5.3: Reading: Defining Art from the Medieval Period to Renaissance

Medieval to Renaissance

We begin by considering the production and consumption of art from the Crusades through to the period of the Catholic Reformation. The focus is on art in medieval and Renaissance Christendom, but this does not imply that Europe was insular during this period. The period witnessed the slow erosion of the crusader states in the Holy Land, finally relinquished in 1291, and of the Greek Byzantine world until Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453. Columbus made his voyage to the Americas in 1492. Medieval Christendom was well aware of its neighbors. Trade, diplomacy, and conquest connected Christendom to the wider world, which in turn had an impact on art.

Any notion of the humble medieval artist oblivious to anything beyond his own immediate environment must be dispelled. Artists and patrons were well aware of artistic developments in other countries. Artists travelled both within and between countries and on occasion even between continents. Such mobility was facilitated by the network of European courts, which were instrumental in the rapid spread of Italian Renaissance art. Europe-wide frameworks of philosophical and theological thought, reaching back to antiquity and governing religious art, applied – albeit with regional variations – throughout Europe.

Art, Visual Culture, and Skill

The term ‘visual culture’ is used here in preference to ‘art’ for the fundamental reason that the arts before 1600 were wide-ranging, including media today that we might deem within the realm of craft and not fine art. The Latin word ‘ars’ signified skilled work; it did not mean art as we might understand it today, but a craft activity demanding a high level of technical ability, including tapestry weaving, goldsmith’s work, and embroidery. Literary statements of what constituted the arts during the medieval period are rare, particularly in northern Europe, but proliferate in the Renaissance. Giorgio
Vasari (1511–74), the biographer of Italian artists, claimed in his famous book *Le vite de’ più eccelenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects; first edition 1550 and revised 1568) that the architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) was initially apprenticed to a goldsmith ‘to the end that he might learn design’ (Vasari, 1996 [1568], vol. 1, p. 326). According to Vasari, several other Italian Renaissance artists are supposed to have trained initially as goldsmiths, including the sculptors Ghiberti (1378–1455) and Verrocchio (1435–88), and the painters Botticelli (c.1445–1510) and Ghirlandaio (1448/49–94). The design skills necessary for goldsmiths’ work were evidently a good foundation for future artistic success.

**Medieval and Renaissance Visual Culture**

The term ‘visual culture’ is also used for a second reason that is less to do with definition than with method. Including the various arts under the umbrella of ‘visual culture’ implies their inseparability from the visual rhetoric of power on the one hand, and the material culture of a society on the other. Before 1500 art was primarily part of the persuasive power and cultural identity of the church, ruler, city, institution, or the wealthy patron commissioning the artwork. In this sense, art might be considered alongside ceremonies, for example, as strategies conveying social meaning or magnificence, or as a demonstration of wealth and power by the patron commissioning the artwork to be made.

In later centuries art evolves into purely an aesthetic entity, prompting scrutiny for its own sake alone. The intent of the varied forms of art produced during the medieval and Renaissance period lie outside this definition. Objects were made that invited attentive scrutiny for their ingenuity in design, while at the same time fulfilling a variety of functions. No one in medieval times would have bothered to commission works of art unless they could assume that their contemporaries were vulnerable to their communicative power. For example, the wealthy lavished money on rich artifacts or dynastic portraits in part because these objects were a way of communicating their exclusiveness and social power to their contemporaries.

**Artistic Quality**

The fact that a work of art had a function did not mean that artistic quality was a matter of indifference. Some artists' guilds, such as the painters’ guild of Tournai, south of Brussels, required candidates to submit a ‘masterpiece’ for examination by the guild in order to win the status of master. Those scrutinizing the masterpieces must have had a clear idea of the criteria of quality they were hoping for, even if these criteria were never set down in writing. The careful selection of artists even from far-flung locations, and the preference for one practitioner above another, shows that patrons too were quite capable of discriminating on the basis of artistic prowess. A work of art during the medieval and Renaissance period was expected to be of high quality as well as purposeful.

**Artists and Patrons**

Famously, in 1516, the renowned Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was invited to the French court of Francis I (ruled 1515–47), perhaps not so much for the work that he might produce at what was then an advanced age, as out of admiration and presumably for the prestige that the presence of such a renowned figure might endow on the French court. The advancement of artistic status is often associated with princely employment, for example by Martin Warnke in his seminal study of the court artist (Warnke, 1993, pp. 33–45). Given the example of Leonardo da Vinci, this appears to make sense. Maintained on a salary, a court artist was no longer a jobbing craftsman constantly on the lookout for work. Potentially, at least, he had access to projects demanding inventiveness and conferring honor, and
time to lavish on his art and on study. Equally, however, court artists might be required to undertake mundane and routine work which they could not very well refuse. Court salaries were also often in arrears or not paid at all. In the same letter in which Leone Leoni described Charles V chatting with him for two to three hours at a time, he complains of his poverty, while carefully qualifying the complaint by claiming he serves the emperor for honor and cares for studying not moneymaking. The lot of the court artist might appear to fulfill aspirations for artistic status, but it certainly had its drawbacks.

**Patterns of Artistic Employment: Workshop, Guild, and Court Employment**

The pattern of artistic employment in the medieval period and the Renaissance varied. Traditionally, craftsmen working on great churches would be employed in workshops on site, albeit often for some length of time; during the course of their career, such craftsmen might move several times from one project to another. Many other artists moved around in search of new opportunities of employment, even to the extent of accompanying a crusade. Artists working for European courts might travel extensively as well, not just within a country but from country to country and court to court: El Greco (1541–1614) moved between three different countries before finding employment not at the royal court in Spain but in the city of Toledo.

A fixed artist’s workshop depended not only on local institutional and individual patronage, but often also on the willingness of clients from further afield to come to the artist rather than the artist traveling to work for clients.

A guild served three main functions: promoting the social welfare of its members, maintaining the quality of its products and protecting its members from competition. This usually meant defining quite carefully the materials and tools that a guild member was allowed to use to prevent activities that infringed the privileges of other guilds and for which they had not been trained, for example a carpenter producing wood sculpture.

It is the protection from competition that art historians have seen as eliminating artistic freedom, but it is worth pausing to wonder whether this view owes more to modern free-market economics than to the realities of fifteenth-century craft practices. In practice, it meant that domestic craftsmen enjoyed preferential membership rates, but in many artistic centers foreign craftsmen were clearly also welcomed so long as their work reflected favorably on the reputation of the guild.

As the debate about artistic status grew, the real disadvantage of the guild system for artists was not so much lack of freedom or profitability or even status so much as the connotations of manual craft attached to the guild system of apprenticeship as opposed to the ‘liberal’ training offered by the art academies.

We have here sought to indicate the range and richness of visual culture in medieval Christendom and the Renaissance.

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