrait of Alfonso d'Este) and a wood nymph are seated

behind the large bowl of fruit (grapes and apples) suggest a prelude to the physical aspects of love, Ceres and Apollo to the right are, perhaps, enjoying the quiet time after the completion of physical love. Priapus and the sleeping nymph, Lotis, suggest the carnal aspects of love, attendants and gods enjoying a day of revelry surround all. The background landscape was painted by Giorgione creating a harmonious balance to the foreground figures. Bellini has unified the whole text of this work by using light, shadow and clear color. The sensuousness of the work does not fall into the salacious, it becomes a visually satisfying image which falls into the commission range Alfonso d'Este wanted for his Camerino d'Alabastro, a room which was to present classical subject matter in more earthy terms.



Giorgione's painting *Pastoral Symphony* c.1508 (22-33) is a work that falls into the Venetian vocabulary very well. He has created a sensuous work reflecting a mood and amplified by the contrasts of textures, even more pronounced than Bellini's work.

In

the foreground are two naked women, drapery winding around their bodies emphasizing

the texture of their skin. In the immediate background are two men, one a Venetian

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 courtier dressed in velvet and playing a lute. The other man is perhaps a shepherd, his homespun and a bare foot indicates a rustic. The texture of the full red velvet sleeve draws our eye to second male and it also emphasizes the nakedness of the two women. The tactility of the sleeve offers a contrasting tactility against the naked flesh of the women. The ambiguity of the work becomes more conspicuous when it becomes apparent neither couple is communicating with the other couple. The one woman, whose

back is to the viewer, seems to be participating in the musical moment, but is she? The landscape offers a quiet and tranquil setting for the concert but the women add a note of

evocative interruption. The women do not interrupt the discourse of the men, but they do

create a question for the viewer. The soft light, a hallmark of Venetian painting, unites the entire composition.



Titian, the most recognized Venetian, was the undisputed leader in Venetian art. His work on the *Assumption of the Virgin* (22-35) established his reputation as the premier painter in Venice. The three levels represented in the work show a clear understanding of the dogma, as the Franciscans (especially devoted to the Virgin) perceived it. The focal point of the composition is the Virgin as she rises on a cloud held

aloft by angels, all preparing her way for a triumphant entry into heaven. The curving pattern that is augmented by the angels and clouds creates the illusion of a vehicle ascending and above her with open arms emphasized by the spreading cloak is God waiting to receive her. In a contrasting half circle of heavenly angels, which completes the circle of the rising Virgin and angels, Titian has united this work into a completely unified document. The miracle of her Immaculate Conception is ratified by her miraculous assumption into heaven. Below her are the Apostles, witnessing this event with joy and wonder. The monumentality of the theme is predicated on the size of the work. Titian has created a work which does not diminish or disappear in the nave of the

church (Sta. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari). It becomes the focal point of the altar and draws

attention to the miracle. It dominates the interior but does not overwhelm it.



In another

work Titian creates a tableau which responds to the religious, political and familial motivations of the patron. Jacopo Pesaro, captain of the papal forces, which defeated the

Turks in 1502, gratefully commissioned from Titian the *Madonna of the Pesaro Family* (22-36). This work documents his victory and his faith as well as his family. Jacopo kneels before the Virgin and Child and is introduced to her by St. Peter; identified as Peter by his key standing upright on the first step. Behind him is a Turkish prisoner, acknowledging his defeat and witnessing the miracle of Jacopo's faith. To the right of the throne are the male members of the Pesaro family, St. Francis introduces them to the

Child. In the right foreground is one small Pesaro looking out and drawing the viewer into this event. We witness the importance and the stature of Jacopo and his family. In this painting Titian has once again used a monumental setting to create a scene that is dramatic and powerful. The signs and symbols tie the work together. The upright key on

the first step alludes to the power of the Church, not only as the spiritual representative of

God but also as a military power that caused the Turkish defeat on Santa Maura. The positioning of the key almost suggests that Jacopo has gained entry into heaven by his military campaigning for Pope Alexander VI.

2) Mannerism took the devices developed by Michelangelo and Titian and made them even more staged and contrived. Two works by Parmigianino and Bronzino illustrate this contrivance and sleek designs that were favored by the Mannerists.



In the *Madonna with the Long Neck* c.1535 (22-43) Parmigianino has refined this work into ornamental beauty. The sleeping Christ Child evokes his later death, but the posed position suggests artificiality that conflicts with the theme. The five figures that stand next to the Madonna are also cryptic and ambiguous; their various states of undress create a tension that again conflicts with the theme. It has been suggested that one of the five figures is a self-portrait. The dark-haired youth staring out at the viewer has been tentatively identified as Parmigianino. The ambiguity and tension this work creates falls within the Mannerist lexicon. The column behind the Virgin and Child echoes her

attenuated figure and artificial elegance. It also symbolizes the pillar or whipping post Christ was tied to during his Passion. The atmosphere, which permeates this work, creates an enigma, an elegant and artificial mystery.



In Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time (Exposure of Luxury)* c.1546 (22-44), the artist has selected a number of symbols and signs to create an enigmatic work. Cosimo I de' Medici commissioned this work as a gift for Francis I of France. The work

also functions as a response to the Counter-Reformation. This work becomes the validation of the repudiation of "Luxury". Yet Bronzino created an exaggerated and sleek work which shows both his ability to express texture and a theme which borders on

the salacious. The starkly cold figures of Venus and Cupid create a licentious couple. Bronzino hints at the incestuous nature of their play, by having Time and Truth draw back the cold blue curtain exposing their activity. Again the artist has used analogy and allegory to create a response to the Counter-Reformation; it can be suggested that this foursome could represent the folly of both the Church and the reformers (Protestants).

A

lack of honesty on both sides contributes to the folly of both sides refusing to follow the

path to God's love. Cupid and Venus could be suggested to represent both sides arguing

about the same ideal and the folly of the Church and the Protestants attaching to God the

falseness of insincere love. Envy, the old hag, and Fraud, with a girl's face on a monster's body also enjoins the viewer to be careful. The power of the false and insincere can be packaged in beauty but remains shallow. The Mannerist vocabulary created a work which could respond to the philosophical arguments of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, but it could also disguise these arguments in a work which seems to be moralistic yet is deliberately and skillfully lascivious.



Sofonisba Anguissola, a northern Italian artist who was given the opportunity by her father to train under a practicing artist in Cremona, has created an intimate view into family life. In *Portrait of the Artist's Sisters and Brother* c.1555 (22-46) Sofonisba has shed the formal canon for portraits and given us a comfortable picture of two of her sisters and her brother.



The formality of the Renaissance portrait can be seen in Bronzino's *Portrait of a Young Man* c.1530s (22-45), the posed and punctilious facial expression of the young man does not appear in Sofonisba's presentation of her sisters and brother. Only one sister is confronting the viewer while her other sister and brother stare off into the distance. The slight smiles her sisters share suggest an awareness that is absent in other Renaissance portraits (22-45).

3) Italian architecture in the 16th century synthesized the classical elements into an architectural vocabulary, which was used to promote not only religious ideals but also social and political statements.



Bramante's Tempietto (22-8) becomes a visual statement reporting on the climate of the times. Bramante has tied into one small structure the classical attributes of harmony and balance. The Tempietto becomes the exemplar for 16th century architecture. The balance of the simplicity of design with the classical elements has created a truly Renaissance structure; Bramante focused on the dynamics of the structure to represent the religious theme. It was to hallmark the actual site or spot of St. Peter's crucifixion. This work conforms to the dictates of the period and the intellectual focus of the period as well. The circle represents the infinite love of God as well as the infinity of God. This work becomes the model for the sixteenth century architect to pursue, synthesizing the classical past with the religious focus of the present. Bramante used the circular design and doric capitals to focus the attention on the building itself. It becomes, in the Greek sense, a piece of sculpture. The spacing of the columns and the interior pilasters create a rhythm which is maintained by the play of light and shadow in the facade. The movement of light across the surface brings the relationship of form and space into the forefront and creates a unity between the spiritual nature of the building and the intellectual perfection of its presentation.



That same pursuit of perfection has been realized in the work Michelangelo did

for St. Peter's (22-29). The basilica was to be the visible answer for Christendom; it was to become the hallmark church, which focused the attention of the faithful on Rome. Not only was the church to function as a church (a place for religious services), it was also to function as a political statement on the place of the papacy in the political environment of sixteenth century Europe. The northwest view of St. Peter's illustrates the powerful statement this structure has become. The monumental Corinthian pilasters create a vertical thrust that is balanced by the dome which appears to rise from the base rather than resting on it. Even though the shape of the dome does not conform to Michelangelo's original design, the ogival shape does create a more stable image. That image was to be promoted during the period to offset the criticisms the Church was undergoing. The structure and the purpose of St. Peter's was to become a visual statement in support of the Church. The symbology of the structure becomes a proclamation for the Church as the answer to salvation. The past excesses can be ignored because of the grandeur of St. Peter's or so the papacy wanted the faithful to believe. Nevertheless, St. Peter's does present a most impressive vision.

Resources:

Videotapes

Last Supper in New York 53 min. BVL10949 \$129

Leonardo 30 min. BVL7789 \$89.95

Titian 33min. BVL7796 \$89.95

Light and Liberty: Renaissance Art in Venice 60 min. BVL11330 \$149.95

Apocalypse: The Reinvention of Christian Art 60 min. BVL11329 \$149.95

The End of the Renaissance? 60 min. BVL11331 \$149.95

Films for the Humanities

1-800-257-5126

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<http://www.films.com>

Books

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Zuffi, Stefano. *Art in Venice*. New York: H. N. Abrams, 1999.

Web Resources

<http://www.christusrex.org/www1/sistine/0-Tour.html>

<http://www.italyberguide.com/History/popes/16th.htm>