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Renaissance Techniques of Italy and Northern Europe: Comparison and Contrast of Regional Techniques

Emma Wise
Parkland College

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Beginning in the late 15th century, the Renaissance was a time of rebirth which led to the creation of new artwork. During this time there were economic conditions that allowed patrons to fund the creation of masterpieces. Religion was a prevalent subject in Italian Renaissance art. New ideas would influence the creation of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Through the influence of Italian art, the countries of Northern Europe had a cultural rebirth, which would heavily influence Christian humanism. This period would lead to the creation of new art created in the Low Countries beginning in the late 15th century. Artists produced genre painting and developed different painting techniques.

Economic stability was the base on which the Renaissance would flourish. Economic stability during the Renaissance period created opportunities for the wealthy to spend their money. In Italy, the wealthy often became patrons for artists, facilitating the creation of the works that still exist today. The economy of pre-Renaissance Italy has long been debated[1]. Some historians believe that the Renaissance was born out of economic depression, however, there is not enough information about the Italian economy during the Renaissance to make definitive statements[2]. It is known that the period between 1350 to 1450 witnessed an abundance of military activity[3]. Many of these military campaigns were the result of interregional disputes. Warfare was an expensive endeavor,[4] and war facilitated the creation of private wealth. With that private wealth, felt a responsibility to their communities. Their wealth would create jobs in their homes or their businesses. Some of these businesses produced materials for war[5]. For instance, the city of Milan produced armor for the soldiers[6]. War also promoted local financial .

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[1] William P. Caferro, "Warfare and Economy in Renaissance Italy, 1350-1450," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 39 (2008): 167.
[2] Caferro, 169.
[3] Caferro, 169.
[4] Caferro, 169.
[5] Caferro, 198.
[6] Caferro, 198.

interaction. Soldiers would send money home to their families but also invest their money into the economies of where they were stationed[7]. Places like Florence and Venice attracted outside investors. War served as a stimulus for outside investment. This was due to limited opportunities elsewhere.[8] It is unclear whether or not there was economic stability within the Italian cities prior to the Renaissance. Ultimately, the rise of private wealth would create opportunities to become patrons to artists. These relationships would facilitate the creation of art.

During the Renaissance, trade between cities created an economy where artistry would flourish. The art market of Florence in particular was driven by a stable economy and court patronage.[9] The Medici family became the ruling power of Florence and the city-state became a principality in 1530.[10] Their familial wealth created the basis for a wealthy city. Florence's economy during the 16th century was based on merchant banking and the creation of textiles.[11]

Artists had received higher social standing based on the notoriety of their works and patrons. As the status of art increased so would the artists.[12] Art markets were strengthened by an increasing number of patrons. The patrons were willing to be an economic force because of the social prestige that patronage awarded them.[13] Artists would earn wages and be awarded social standing as well, however, this social standing was hard to distinguish between the social standing of fellow craftsmen and architects. Art increased the status of those who owned it, however artists were still considered lower-class.[14] They were more well-known than their craftsmen and architect counterparts but were awarded the same social standing.

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[7] Caferro, 205.
[8] Caferro, 205.
[9] Richard A. Goldthwaite, "Artisans and the Economy in Sixteenth-century Florence," in *The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 85
[10] Goldthwaite, 85.
[11] Goldthwaite, 85.
[12] Goldthwaite, 91.
[13] Goldthwaite, 92.
[14] Goldthwaite, 92.

Patronage in the Renaissance was fueled by private wealth. Relationships between the wealthy and those of lower status had long existed in history. In 16th century Florence, Michelangelo was under the monetary support of the Medici Family.[15] During this time the Medici controlled much of Florence. They were known for fostering the arts and showing off their wealth. The relationship between the Medici Family and Michelangelo occurred early in the artist's life. Michelangelo would later work with many other patrons and benefactors over the course of his life. Cosimo de Medici, after becoming a duke, brought under his service various artists and architects[16]. These artists and architects would create public monuments and other pieces.[17] Becoming a patron of the arts was also a way to establish yourself and your wealth. For Cosimo de Medici, his patronage of the arts was to establish his role as duke.[18] Florence's economic stability during the time of the Renaissance would lead to a number of artists spending periods of time there during their careers.

In Northern Europe, a similar situation occurred. Artists would become part of the court of their lord or local ruler. This opportunity would offer economic stability for the artist but also socially as well. The artist would gain social standing while becoming part of the court.

The pope and members of the Catholic Church during the Renaissance became patrons of the arts. Several Popes sought out artists to adorn the papal buildings and chapels in order to show the power of the papacy. The papacy sought to make Rome the heart of the Christian world culturally and they sought to display their power. The Vatican was the seat of the vast political power and influence that the Pope had. In the early 16th century, the artist Raphael was

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[15] Cristina Acidini Luchinat, "Michelangelo and the Medici," in *The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 10.
[16] Janet Cox-Rearick, "Art at the Court of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici," in *The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002,) 37.
[17] Cox-Rearick, 37.
[18] Cox-Rearick, 37.

commissioned by Pope Julius II to aid the in refurbishment of the Stanza della Segnatura.[19] Pope Julius II wanted to use the rooms as a private library. This commission would lead to the creation of one of Raphael's most notable works, *The School of Athens*. The theme of the painting was intellectual discourse, which fit the theme of a private library for the Pope.[20]

Raphael depicted Classical thinkers in his painting, creating an interesting juxtaposition between location and subject matter. The painting was inside the Vatican while depicting secular philosophers and ideas. The commission was not for public viewing, meaning its purpose was purely decorative for the space. Raphael decorated the library in the traditional way highlighting Theology, Philosophy, Justice and Poetry in his work.[21] There would be a total of 10 paintings done by Raphael for the Papal Apartments. Later, Pope Julius II commissioned Raphael to paint his self-portrait. The painting was completed in 1512.[22] Raphael was not the only artist approached by the Pope to create artwork.

Michelangelo Buonarroti did several works of art for the Catholic Church. Works commissioned by the Vatican included *The Pieta, The Sistine Chapel Paintings,* and the *Basilica of St.Peter.* Michelangelo, as early as 1498, was approached by the Catholic Church to produce new work. Written in a legal document by a third-party banker, Reverend Cardinal di San Dionisio agrees to pay Michelangelo for the production of the *Pieta.*[23] Michelangelo was promised 450 ducats of papal gold for his commission. This document shows that there would

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[19]Stephanie Buck and Peter Hohenstatt, *Raphael: Masters of Italian Art,* (Potsdam: h.f.ullman publishing GmbH, 2013,) 42.

[20] Buck, Stephanie and Peter Hohenstatt, 56.

[21] Buck, Stephanie and Peter Hohenstatt, 42.

[22] Buck, Stephanie and Peter Hohenstatt, 67.

[23] Jacopo Galli, "Contract for the Pieta," (1498), https://arthum.college.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/PDFs/arthum_michel_reader.pdf

have been a third party involved to ensure the legality of the transaction, who in this case was a banker. There were legal contracts linking patron to artist. Commissioned by Pope Clement in 1535, Michelangelo painted *The Last Judgement* on the wall behind the altar in the Sistine Chapel.[24] Twenty-four years earlier Michelangelo had been commissioned to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling, work began on May 10, 1508.[25] He decorated the ceiling with scenes from the book of Genesis, specifically the first nine chapters of the book. These chapters range from the *Creation of Adam* and go through the life of Noah.

The Renaissance is often characterized by the reemergence of Classical Antiquity. The term "modernity" in history is often in direct correlation with influence from the Ancients.[26] The Renaissance was a time when the art of Ancient Greece and Rome were rediscovered and imitated. This influence began in Italy in the mid 14th century and extended to other parts of Europe until the 17th century.[27] Classical influence would extend beyond art into architecture, education, and politics. The popes in Rome were art collectors of Classical pieces. Pope Julius II acquired both the *Apollo Belvedere* and *Laocoön* when they were discovered in Rome.[28] Techniques used by Classical artists were also used during the Renaissance. Many artists of the time utilized the classic fresco technique, which was painting onto wet plaster had been used since Ancient Greece. Dry fresco would be painting onto dry plaster; but this method was less common on the Italian peninsula.

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[24] Fredrick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture* (Prentice-Hall, 1987), 576.

[25] Pierluigi De Vecchi and Gianluigi Colalucci, *Michelangelo: The Vatican Frescoes,* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1996,) 9.

[26] Mikhail Sergeev, "The Project of Modernity: Pro et Contra*," Value Inquiry Book Series 284* (2015), https://ezproxy.parkland.edu:443/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=112700862&site=ehost-live&scope=site, 35.

[27] Sergeev, 35.

[28] Michael Norris, "The Papacy during the Renaissance," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art,* 2007, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pape/hd_pape.htm

Artists rediscovered the importance of the human form which was prevalent in Classical art. The art of antiquity was inspirational to Renaissance art and how the artists would portray the human form.[29] The discovery of ancient monuments, such as the Apollo Belvedere, inspire mimicry of the ancient works.[30] The ideal natural form along with the study of anatomy led artists to refocus on naturalizing the body. Michelangelo's *David* is an example of a piece emphasizing the human body. *David* was completed in 1504, which is considered the High Renaissance Period of art. The *David,* however, *displays* the issue of nudity portrayed in work so closely associated with Classical Antiquity. People of the Renaissance did not know how to view nudity in art specifically in the sculpture. Not soon after completion of the *David* his groin area was covered with a gold loincloth.[31] During the time of the Renaissance the body was often viewed as dirty and not having a place in art. Michelangelo's goal "was to show humanity in its most elemental form" which was to present the figures naked[32]. His work as a sculptor had given him mastery over the human figure.

While artists in Italy were heavily influenced by the art of Classical Greek and Rome, Northern artists found different inspiration. With the birth of Genre painting and landscaping, Northern painting began to look very different from their Italian counterparts. One key difference in the creation of their art was the prevalence of oil painting, rather than water colors. Oil painting had been used in Northern Europe as early as the 12th century.[33] Oil originally had been associated with the realistic paintings done by early Dutch artists.[34] A key factor to the realism of

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[29] Hartt, 18.

[30] Hartt, 20.

[31] Edward J. Olszewski, "Michelangelo's *David*: Full Frontal Nudity in the Age of Savonarola," *Notes in the History of Art* 35, no. 1/2 (2016), 1.

[32] Hartt, 576.

[33] Susan Jones, "Painting in Oil in the Low Countries and Its Spread to Southern Europe," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art,* 2002, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/optg/hd_optg.htm.

[34] Jones, 1.

these paintings was the range and diversity of colors of oil paints. These colors were much more vibrant than the tempera paint that was used in Italy and Southern Europe. Early tempera paint used egg in it to create the desired consistency. However, it dried quicker and lighter than oil did leaving the colors more washed out.[35] Oil painting became the dominate form of painting later in the 16th century.

Italian painting before the 16th century focused mainly on fresco and tempera panel work. Paintings in the 16th century were often done in oil painting as it became common in Italy. The subject of these paintings was more often than not religious. This was primarily due to Church commissions or community spaces. Raphael painted several portraits for men of the Church and the portrait of Pope Julius II. Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa,* another portrait, depicts neither a scene from the bible nor an important Church figures. Most of these paintings were commissioned by families. For instance, the artist Agnolo Bronzino was commissioned by Cosimo de Medici to paint his wife Eleonora and their son Giovanni in *Eleonora of Toledo and Her Son Giovanni.* Private commissions were to show the importance and wealth of a family.

In Northern Europe, the birth of genre painting led to the focus on everyday people as the subjects for the work produced. The term genre painting wasn't adopted till the late 17th century.[36] The term meant a "kind" or "type" of painting. This is a contrast from the religious content that was produced by Italian artists during the Renaissance. Due to the rise of Protestant beliefs some people felt negatively about religious subject matter and artists turned to everyday subject for inspiration.

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[35] Jones, 1.

[36] Margaret A. Sullivan, "Bruegel the Elder, Pieter Aertsen, and the Beginnings of Genre," *Art Bulletin* 93 (2) (2011): 127.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder is an artist heavily associated with the creation of genre painting. Bruegel's drawing *Ice Skating before the Gate of St. George* is a good example of early depictions of genre. His focus on the people depicted in the drawing is new.[37] His focus on the background is equal to his attention paid to the people in the foreground. The creation of genre did not exist without criticism. Some felt the lives of everyday people did not deserve the same attention as other subject matter. Bruegel's *Ice Skating before the Gate of St. George* proved that art could depict daily life while "still display the artist's skill and imagination."[38] The new type of painting would continue in the Low Countries and influenced the later movement of Dutch Golden Age artists.

Northern painting also depicted domestic scenes. These paintings focused heavily on the depiction of interior space. Early Dutch painting of the 15th century would often contain benches, windows, and fireplaces. These additions to the painting would create the allusion of space in a home environment.[39] The homes often depicted in this style of painting would show middle class Dutch homes. These paintings were representative of the whole population only focusing on the middle class.

The Renaissance was a time of rebirth and the expression of new ideas. Patronage facilitated the creation of new work while acting as the economic backbone of the art market. The creation of new regional techniques, such as the use of oil paint in early Dutch work, spread and evolved. Without the use of oil paint on the Italian peninsula, the Renaissance art known today would look different. Artists today still look to the Renaissance as a highly influential art

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[37] Sullivan, 127.
[38] Sullivan, 127.
[39] Annette LeZotte, "Defining Domestic: An Examination of the Characteristics and Functions of the Home setting in Early Netherlandish Paintings," *Home Cultures* 6 (1) (2011), https://ezproxy.parkland.edu:443/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=371 79171&site=ehost-live&scope=site, 10.

historical period. Like the artists of the Renaissance, some modern artists look to the past to gain artistic inspiration. Renaissance art marks the evolution of beliefs and the art techniques, which modernized the art of the time.

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