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The Spiritual Nature of the Italian Renaissance

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the influence of faith in the emergence and development of the Italian Renaissance, in both the artwork and writing of the major artists and thinkers of the day, and the impact that new expressions of faith had on the viewing public. While the Renaissance is often labeled as a secular movement by modern scholars, this interpretation is largely due to the political motives of the Medici family who dominated Florence as the center of this artistic rebirth, on and off again throughout the period. On close examination, the philosophical and creative undercurrents of the movement were much more complex. The thinkers of the era would often place Greco-Roman philosophers in the context of their Christian era and use their wisdom in addition to, rather than superseding, church and biblical authority, embracing figures like Virgil and Augustine in concert rather than opposition. These Christian humanists saw their work as a way to engage humanity in a quest for knowledge in ever expanding ways, but still with an undercurrent of reflection on the role of the Divine. Spiritual inquiries of Dante, Lorenzo Valla, and Petrarch in written works are similarly manifested in the visual arts by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, and Raphael Sanzio. These ‘big three’ painters of the Renaissance portrayed their individual Christian ideas through their own writings, sketchbooks, and all forms of artistic expressions, many of which are evaluated in this paper. Finally, the transition of art to a scale inviting the viewer to experience it personally marked a vital change. The shift from divine proportions to more naturalistic and relatable art also logically harmonizes with the mindset of the broader Renaissance movement. This paper seeks to examine the depth and complexity of key Renaissance figures and how concepts of Christian faith and spirituality translated into their works.

The Spiritual Nature of the Italian Renaissance

The figures of Jesus and Mary can be seen in countless Renaissance paintings yet oftentimes today scholars purport this time of rebirth in art, culture, and academia as symbolic of a turn towards secular scholarship, with some political powers using Christian symbols purely for their own gain. While there was a diverse array of theological beliefs in Renaissance society, there was also a fair representation of thinkers who were able to blend their faith with rational discernment. The philosophy of Humanism placed value in the individual and advanced the spread of knowledge based on ideas of the Greco-Roman civilizations; many secularists identified with Humanism as a turn towards pure scientific drive with man as the origin of nature. However, the Renaissance was also highlighted by many people of strong faith, Christian humanists. These thinkers varied in role and specific spiritual, social, and political beliefs as is normal in any great developing intellectual movement. The wide array of foundational thinkers, artists, and their works showed a strong devotion to Christianity in the Italian Renaissance in the midst of various political and personal motives.

Writings

Dante's writings before the Renaissance helped in large part to formulate Christian humanism. Simply writing many of his works in the vernacular was a step forward that other writers would emulate to spread their ideas to more of the populace. Additionally, Dante in his *De Monarchia* (On World Government), quotes the Bible and says that the authority of the monarch comes directly from God, rather than from some vicar of God. He states that he sees "truth from its changeless throne," the holy power Solomon also consulted. He quotes Daniel saying that the God who worked miracles such as shutting the mouths of lions, has established a

justice that the human soul naturally can recognize and receive.¹ Dante contrasts the view that the Renaissance thinkers align directly with the Enlightenment idea of human perfectibility. He states that “there are many things of which we are in ignorance.” He explains that in “evil bias [mankind] lay aside the light of reason, and being dragged on blindly by their desire, obstinately deny that they are blind.”² To Dante, acknowledging human limitations is logical. His faith in God is only strengthened by not being able to understand everything due to Dante’s finite capabilities; the order of the Christian Creator God envelopes systematic reason on earth and even the most powerful rulers and wise scholars.

Famously, Dante establishes a belief in a real hell and heaven in his *Divine Comedy*. While his envisioned circles of hell are not explicitly stated in the Bible, Dante “seeks to bring readers back to the sacred text” through his interpretative epic.³ His main purpose is to create a scenario wherein biblical truths can be ‘lived’ in a setting relatable and understandable to the culture. Much like the coming Renaissance artists, he took the seemingly foreign and intangible aspects of eternity and God and framed them into something graspable. Such imagery humanizes a more personal relationship between God and man. He also demonstrates Christian humanist values by showing some of his pagan heroes as his guides through hell. Virgil, author of the *Aeneid* and Dante’s primary guide in the *Inferno*, encapsulates Dante’s admiration for Roman antiquity and literature yet also his doctrinal belief that Virgil, being pagan, would therefore be separated from God.

¹ Dante Aligheri, *On World Government, or De Monarchia*, ed. Paul A. Boer, trans. Aurelia Henry (Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), 80.

² Aligheri, *Monarchia*, ed. Boer, trans., Henry, 83-84.

³ Stanley V. Benfell, “Conclusion: Poet of the Biblical World” in *The Biblical Dante*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 194-8.

Dante shows his respect for Virgil and Rome throughout the *Inferno*. Dante casts himself as Aeneas for he must explore the underworld, but Dante says he is less qualified than the epic hero.⁴ He is linked to Virgil by their similar geographic location in life and the fact that they were both impacted by the Roman empire. Dante believes that Rome paved the way for the church, and it certainly paved the way for his writings. He morphs many traditions' elements into his story's structure such as the forest at the entrance of Hades like the *Aeneid*, the association of sin with a 'region of unlikeness' as stated in Augustine's *Confessions*, and knights in dangerous forests similar to Medieval romance works.⁵ The fact that Dante valued Virgil and the writings of the past set the stage for the Renaissance rediscovery and use of great thinkers to develop new understandings and ways to represent the Bible and other knowledge.

Dante uses Virgil, not a Christian source, but someone who would have been known to Dante's contemporaries, as a brilliant mind who was not able to understand Jesus' role in eternity and thus was not saved.⁶ Virgil can be seen as a symbol of reason and the rational capacity of man. He was an expert at rhetoric yet somewhat prideful in his own abilities, and Dante admires much about him while acknowledging his limitations.⁷ Dante discovers that academia is not enough for a meaningful eternal existence, and this is essentially a microcosm of Dante's Christian humanist philosophy: use the secular to convey Christian truths.

⁴ "Dante's Inferno - Prologue - Cantos 1 & 2," The University of Texas at Austin, Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services, accessed August 3, 2019, <http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/prologue.html>.

⁵ "Dante's Inferno - Prologue - Cantos 1 & 2."

⁶ Glenn A. Steinberg, "Dante, Virgil, and Christianity: Or Statius, Sin, and Clueless Pagans in Inferno IV," *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies* 4 no. 3, (September 11, 2013): 476.

⁷ Robert Hollander, "Dante's Virgil: A Light that Failed," (paper presented for Princeton University at the conference for Poetry and Prophecy at Yale University, Newhaven, CT., April 28, 1985) accessed August 5, 2019, https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/LD/numbers/04/hollander.html.

Another overtly Christian and scholarly figure of the Renaissance was Petrarch. Known as the ‘father of humanism’, Petrarch was deeply inspired by Augustine. In fact, he engaged with him in the Greek dialogue, writing as if discussing life with Augustine in the presence of “Lady Truth.” These writings were compiled for his own meditation and resolution of his ecclesiastical quandaries. Known as “*Secretum*,” Petrarch’s secret, personal crises are solved with the wisdom of Augustine as well as the writings of Virgil and Ovid. Thus, he blends both Christian and literary scholars in his reasoning of life. Augustine tells Petrarch that, to avoid his human depression and anxiety, he must meditate on “death and man’s misery” and then “have a vehement desire and purpose to rise” above, focusing the soul on heavenly hopes. Petrarch responds by affirming Augustine’s point, restating his admiration for the Saint by saying “from my youth upwards I- have had the increasing constriction that if in any matter I was inclined to think differently from yourself I was certain to be wrong.”⁸

Augustine also warns Petrarch against deception by loved ones and the stronger danger, self-deception. He speaks against humans falling into a comfortable routine that allows them to think that their current understanding or attitudes are acceptable in a God-driven universe. Augustine decries the case of darkness wherein blindly, “one esteems himself more than he deserves, loves himself more than he ought, and where Deceiver and Deceived are one and the same person.”⁹ Thus, one can see the workings of Petrarch’s mind and his desire to seek information for himself, not being satisfied in the present understanding of the world, even if proclaimed by respected authority in the church, family, or his own fallible thinking.

⁸ Francesco Petrarca, *Secretum, Dialogue 1*, trans. William H. Draper (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 2017), accessed August 8, 2019, <http://community.dur.ac.uk/m.j.huxtable/petrarch.htm>.

⁹ Ibid.

Petrarch's problem of constant "woe" is resolved when Augustine tells him to continue wrestling with and meditating on the realities of death in a Christian worldview. Augustine describes the folly of mortals in their quick dismissal of uncomfortable biblical truths. He states that pursuing that line of thinking is helpful and turns the sinner towards God, but by ignoring such problems the soul seeps in "that worrying torment of a mind angry with itself; when it loathes its own defilements, yet cleanses them not away; sees the crooked paths, yet does not forsake them; dreads the impending danger, yet stirs not a step to avoid it." To this Petrarch responds, "Ah, woe is me! Now you have probed my wound to the quick. There is the seat of my pain, from there I fear my death will come."

At one point, Augustine out wiles the mortal Petrarch, proving his prowess in theology and psychology by his superb understanding of scholarly writings. Augustine tells Petrarch that he can prove Petrarch is unhappy because of his misuse of words ("will not" should have been used instead of "cannot"). Throughout this work, Augustine continually shines a logic based in academic reasoning to point Petrarch to a higher understanding of the Divine. Petrarch fully acknowledges that to reach the truth, analogous to God's handprint, he must seek truth on earth. Petrarch states that the individual is important, and he has a more "sacred inner life" that will lead him on to the next. This radical notion of the individual as an important entity, rather than destroying notions of religiosity, is enhanced to be more meaningful individually, contrasting blind adherence to state doctrine.¹⁰ In this way, Petrarch demonstrates the Christian ideal of not settling for a present state and understanding but to "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."¹¹

¹⁰ Morris Bishop. *Petrarch and His World*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1963), 118.

¹¹ Phil. 2:12

Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla also exemplifies the foundational beliefs of Christian humanism in his scholarly writings used to straighten out theological and other matters of the church. His most famous impact on the church was discrediting the Donation of Constantine, a forged letter under Pope Sylvester I that said Constantine gave the Pontiffs power so “that more than our empire and earthly throne, the most sacred seat of the Blessed Peter shall be gloriously exalted,” declaring that with a “sacred imperial mandate we have granted him of our property in the east as well as in the west and even in the northern southern quarter.”¹² Valla, in “De Falso Credita et Ementita Constantini donatione” (On the Donation of Constantine), used his expertise in rhetoric and history to identify the letter as a fraud, exposing certain diction that would not have been used by Constantine or Romans of his time. This document which shaped much of Medieval culture and inflated the authority of the papacy was now discredited and brought the authority of the papacy into question.

Valla additionally shows a groundbreaking admiration for freethinking. As he states in his “On the Donation of Constantine”, the Roman Church shows the contradictories of putting power in an earthly realm (empire, Caesar/ the ruler, and slavery) while the Bible puts power in the Gospel, Christ, and freedom.¹³ Valla offers the solution of renewing evangelical freedom by focusing on the power of saving grace and political agency since “human beings are born for freedom.”¹⁴ In other works, Valla criticizes the pope to the extent of calling him “tyrannical,”

¹² Lorenzo Valla, *Discourse on the Forgery of the Alleged Donation of Constantine*, trans. Christopher B. Coleman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), accessed August 8, 2019, <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/vallapart1.html>.

¹³ Patrick Baker, Salvator I. Camporeale, and Christopher S. Celenza. *Christianity, Latinity, and Culture: Two Studies on Lorenzo Valla*, (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2013), 23.

¹⁴ Lorenzo Valla, *De Falso Credita et Ementita Constantini Donatione*, trans. Wolfram Setz, Weimar: Böhlau, 1976), 89.

and he acknowledges that people will think him heretical and impious for these accusations but expresses his “dissent from all canonists and theologians” who perpetuate the power of the pope, who he sees to be following the example of Caesar instead of Christ, rather than the power of Christ over the church. Valla reminds his audience to bear in mind that he “acted for the sake of the truth, of religion, and a certain renown” purpose and message he feels to be divinely given specifically to his mind.¹⁵

Showing many beliefs of later Reformation thinkers, including that the individual has power in religion and should think freely based on the Bible, demonstrates Valla’s dedication to both the Christian faith and academic pursuits. He used his skill in the written word to share these beliefs and to further reform by discrediting a historical document that others had not thought to question. Valla’s inquiry and questioning of societal norms against even the Church is set in the context of faith. Rather than trying to discredit Christianity, he is trying to discredit the disingenuous and secular influences in the church. Even as Valla advocates absolute “libertas” or freedom from each other, in separation the power of church and state, Valla is seeking a protection of the church from secularism rather than a protection of secularism from the church, since he sees the pope’s power, not Christianity itself, as corrupt. His work is about faith yet uplifts the individual; he uses a humanist approach to pursue Christian ends. Thus, it makes sense that his work written in 1440, would only be circulated en masse by Reformation thinkers starting in 1517.¹⁶

¹⁵ Valla, *Two Studies on Lorenzo Valla* (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2013), 246-248.

¹⁶ “Lorenzo Valla-Humanism as Philosophy,” *Philosophers of the Renaissance*, ed. Paul Richard Blum, trans. Brian McNeil, (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2010), 33-42.

Artists

While the thinkers and writers of the Renaissance set the stage for more intellectual flourishing, today the art of the Renaissance is almost synonymous with the movement. From Michelangelo's frescoes and sculptures to the thousands of adorned small churches that cover the map of Italy, Christian art infiltrated the lives of everyday Italians and visitors. The study of perspective was examined and furthered in the Duomo of Florence by architect Brunelleschi. For the first time, by his handiwork and other artists imitating his style, the church was centered around the viewing ability of the individual. This was accomplished by architecture which comforted rather than overwhelmed the worshipper, a change from the Gothic style, with spaces designed to fit human and not divine measurements.¹⁷

Architectural perspective techniques also changed and impacted the worshippers' focus while in the church and their mindset as they left. Perspective helped to enhance the size of holy objects by placing them on a focal point, distancing holy/symbolic objects by placing crosses and relics in the back of the church so that they appear larger but are in reality closer, and design inside the churches drew the worshipper towards the main altar. This placement naturally forces the worshippers' gaze upwards and the perspective was used "not so much for the creation of space but rather as a compositional device helping to draw devotion" and focus it at Christian symbols, much like perspective was used in paintings also reflecting moments of Christ or another Christian figure's life.¹⁸ These advances, mixed into a religious setting, fostered a

¹⁷ Jackson J. Spielvogel, ed. *Western Civilization since 1300*, 9th ed. (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015), 352.

¹⁸ Paul Davies, "Framing the Miraculous: The Devotional Functions of Perspective in Italian Renaissance Tabernacle Design," *Association of Art Historians* 36, no. 5 (2013).

growing sense of the person's place in the world. Humans could be the target audience of art and use their focus to self-examine their own spiritual status.

While often this contemplation was based on the miraculous tales of saints or relics, it was also used in regard to seeing art of more realistic portrayals of God and stories from the Bible. The Christ child, rather than being painted as a stoic miniaturized adult, is depicted more human and as an adult, Jesus and others have anatomically correct proportions, expressive features, and shadows and highlights for focus and symbolic purposes. Often considered the first Renaissance artist, Giotto, painted to express piety in passion. His crucifix clearly portrays the suffering of Christ as “one of us, a human being who suffers.”¹⁹ The expressions of naturalism and realism in the limp body, being dragged down by his own weight, naturally evokes a response of sympathy and outrage against those torturing Him. This depicted grief “dramatically expressed the consequences of human sin.”²⁰ Giotto heightened the Gothic sense of pathos emerging in paintings by “the naturalism of the figures and the addition of psychological interest.” Art historian Bruce Cole describes Giotto as breaking the two-dimensional ceiling, departing from Gothic subjects which “existed in a world of their own—a world that is not part of the human experience, as it is in all Giotto's pictures.”²¹ This human connection on an emotional level connected to faith and created an atmosphere where the viewer could feel more a part of worship and better relate to the God of their devotion.

¹⁹ Mario Bucci, *Giotto* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 12.

²⁰ Richard Viladesau, “Nominalism, Naturalism, and the Intensification of Passion Piety,” *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²¹ Bruce Cole, *Giotto and Florentine Painting*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), 6.

The developments seen in Giotto's art continued in the Renaissance and the portrayal of Christ especially was emulated to convey a message. Many works depict the life of Christ in scenes, blending different moments into a singular work united by the character of Jesus as seen through His miraculous and loving actions. This helped to convey to the illiterate more about the God they worshipped, engaging them in a visual discussion all can understand. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Foundation period study states that "Artists and patrons alike were keenly attentive to innovations within the tradition, and creative experiments continually refreshed the iconography of Christ's life."²² Certain portrayals of Christ's miracles were generally created according to a precedent but more and more Renaissance artists added realistic backgrounds with nature and different colors.²³ The art of Christ adapted to the trends in the art world and advanced in accuracy and realism, relating the man who lived among the Romans to the ever changing and developing Renaissance society.

Connecting antiquity to their present day, artists were bestowed with a plethora of challenges. Their commissioners desired the new humanist skills of the era: more anatomically accurate figures, perspective, details, but still Christian themes. Visualizing the souls of holy people required creative and scientific efforts. Anthropologist Alfred Gell's writings attest that "The rise of naturalism in Renaissance art is not only a history of increasing scientific objectivity in art, and art for art's sake, as has sometimes been supposed, but rather a history of spiritual agency being attributed to objects through technical excellence and the artist's virtuous

²² Jean Sorabella, "Painting the Life of Christ in Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Essay: Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: The Metropolitan Museum of Art," The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, accessed August 10, 2019, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chri/hd_chri.htm.

²³ Ibid.

intentions.”²⁴ The artist Alberti’s, *On Paintings*, suggests that “the greatest meanings exist within the viewer’s imagination in concert with the painting: bodies are animated by viewers.”²⁵ One such strategy to evoke deeper introspection was the inclusion of symbols such as the veil. “Leonardo, for instance, defends painting for its ability to depict translucency such as ‘veiled figures with the flesh showing through the intervening veil’ ...in the same way that painterly illusion has made it possible to see the Virgin’s skin beneath her veil, so too does Christ’s salvation make possible the true perception and understanding of sacred history.”²⁶

Leonardo da Vinci stated that he felt like the physician for the Cathedral of Milan, curing and aiding its foundations. Giorgio Vasari, the first art historian and the primary recorder of Renaissance biographies, spoke of the foundations of buildings, especially churches, but also political establishments being only as strong as moral conditions were upon their founding. These statements echo Augustinian ideas of the earthly city in which “a society of men pit themselves against one another to their own detriment,” and thus, the strongest foundation a building could have would be based on biblical values, set in the eternal City of God.²⁷ Whether political rulers, like the Medici, used Christian-infused art for pious or impious reasons, they saw a Christian image as powerful because their people saw it that way and Christian humanist philosophy attested to power lying in heaven, with men using their divinely-given talents.

²⁴ Steven Stowell, *The Spiritual Language of Art: Medieval Christian Themes in Writings on Art of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Andrew Colin Gow, (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2015), 165.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 180-182.

²⁷ Stowell, *The Spiritual Language of Art* (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2015), 327.

“Beneficio di Cristo” by the Mantuan Friar Benedetto Fontanini was a powerful work influencing many in the remarkable Italian reformation radical/evangelical movement of the mid-1500s. Literally translated to the “The Benefit of Christ’s Death,” it focused on the adoration of Jesus and a personal connection, unalterably connected to the mission of spreading the Gospel and man’s dependence on God. Colonna and Marguerite de Navarre (princess of France and fellow Christian poet) wrote to each other as part of this *spirituali*, 1530s-1560s evangelical movement of the Catholic church. In one letter, Colonna describes that the language of her friend’s note was not so filling to her as was the spirit, the essence of the divine, that she felt in her fellow believer’s writing. It was in this Renaissance subculture, that Michelangelo also wrote to Colonna. They discussed the Crucifixion and “...engaged in a discourse on gift giving in relation to the concept of justification by grace through faith.”²⁸ Simultaneously extolling God’s grace and denouncing his own folly, Michelangelo states, “...And I see clearly how anyone’s mistaken who believes the grace that rains down from divine could be equaled by my feeble and fleeting work. Genius, and art, and memory give up: for one who’s mortal can’t, from himself, repay a heavenly gift, even with a thousand tries.”²⁹ Thus emerges an artist not so conceited in personal glory or filled with a desire for political power as much as a seeker, a poet and artist trying to contemplate the gift of God versus transient efforts in the current, physical realm. This is an exceedingly humble mindset to describe between two prolific artists, revealing Michelangelo’s wondering tone and search for what will stay with him more than his best projects.

²⁸ Sarah Rolfe Prodan, *Michelangelo's Christian Mysticism: Spirituality, Poetry and Art in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 117.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

This connection is also notable since Colonna was a devout and reform-minded intellectual; she sought a personal “development of an intimate relationship with Christ...typical of reform devotion.”³⁰ Michelangelo’s connection with these thinkers influenced his writings and led to his association “with proto-Protestant ideals of sola fide,” salvation through faith and grace alone. He was in the midst of a Catholic reform movement.³¹ Upon Colonna’s death, Michelangelo’s poem in her honor “...echoes patterns of interaction among spirituali in light of their new and evolving Christo-centrism and their concept of and relation to the Holy Spirit, which they believed operated within their circle and through its members.”³²

Michelangelo is known for being a passionate creator and admirer of beauty. His letters to other thinkers are often overflowing with praise and intense emotion. For example, writing to Bonaventura Cavalieri, the Italian mathematician and member of the religious order of the Sieneese Jesuits, Michelangelo praised his beauty and intellect saying "I could as soon forget your name as forget the food which alas nourishes only the body than forget your name which nourishes body and soul filling each with such delight that I no longer feel sorrow nor am afraid of death as long as I have you in my thoughts."³³ This passion which many cite as evidence of his unreciprocated homosexual love, may or may not be romantic but certainly shows his immense passion conveyed in letters. He goes on in other letters and writings to say that physical beauty in many people show him a peak into the divine nature of God.³⁴ Dr. Sarah Prodan, a

³⁰ Prodan, *Michelangelo's Christian Mysticism*, 5.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Michelangelo Buonarroti and John Frederick Nims, *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 60.

³⁴ Ibid., 39.

primary researcher of Michelangelo's spiritualism, states that the psychological analyses of Michelangelo often take his writings literally, emphasizing his guilt (which is written in hyperbole so as to emphasize the yearned-for spiritual delivery). Michelangelo's "plausible homoeroticism" is often seen as the cause of his guilt, what he saw as a fatal sin keeping him from holiness. This assumption may have elements of truth, but the artist also focused on general self-improvement, a logical ethos in a time "when pious self-fashioning carried important weight in the cultural currency of the day."³⁵ Michelangelo's poetry is debated in its spirituality. Some say his work was mostly for intellectual exercise as it is written in pristine verse, sometimes in new forms with original ideals and structures. Still other scholars characterize it as a personal song to God. However, the idea of Michelangelo as a mystical/spiritual 'seeker' is most probable. His poetry notes a strong desire for sanctification as he calls out to God, feeling that he cannot get salvation from his current status as a lowly fallen man despite all his works.

This mix between pure religious/intellectual prose and personal praise and love create "Such conflicting emotions" reminiscent of "the contrapposto of his statues, the tension close to torsion with which the shoulders strain one way while [the] face or knees are turned another."³⁶ The rift between human and divine beauty created a struggle for the artist as he tried to delve into both full-heartedly. Michelangelo echoes a personal passion in his other writings. For instance, his friendship and work for the poet Vittoria Colonna exemplifies a consuming wonder and praise for his friend. The editor and translator of Michelangelo's poetry, John Frederick Nims states that:

³⁵ Prodan, *Michelangelo's Christian Mysticism*, 7.

³⁶ Buonarrotti and Nims, *The Complete Poems*, 62.

Michelangelo found her beautiful in a somewhat masculine way... he probably overrated her poetry; more and more he came to share radical belief that salvation could come through faith alone (Luther's *fide sola*) thanks to Christ's sacrifice of blood on the cross and not through any work of man- a belief some think he dramatized over the next five years in the *Last Judgment*, its stern Christ seeming to choose those He would and to reject those who thought they could storm heaven on their own.³⁷

Michelangelo's connection to the *spirituali* and his intellectual pursuits make him a Renaissance man in philosophy and deed. The "three general areas of continued or renewed Augustinian influence in Italy during the Renaissance: the Augustinian orders, lay religious culture, and Christian humanism" pervaded the intellectual circles and Michelangelo found elements of Augustinian emphasis on personal devotion and grace within his complex worldview.³⁸

Michelangelo Buonarroti's poem "To the Supreme Being" illustrates a God-centered devotion over one for man or self. While it is impossible to know to what degree he believed this and to what degree he was perfecting poetry as an intellectual pursuit, Michelangelo clearly was satisfied to be among the *spirituali* and delve into theological, philosophic discourse with them. This poem stands out among his works, reading almost as a diary entry to God:

"To the Supreme Being"

The prayers I make will then be sweet indeed,
 If Thou the spirit give by which I pray:
 My unassisted heart is barren clay,
 Which of its native self can nothing feed:
 Of good and pious works Thou art the seed,
 Which quickens only where Thou say'st it may;
 Unless Thou show to us Thine own true way,
 No man can find it: Father! Thou must lead.
 Do Thou, then, breathe those thoughts into my mind
 By which such virtue may in me be bred

³⁷ Ibid., 42.

³⁸ Prodan, *Michelangelo's Christian Mysticism*, 11.

That in Thy holy footsteps I may tread;
The fetters of my tongue do Thou unbind,
That I may have the power to sing of Thee,
And sound Thy praises everlastingly.³⁹

Michelangelo's poetry frames his outlook on his artwork. His immense contribution to the Renaissance helped glorify his home, Florence, and later the papacy but at least according to his writings, his work meant nothing to him if not for God and he was convinced was divinely ordained, breathing creativity into his mind like the Creator giving Adam the spark of life. It was "only toward the end of his life that Michelangelo reached a more universal conception; he became a citizen of Christendom. That intermediary between the two extremes of local and universal which constitutes modern 'patriotism' was absent from his thought."⁴⁰ Earlier in his life, he sought to establish his love of his birthplace, Florence, via his *David* by depicting civic virtues, emphasizing "the permanent features...character and moral attitude...an incarnation of moral and physical strength which knows no fear and is ready to defend an ideal."⁴¹ *David* is also notable as one with *Fortezza* (similar to *fortitudo*, meaning force for one's home), a republican ideal somewhat antagonistic to the Medici who disarmed the people.⁴² Charles de Tolnay in his work, *The Art and Thought of Michelangelo* states that "His traditional piety is revealed in his letters to his family; the new ideas find expression in his works of art and his poetry."⁴³ He goes on to say that the artist "made it a habit to have prayers said for the success of his works before

³⁹ "Michelangelo's Poetry," Michelangelo Gallery, accessed January 25th, 2020, <https://www.michelangelo-gallery.com/poems.aspx>.

⁴⁰ Charles de Tolnay, *The Art and Thought of Michelangelo* (New York: Random House, 1964), 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 57.

he finished them.”⁴⁴ Indeed, in later works such as the *Pieta*, “all the emphasis is placed on Christ” and “his body becomes the center of the composition.”⁴⁵ Similar to Vittoria Colonna who is said to have believed “that she would attain salvation by faith alone, but that she should behave as if her salvation depended on good works,” Michelangelo’s later religiosity was pervaded by a deep sense of tradition and the Reform of the Church.⁴⁶

Humanist philosophy can pertain to the modern philosophical school and secularism, but applying solely this label to the Italian Renaissance overlooks the underlying religious motives of most thinkers. Dante, Petrarch, and Valla were all figures who wrote on Christianity and expressed it to be their faith. Their writings and ideas are fundamental to the achievement of the individual and the advancement of the sciences and literature. Using a variety of sources and skills, they looked past the stigma placed on nonreligious endeavors and instead sought to implement their faith in pursuit of knowledge. The vast majority Renaissance art is religious in nature and it connects to the human psyche by making figures of biblical times come to life to be related to the lives of their viewers. Rather than casting Christianity aside as superstition, the Christian humanists layered their works with renewed depth of purpose. Through the lens of their faith, they shined a light on some abuses within the church and brought into focus forgotten truths and universal themes from antiquity to their present age.

Raphael, another major artist oft associated with the Renaissance presents a dynamic religious life. His art presents a major shift in composition of the heroic, centric figures. As

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Tolnay, *Art and Thought of Michelangelo*, 65.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 70.

Eugene Muntz states, “For the first time the painter of *Madonnas* becomes the composer of battle pieces. But he chooses the Christian rather than the pagan warrior, and his soldiers are saints – the archangel Michael and St George, the Cappadocian prince who suffered martyrdom under Diocletian, after having, like another Perseus, rescued a princess from the jaws of a dragon.”⁴⁷ Making Christian figures in his *Saint Michael* and *Saint George* in the same epic tradition of Achilles and pagan gods was an innovative collision that Raphael escalated through depicting battle scenes. While Raphael is mainly known for his *Madonnas* and the *School of Athens*, these works illustrate a turn of taking a pagan scene and replacing it with religious figures rather than just putting a religious figure in a classical pose or positioning contemporary minds in the places of ancient scholars.

To understand Raphael’s thought life and its collision with his work, one must understand the political unrest and religious rivalries heightening during Raphael’s formational years. For instance, the death of Savonarola, the extremist Dominican monk created turmoil in Florence. However, Savonarola’s period of power in Florence continued:

His ideas lived on, and they must often have been in the mind of Raphael, who was still under the influence of Umbrian mysticism. The figure of the reformer was before him when he painted the Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament...and he did not hesitate to place in the very Vatican itself, and among the Fathers of the Church, the Dominican monk who had been burnt a few years before by order of the Papal Commissioners.⁴⁸

Valuing some of Savonarola’s ideals of self-disavowal and the rejection of luxuries, people had a certain nostalgia for the hardline monk-ruler after his death. Another influence on Raphael was Umbrian mysticism. A neighboring region to Tuscany, the Umbrian school of Catholicism was highlighted by several personal monks and nuns who testified to their revelation

⁴⁷ Eugène Müntz, *Raphael Volume I* (New York, USA: Parkstone International, 2018), 50.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

in their personal lives. Sometimes these clerics would bring themselves into postures of extreme humility to better understand suffering, sin, and the suffering Christ to cleanse the sins of the world. St. Clare of Assisi, born in Umbria to a wealthy family, rejected a normal life and instead sought an understanding of *imitation Christi*. In her *Confessions*, she advises walking in the ““footprints of the poor and humble Jesus Christ...to transform yourself entirely through contemplation into the image of divinity itself.””⁴⁹ Raphael’s influence from these two rising religious ideals, rejection of the self and yet a personal connection to Christ, show a change in Dominican influence from one solely of tradition to a new view of piety.

Seen through his artwork, Raphael exhibits an amalgamation of influences. His training under Perugino in Umbria was characterized by a conscious traditionalism from his commissioners. In his contracts for nunneries and other Umbrian patrons, Raphael was told to construct his paintings, in dimension and position of figures, in ways similar to specific late Medieval artists. The adoration and exaltation were set to match a running vein of artists in a respectful intention to maintain traditional piety. When Raphael followed his growing career to the arts capital, Florence, he mixed in the styles of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Donatello while maintaining “his unique blend of Umbrian piety” in positions of the Madonna and saints among other qualities.⁵⁰

This technical Umbrian piety in his artwork was adapted by Raphael’s use of naturalism, removing the bold halos for thin or nonexistent ones, acting as “a sincere and a respectful

⁴⁹ Elizabeth A. Esposito, “Embodying Mysticism: The Utilization of Embodied Experience in the Mysticism of Italian Women, Circa 1200-1400 CE,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Florida, 2004), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.511.7678&rep=rep1&type=pdf>, 27.

⁵⁰ Dillian Gordon, “The Conservatism of Umbrian Art: Raphael and Before,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 134, no. 5354 (1986): 118.

disciple of nature” who thus “could not bring himself to sacrifice life and truth to symbolism.”⁵¹ His transitional naturalism brought him into the midst of the great Renaissance men, even working at the same time Michelangelo was working on the Sistine chapel ceiling. His most iconic work, *School of Athens* stands as a testament to ancient Greek philosophers and great intellectuals yet blends contemporary masters’ visages into these figures of antiquity. Vasari states in his *Lives of the Artists* that “Raphael received a hearty welcome from Pope Julius, and in the chamber of the *Segnatura* he painted the theologians reconciling Philosophy and Astrology with Theology, including portraits of all the wise men of the world in dispute.”⁵² Raphael’s portrayal of Greek scholasticism layers the ancient with the contemporary, Christian society.

Created for the epicenter of the Christian church, the *Stanza della Segnatura* also houses Raphael’s *Disputation on the Sacrament*, a purely Christian work which was created first. Taken in whole the Raphael Rooms present a journey from antiquity to the Christian Age, and served as Julius II’s personal study/library. Each section housed related sources and as Julius was a man of learning, he sought to show his approval and renown for scholarly pursuits while maintaining an overall Christian message of Christianity being the end that all the past searched for.⁵³

In his personal life, Raphael is noted for his generally kind and pleasant demeanor. Orphaned at age eleven and having studied under his artist father and then other great masters, he

⁵¹ Müntz, *Raphael*, 87.

⁵² Giorgio Vasari, trans. Gaston du C. De Vere, “Raphael of Urbino” in *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (ePublishing: Studium Publishing, 2018), <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/metabook?id=livespainters>.

⁵³ M. Smolizza, “Rafael y el Amor,” *Idea y Sentimiento* (2007): 29–77.

was well liked by the people and his patrons alike. Called the “prince of painters,” Raphael was most often praised for his ability to maintain the reverence of religious figures while making them appear more human than Medieval art. Vasari states that Raphael may have been considering a cardinal position after such close friendships with Leo X and Julius II which may account for his delaying his marriage that was supposed to occur before meeting his longtime partner, Margarita Luti.⁵⁴ His funeral drew vast crowds and mourners, and while noted to have had numerous affairs in his life, his one constant mistress, Margherita Luti entered a nunnery after his passing. This is particularly interesting because Vasari also notes that Raphael “sent away his mistress before making his will, but gave her enough to keep her in comfort,” but Luti left a well provided for life for solitude out of heartbreak.⁵⁵

Another giant of the age was Leonardo da Vinci, a renaissance man in thought and action. His endeavors far exceeded just the artistic field of painting as he is also noted for his far-reaching engineering foresight in flight, mathematics, architecture, and philosophy. As far as his ideology of faith, he believed in God, as “the motive power” causing all life, making “Our body dependent on heaven and heaven on the Spirit.”⁵⁶ His logical faith can be seen in his prayers, found in his notebooks which are largely on the value of painting, how to convey meaning in art, and philosophy. Da Vinci states that, “I obey Thee Lord, first for the love I ought, in all reason to

⁵⁴ Müntz, *Raphael*, 38-52.

⁵⁵ Giorgio Vasari, trans. Gaston du C. De Vere, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (ePublishing: Studium Publishing, 2018), 230, <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/metabook?id=livespainters>.

⁵⁶ Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, trans. Jean Paul Richter, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publishing, 2016), 1138-1139.

bear Thee; secondly for that Thou canst shorten or prolong the lives of men.”⁵⁷ He shows a personal admiration for God but also a fear and awe at the power of God over all people.

In addition to this personal reverence, da Vinci’s perception of God as the Creator can be seen as he exclaims, “O admirable impartiality of Thine, Thou first Mover; Thou hast not permitted that any force should fail of the order or quality of its necessary results.”⁵⁸ While the phrase ‘first mover’ may connote a sense of Deistic belief, da Vinci also emphasizes the continuance of God’s plan, order, and results. In other parts of his notebooks, da Vinci relates painting to the philosophy of God. Extrapolating on the expression ‘a picture is worth a thousand words,’ da Vinci says that paintings and art last longer and are more remembered and valuable than the legacy of poetry. As he puts it, “Write up the name of God in some spot and setup His image opposite and you will see which will be most revered.”⁵⁹

Da Vinci argues that since fine art presents nature to the viewer as God presents nature to us on earth, “it is the grandchild of nature; for all visible things are produced by nature, and these her children have given birth to painting. Hence, we may justly call it the grandchild of nature and related to God.”⁶⁰ Da Vinci however did not experience the same turn to evangelical, *spirituali* revivalism like Michelangelo or the otherworldly continuation in art like Raphael. He shunned those who spend their time debating over miracles while rejecting mathematics, and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 1132.

⁵⁸ Da Vinci, *Notebooks*, 1134.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 654.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 652.

Leonardo affirms his belief in a rationally minded God who would promote understanding and valuing the nature He created.

For Leonardo da Vinci, his painting was both a logical expression of mathematics and order and a way to channel the divine to those who view his art. His own advice notes that “Envy must be represented with a contemptuous motion of the hand towards heaven...show her as wounded in the eye by a palm branch and by an olive-branch, and wounded in the ear by laurel and myrtle, to signify that victory and truth are odious to her.”⁶¹ This emphasis on plant life and natural elements symbolizing human fate, fall, and fulfillment are plentiful in his work.

According to the University of Florence Natural History Exhibits, throughout the works of da Vinci, flora and fauna were used symbolically and largely as religious messages. The carnation was a symbol of Jesus’ sacrificial death and Mary’s supernatural love for Him, cypresses were associated with death as they were customarily a funerary plant, and lilies represented purity. Da Vinci used these plants because they were local to Florence and thus people would already have associations with them, and his art would convey these meanings to the viewers in local churches.⁶² In his personal scientific inquiries and artistic endeavors, Leonardo da Vinci sought advancements and also to convey a lasting legacy to his audience. Deeply ingrained with a passion for painting and believing art to be an avenue to the soul and to the future, da Vinci also believed in God as the intelligent designer who continued to give meaning to man, his mind and his efforts.

⁶¹ Ibid., 677.

⁶² University of Florence, “Leonardo e la Storia Naturale,” University of Florence Museum Exhibits, Florence, Italy, May 24 2019.

Viewership and Artistic Technique

The innovative thinkers of the Renaissance are paralleled by the innovative works of art they created. Not only was art more realistic, it exhibited naturalism and was designed to be enjoyed by men, with dimensions best suited for viewing. Masaccio's *Trinity*, cited as the first work clearly using linear perspective in the Renaissance, is framed intentionally, mirroring the formation of *Or San Michele*, the Florentine church it is home to and is purposefully designed in regard to how spectators could view it. Masaccio's positioning of the work within a frame that is separated from the painting conceptually and physically, is represented as "an opening— as Alberti put it, a window— onto a painted world, onto a microcosm... a continuum between the painted and real worlds" as well as the material and spiritual.⁶³ A Siennese example of art framed for the worshipper is in Pietro Lorenzetti's great *Carmelite Altarpiece*, which presents "an artfully graduate contrast" of a formal, ethereal center and the informal, human peripheral shaded and resembling the natural, seen world.⁶⁴

The naturalism of the Renaissance, painting even religious figures more realistically and seeking inspiration from reality rather than ideal is in modern scholarly writing, often conflated with a rejection of religious beliefs for sole faith and instead for elevation of the modern man. However, rather than a turn to secularization, Princeton's Dr. John Shearman argues that the humanization of Mary, Jesus, and angels in Filippo Lippi's *Madona della Seggiola* (Madonna of

⁶³ John K. G. Sherman, *Only Connect--: Art and the Spectator In the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 67.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

the Chair) creates humanity “tempered by a compensating distance.”⁶⁵ Her natural position in a chair rather than on a throne connect her to the average Florentine.

Giottino’s *Lamentation* is notable for its figures’ realistic, grief-struck expressions as well as the fact that “donors in contemporary dress share a position of intimate and present witness.”⁶⁶ Positioned as mourners, donors could leverage themselves to be viewed as pious, but these depictions also served to make worshippers relate to the subjects of art: people they would have at least recognized in the locality and familiar enough to equalize themselves with spiritually. Indeed, the artistic technique of a linear progression through a work from most public to most inward and personal was a domestic convention. Spectators “reading the spaces realistically” were “placed on the inside, looking out, as Raphael will place himself in the history painting, *Fire in the Borgo*.”⁶⁷ Besides relatable figures in the art, Renaissance paintings also enticed the viewer to reflect on their messages with the formation of figures and the placement of the art itself.

Oftentimes, the large, overarching work in a church or large room was designed to be gazed at and inspected for long periods. In some works, like Pontormo’s *Entombment of Christ*, the viewer is connected to the saints’ sorrow by eye contact with an outward looking subject. The sweeping form of many paintings such as the *Entombment* were designed to point to the viewer standing under a large altar.⁶⁸ Additionally the formation of circles within a painting create movement, attract the eye to differences, and can often be used as symbols of genealogy

⁶⁵ Sherman, *Art and the Spectator*, 75.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 90.

or the repetition and connected nature of history, especially the common thread in the most commonly depicted spiritual events: Christ.

Art historian Norman Land argues that the impact of Renaissance art lies in the impact it had on its viewers. He cites Boccaccio and Dante's formulas for good poetry that state that one's writing must evoke the reader's imagination and emotions to be of lasting value.⁶⁹ The collision of art and poetry can be seen on Giuliano de' Medici's tomb on which the poet Giovanni Strozzi accompanied Michelangelo's statue of *Night* with the epigram:

Night, that you see in so sweet a pose
Sleeping, was carved by an Angel
in this stone; and because she sleeps, she has life.
Wake her, if you do not believe it, and she will speak to you.⁷⁰

Speaking to Giuliano de' Medici's legacy and directly to the viewer, Strozzi and Michelangelo challenge the Florentine visitor to examine the lifelike qualities, and otherworldly meaning carved in stone.

Guiliano, his son Cosimo, and grandsons Lorenzo the Magnificent and Cosimo II all came to prominence and domination over Florence with commercial and cultural influence. However, each son differed in their approach to the arts and its role in influencing the people. Florentines, predisposed to religious icons in a recent history of artistic innovation, most often sought beauty in the church. Knowing this, a primary way to earn the support of the Republic and gain international prestige was through commissioning religious and classical arts and promoting education. With most art depicting the Holy Family or life of Christ, there are

⁶⁹ Norman E. Land, *The Viewer as Poet: The Renaissance Response to Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 60-68.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 75-78.

instances of Medici family members depicted in the art as part of the procession coming to adore the Christ child or as triumphant or adoring saints.⁷¹ Likely to gain prestige, these works cannot be seen solely as political instruments of a manipulative state as that would undermine the intent and reception of the artist, viewer, and legacy.

Cosimo began the process of hiring young talents and the building of the family legacy, Lorenzo offered a diplomacy-driven commissioning approach by connecting major artists to the elite (including the Pope), and the educational centers that the Medici opened had Jesuit foundations under Cosimo II intermixed with a humanist outlook, the blending of secular philosophy in the midst of a Christian society.⁷² These familial ties and differences helped create the diverse artistic legacy of the Renaissance. While the established Medici family did seek to promote themselves through their patronage of the arts, they also sought to elevate their city and earn the goodwill of the common people who valued religious piety in a leader as something worthy of respect.

Leadership in Florence brought the city to immense prosperity and intellectual, artistic revival, but it was the great minds behind the patrons who created the works that make the Renaissance rebirth continue to the present day. The giants of the Renaissance brought about the rise of Humanism that was infused with faith, rather than a rejection of Christianity. Some of the greatest inquiries into antiquity are exhibited through painting and sculpture, as artists sought to transfuse the religious experience into the public realm and shaped their work around the human experience. Leonardo Da Vinci's symbolism and scientific techniques and Raphael's synthesis of

⁷¹ Tim Parks, *Medici Money: Banking, Metaphysics, and Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 54.

⁷² Kathleen Comerford, *Jesuit Foundations and Medici Power, 1532-1621* (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2016), 123.

divine and classical beauty additionally brought Renaissance intellectualism into the portrayal of religious figures. Michelangelo's personal involvement among the *spirituali*, as well as the profound influence of Augustine, changed his work and marks a distinct transition toward contemplating the individual's role in faith. Great writers and minds of the period used scholasticism to discuss and evaluate the role of the church and wrote on the eternal nature of the soul. While personal motives for prestige and allure existed in patronage and ego, the creative Renaissance men and women used their agency to research antiquity and glean lessons applicable to their day, a legacy attaching their talents and studies to the service of faith.

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