The Italian Renaissance: Dialectical Iconography of Perception

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Contents

Michelangelo, *Persian Sybil*, 1508-1512 fresco, Sistine Chapel,

1.Introduction

The Renaissance was an era, informed by history and shaped by the cultural conditions of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In this era, commonly described as a rebirth of ancient and classical wisdom, artists rapidly evolved and mastered the process of giving visible form to abstract ideas that conveyed meaning and message. In this book of images, ideas and research, I provide a position on the art history of the Renaissance necessary to understanding its meaning and discourse. I assert that the art from this era is reflective of a dialectic inquiry, manifested in imagery that sought to reconcile opposing ideas and opinions on the nature of reality, religion and power. From this viewpoint, the Italian Renaissance was an integral part and product of society. More than a rebirth of antiquity, it was a complex interplay of ideological and sociological influences that resulted in emergent and novel ideas.

2. Medieval Legacy

According to the era's art historian, Giorgio Vasari, the revival of antiquity began with Giotto, who began to depict the human form in a worldly context. The introduction of naturalism posed the first contradiction of the Renaissance; how could the window of heaven also include the inclusion of the world? In the late medieval, works increasingly incorporated elements that would help viewers to see things as tangible and believable. The predominance of paintings were iconic and sacred, meant to guide illiterate congregations in understand religious narrative and illicit worship , devotion and salvation. To suggest a secular nature presented a subtle and possibly subversive solution that heavenly presence could be perceived on earth. This emergent and avant-garde idea had far reaching implications for the art world.

Giotto, *St. Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata,* panel painting, 1295-1300, 10' x 5'

The circumstances for artists in the fourteenth century can be seen as a set of parameters that varied according to locale, patronage, and the intended message of the art works. The competing city-states of Florence and Siena exemplified the influence that dictated the function of artworks. In Florence, Giotto painted frescoed narrative scenes commissioned for a private family chapel whereas the artist Duccio was commissioned by the City of Siena to paint an impressive icon of the Virgin Mary for the Cathedral. As artists working under a set of parameters, each still contributed their unique approach to subject matter, medium and content as can be seen in the examples below. Giotto's approach suggests a rough naturalism with muted colors and weighted figures grounded in physical space while Duccio exemplifies the conventions of depicting spiritual icons with heavenly elongated figures and lavishly ornate gold and ultramarine embellishments. The differences between the two approaches define the assertion that Florence was the nexus of a distinct Renaissance idea, while Sienese art would remain devoted to a conservative tradition.

Giotto, *The Entombment of Christ,* c.1303,
Fresco, Arena Chapel

Duccio, *Virgin and Child with Saints (Maesta),*
1308-11, Tempera on panel, 7x 13'

3. Competition and Imitation: Gentile da Fabriano and the Altarpiece Style

Perhaps it is human nature to compete with opposing threats to ideas and conventions. It is only natural to establish newer and more innovative ideals that are then emulated or rejected. In the Renaissance, patrons funded the competitions that built cities and adorned them, while artists and the organized guilds that accompanied them competed for commissions that could secure their status. While competition was highly prevalent in the Renaissance, I assert that our modern retrospective perception conflates the realities of how much Orthodox Christianity, through it's confraternal patrons, influenced the imitation rather than then development of style. Repeated subject matter reinforced the message of the church and controlled the viewer's perception. The subtle nuances of style would have less impact on commoners than the larger than life focus on religious subjects. For altarpieces, their position inside of churches remain consistent focal points for congregations to center their meditations. In the slow and subtle confluence of styles, artists increasingly utilize techniques to create naturalistic figures that are set in architectural settings that suggest being grounded on earth. However, I argue that the functional convention of the altarpiece will continue to dominate the changes in stylistic form that emerge during the fifteenth century.

One hundred years after Duccio completed his *Maesta,* Gentile da Fabriano painted the altarpiece *Coronation of the Virgin.* The altarpiece reflects stylistic progression, yet mainly retains conventions for religious paintings. Thaumaturgic and devotional, the *Coronation* is most reflective of the International Gothic style.

Chiavello Chiavelli, the likely patron for Gentile's *Coronation* would have dictated that the altarpiece have a certain function and structure. The scene was to depict a devotional experience that incited the viewer to feel connection to the divine. This intention is very different than Giotto's narratives, meant to illustrate the life of Christ decoratively on the walls of the Arena Chapel.

Naturalistic elements influenced by Giotto converge within the spiritual spaces of Duccio and reflect a coexistence between function and subject. Yet the compositional structure of altarpiece remained as a window for viewers to perceive the divine. Thus, both artists can be said to influence Gentile da Fabriano, but religious influence sought to preserve conventions that reinforced ultimate superiority.
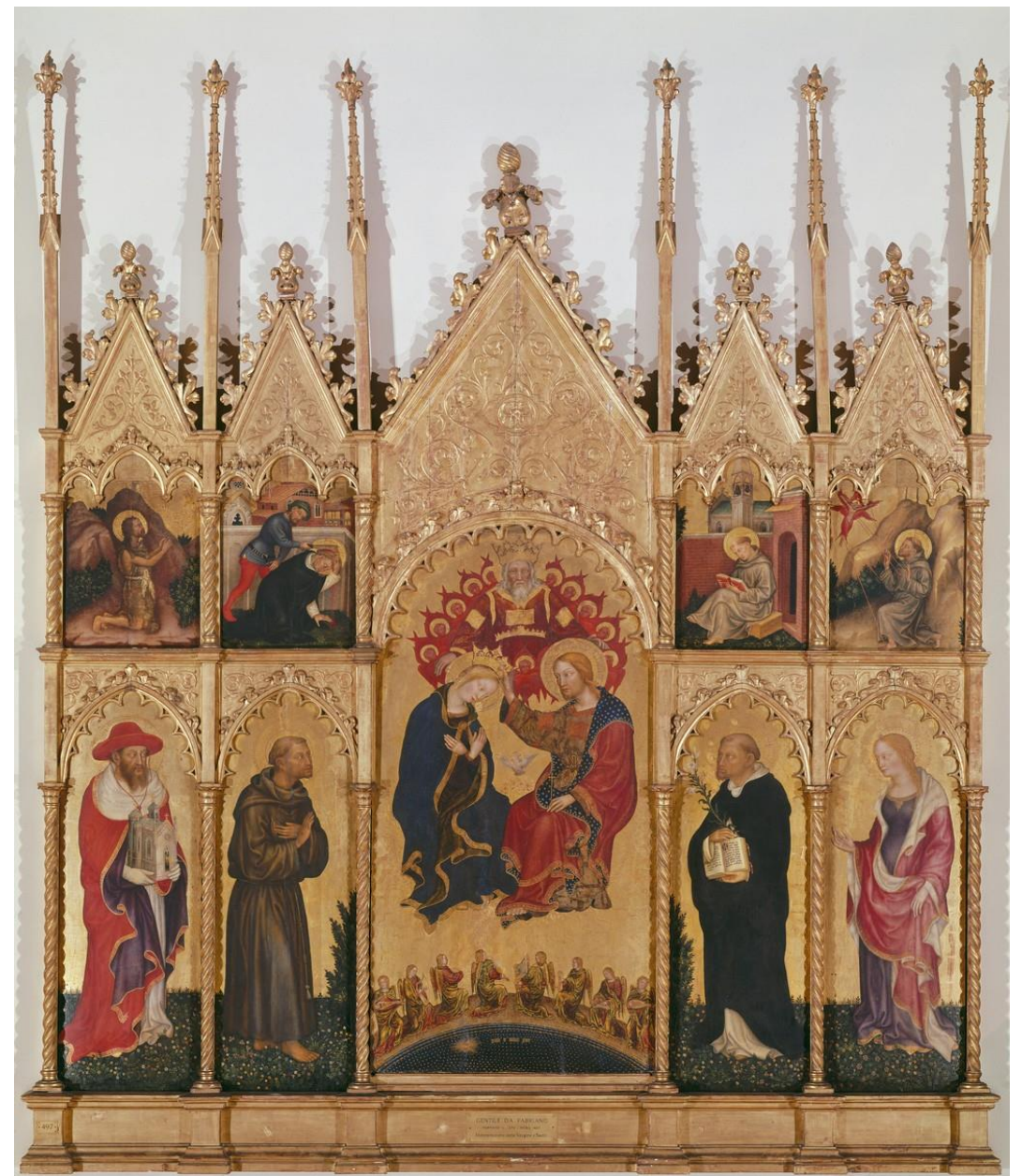
Gentile da Fabriano, *Coronation of the Virgin,* 1408-1410, Tempera on panel

Sassetta, *Virgin and Child with Six Angels,* 1437-1444,
tempera and gold leaf on poplar

Gentile's influence can be seen in the large altarpiece by Sasseta completed in 1444. While the triptych frame is simplified, the focus of the altarpiece is to illuminate the divinity of the figures. The artist seems to struggle to represent naturalistic features and anatomical proportion, though some modeling adds volume to their attributes. Line is used to suggest the draping of fabric, yet the crude foreshortening and rigid poses reflect statuary more than suggest depth. A crude perspective suggests the patterns of the rug under her feet recede back to the base of her throne before the throne itself shows a wider front seat than the back, yet the Virgin's flatness seems imposed rather than to sit. The only suggestion of the setting to be fixed in the natural world is the glimpse of floral shrubs behind the throne. The slight presence of naturalism within an illuminated space reflects that the dialectical conversation was seeking a more human image, yet remained framed in convention.

Sassetta

Gentile da Fabriano

Like Gentile, Sasseta is more aligned with a Byzantine sentiment for spirituality and less of mundane awareness. This can be seen in the enlarged scale of the main figures, which take up so much of the space; there is little reference to depth besides the crude receding lines of the rug and throne chair. While the coloration seen in Sasseta's altarpiece does not reflect the rich colors used by Gentile, the predominance of green and red suggest that layers of pigment have faded to reveal the under-painting. What reinforces this is that the deep ultramarine gown the Virgin is wearing remains fast and shows a similarity with the coloration Gentile used. The use of gold to set the scene in a celestial space is another shared likeness between the two. Like Gentile, Sasseta suggests elements of the natural world, yet remains adherent to the structure of convention.

All of the figures below the vaulted arches are engaged in different poses with gazes fixed in different directions giving the composition the feeling of a moment captured in time. The two figures to either side of the central panel are standing in naturalistic contrapposto. The artist has used light and shadow to create a gradation of values that can be seen in the way that the Virgin's thighs are flattened in order to support the infant. The top is highlighted with a tint of the blue and as the garment falls to the floor, the hue is darkened in shadow. Yet for all the attention to rendering more naturalistic figures, the architectonic space is shallow and remains framed within a golden background. The figures are rendered with great skill, showing foreshortening, chiaroscuro and active postures to enhance the believability of the scene.

Niccolo da Foligno, *Virgin and Child with Saints,* 1462, Tempera on panel

Niccolo da Foligno

Gentile da Fabriano

Fifty years after Gentile's *Coronation,* Niccolo da Foligno painted *Virgin and Child with Saints* in a style that extends the development of Gentile's style and reflects the greater developments of style towards the end of the fifteenth century. Still, like Gentile and Duccio, the function of the work remains in the jurisdiction of the church, who had also evolved with the socio-cultural influences of the time. The evolution of sacred imagery manifested into refined techniques that depicted golden luminance that remains consistent to Gentile's style. The continuity in style can be seen in this light, creating a more detailed naturalism and retention of the northern sentiments for spiritual infusion. The Virgin is still larger than life, yet her seated posture is believable by the angle in which her thighs recede and the darkness of value in the space between. The folds of her robe no longer float weightlessly, rather seem to align with gravity.

Conclusion

As the division between locales dissipated in the later part of the fifteenth century, artists began to work in styles that were influenced from several sources and became increasingly informed by personal choice. Along with this greater artistic input, artists began to associate with the new avant-garde style that began with Giotto and emerged in Florence. As we will see in the next chapter and reflected in the continuity of devotional imagery discussed in this chapter, some artists rejected the new developments in style and remained devout to a conventional style. In this regard, the altarpieces that have been compared reflect the dialectical process artists engaged upon when addressing the problems of depicting celestial beings; the contradiction inherent in attempting to relate abstract ideas with common understandings required the divine to take human forms. This lent itself easily to religious narrative of saints and biblical figures, yet did not address their location in space. Ascended beings such as Mary had to retain a spiritual hierarchy that reflected her positioning floating, enthroned and illuminated, yet artists were hesitant to depict her on the same level as the saints. Hence, she remained central, haloed and in the company of angels. I argue that these issues address the stylistic differences between artists such as Giotto and Duccio; further they explain how the larger movement was defined by the emergence of new ideas and the exploration of those ideas that resulted in either their incorporation and imitation, or their rejection. Thus, the Sienese influence established a conventional approach to religious imagery that dominated the style of artists such as Gentile and his contemporaries, who were able to develop unique styles within the parameters set by the commissions they relied upon.

4. Perspective: Rationality vs. Intuition
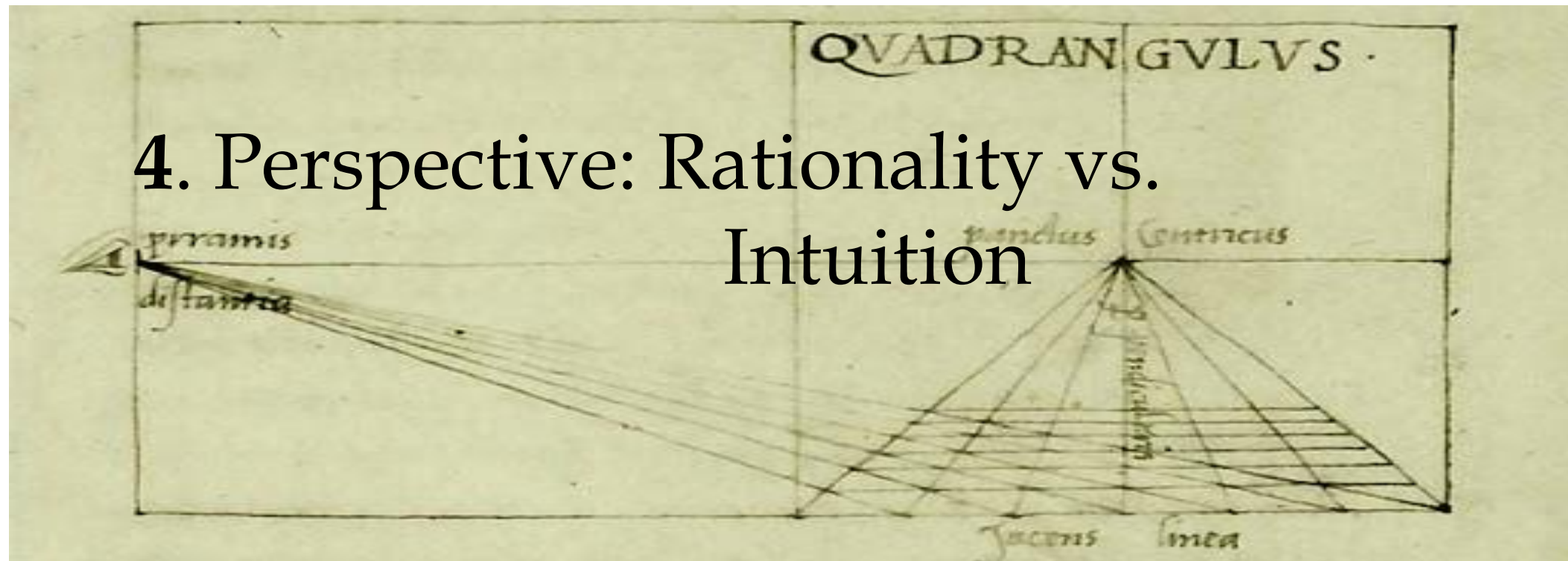
The creation of the system of linear perspective was a defining characteristic in the emergence of an avant-garde, Florentine movement. The ability to place naturalistic figures into a believable space not only merged spiritual ideas with human embodiment, it provided artists the creative power to imagine a complete reality on two-dimensional surfaces. The rational and mathematical convergence with art introduced the science of perspective in Alberti's treatise *On Painting* that would bridge the gap between the world of humanism and the world of art. The implications not only elevated the creative potential of artists, it elevated their social status and by the beginning of the sixteenth century, would spread and influence artists across Italy. Not all artists embraced this approach; those who rejected perspective remained traditional such as Sienese artists, who saw the rational approach as limiting and inhibiting to the creation of large scale murals or disruptive to the decorative linear calligraphy that stressed pictorial surface over the illusion of depth.

Matteo di Giovanni, *Massacre of the Innocents,* 1480, Oil of panel

Leonardo da Vinci, Annunciation of the Virgin, 1475-1478, Oil on wood, 98 x 217 cm

On the left, Matteo di Giovanni, who was commissioned by and associated with Siena, created this work that demonstrates the use of intuitive perspective. The Siena school rejected the science of linear perspective that is exemplified by Leonardo da Vinci's work on the right. The distinguishing component in the *Annunciation* can be seen in the creation of the illusion of depth that brings a focus to the drama taking place between the two main figures. In contrast, the *Massacre* relies on other means to establish space. Because the lines are distorted, the room lacks a sense of depth which further compounds the chaos taking place in the foreground. There is a suggestion of dimensionality in the arches, yet the conclave to the right does not suggest any depth. The buildings in the back do not create a sense of distance because the orthogonals do not correspond with the receding lines from the architecture. The clarified space on the right helps to accentuate the gestures of the Virgin and the angel. The symbolic relationship can be witnessed by the viewer who could be present in the imagined space. Giovanni's depiction resembles the intricate, flattened shapes associated with tapestries that tell a story more than a believable space that one could enter.

5. Masterpiece Analysis
Ghirlandaio's *Assumption of the Virgin*

Figure 1
Ridolfo Ghirlandaio, *Assumption of the Virgin with St John the Baptist*, c. 1519-24, restored after 1530. Panel, 380 by 248 cm

Figure 2
Ghirlandaio (possibly Michele di Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio), *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1572.

The *Assumption* attributed to Ridolfo Ghirlandaio and dated at 1572 could only have been completed by his heir and artistic pupil, Michele Tosini because Ridolfo had died in 1561. Because of the limited literature available, and according to Vasari's *Vita*, dates for the artist work after 1520 most likely include the collaboration with Tosini and the Ghirlandaio workshop. What little research into the matter that has been done shows that the work completed solely by Ridolfo was titled *Assumption of the Virgin with St John the Bapist* and was from 1519-1524 (figure 1). According to research by David Franklin, Vasari's description made indicated that the altar piece was damaged in storage during the siege of Florence and subsequently restored and completed by Ghirlandaio alone and that he added a self-portrait that can be seen standing to the left of the tomb as seen in figure one. For this analysis I will be looking at the *Assumption of the Virgin* dated to 1572 (figure 2). The painting was most likely executed by the late Ridolfo's close friend and pupil Tosini, who was also called Michele di Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio on account of their close relationship and may explain how the painting was attributed to the deceased Ridolfo Ghirlandaio.

Figure 3

In this *Assumption of the Virgin*, the scale is moderate at nearly nine feet tall by about six feet wide. The composition is nearly symmetric on the vertical axis and relies on the pyramidal relationship between Mary in the upper register and the three main characters in the bottom two-thirds. This division is delineated by a thick and heavy cloud that spans the entirety of the piece from one side to the other and holds six kneeling seraphim, three on either side of the Virgin Mary. She is kneeling, her right foot holding down one of three cherubs in playful dialogue around her. If Mary had been focused and centered with her hands in prayer a moment before, she is now peering down and to her right, distracted in her attempt to settle the cherubs who have been running in circles around her. Two pairs of the seraphim seem to be whispering comments to each other while one extends her left arm as if to offer an interjecting request for order (figure 3).

Even the bodiless, floating angel heads lack a shared attention on the focal point of Mary entering heaven as each gaze gaily at different aspects of the scene. If events above the cloud were as unruly as the gestures allude, the lack of visual organization above is being reacted to, albeit unknowingly below. The four figures in the foreground seem to each be seeking the same answer with similar anticipation in their furrowed brows. The figure to the far left holds his right hand against his thigh as he leans gingerly towards the character in the yellow draping gown as if he is about to ask for updated information. This figure stands in front of the tomb located in the lower corner of the compositional pyramid. He holds his head slightly elevated as he gazes diagonally upwards, yet his sight of what is beyond is blocked by the ceiling made from heavy and opaque clouds (figure 4).

Figure 4

With his right hand he gestures as if he is trying to listen. With his left hand he holds two keys, one resting on the flat surface of the closed book he holds and the other connected to the same lanyard dangles off the edge. Creating the second of three points in the pyramidal composition, a figure in a red robe kneels to the right of the tomb and props themselves up with their left hand on an upright book. She is pointing towards the previous figure and at the same time looking back towards the viewer over her left shoulder. The third point of the pyramid is occupied by a character that kneels and peers upwards gesturing with his left hand open as if expecting to encounter a vision from above. In the center of the lower composition sits a flowered garland on the top of the tomb. In the lower background under the dark shadow created from the cloud, eight characters stand with various expressions ranging from quietly waiting to sharing commentary on the scenario with one another. The character directly behind the tomb clasps his hands while hunching over under his garment as if he were cold.

What stands out in this composition is that the subject matter is addressed in a very unconventional manner. Throughout the ages and certainly in the 16th Century, many famous iterations of the *Assumption* had been created by artists such as Filippino Lippi, Ghiberti, and Correggio. All of the previous versions, including the original painting by Ghirlandaio in the 1520s, address the subject with a spiritual rigidity showing glorified reverence for the ascended Mary. This version, however takes the concept of naturalism to the extreme in the much more honest portrayal of Mary as a motherly woman; we see a patient yet amusingly disheveled Mary doing her best to mitigate a breach of focus during what should be an austere occasion. This seems to upset the balance of the whole composition; instead of the traditional narrative that reinforces the authority of the church, there seems to be an unexpected interruption in the drams that is unfolding. The cherubs seem to be holding up the show while the apostles below attempt in vain to make sense of the situation. The symbolic flowers lay on the tomb, yet none of the characters acknowledge their presence as a sign from Mary. Even with the keys to heaven in his possession, the central character is forced to take pause and use his senses to figure out what is happening. According to historical knowledge of religious symbols in art, an open book signifies obedience to God, education, knowledge and wisdom. The closed book symbolizes incomplete knowledge and may explain the sense of suspension and confusion from the character in the yellow garment who could be St. Paul or a member of the Medici family.

The only female figure of the group besides Mary is using her weight upon a closed book and may be subverting Gods Holy Law in favor of a more humanistic and feminist truth. She looks elsewhere for answers she may not find from the figure to her left even though he possesses the symbols of papal power in the two keys. The artist was making a statement by placing the keys intentionally out of St. Paul's hands and separated on the closed book in such a manner that the weight of one may cause them both to drop to the ground. Meanwhile, the seraphim are at a loss as to how to proceed with the "assumption" of Mary, yet they seem to defer to the moment shrugging and gesturing uninhibitedly while the cosmic humor of the situation is merrily enjoyed by the bodiless angels in the background. There is nothing above the clouds that is suggestive of a masculine God or presence of Jesus; a warm radiance illuminates the space Mary inhabits suggesting familiarity and safety as opposed to the high and intense climatic arenas of heaven depicted on massive scales on sprawling and concentric ceilings such as created by Correggio. The artist has portrayed what is typically a regimented and spiritual occasion as the epitome of motherly reality in a similar fashion as his contemporary and friend Raphael in *Sistine Madonna*. This femininity cannot be completely understood by the authority of the church, represented by the closed books and uncrossed set of keys held by St. Paul below. The only female in the group turns her gaze towards the viewer, gestures to the irony of the scene unfolding beside her and beckons them to watch what is about to unfold before their earthly eyes (figure 5).

**Figure 5**

6.Portraits of Women and Men

Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici in Armor*, 1543

Sofonisba Anguissola, *Infanta Catalina Micaela (Lady with an Ermine)*, 1590

Humanist belief in the value of the individual led to the dominance of the Italian portrait starting in the late fifteenth century. Influenced from Northern Italy where icons had been replaced by exquisitely rendered portraits, the Italian portrait began as more symbolic and idealized and progressed throughout a century to reflect a deeper psychology and emotion. Social-cultural views of male and female roles where supported or challenged through the presence or absence of emblematic embellishments; ideals were invented, status' were portrayed, dynasties were secured, and norms were challenged. In this comparison, I will show the different standards that existed for representing women and men, and how these change over time.
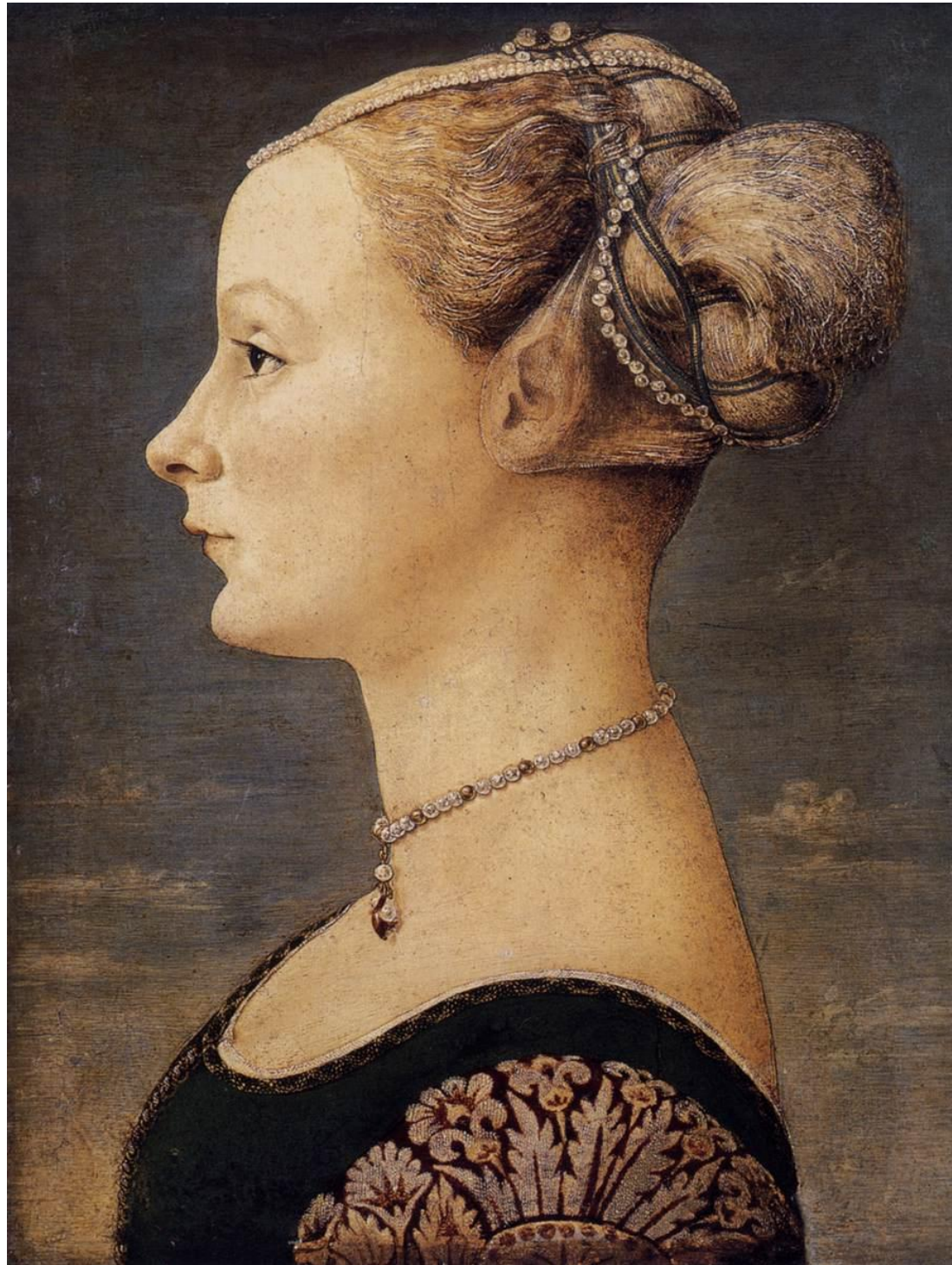
Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, 1467-70. Panel, 46 x 34 cm

The influences of naturalism and symbolism combined in portraits to produce believable representations of human anatomy, yet the idealization of human attributes was highly conventionalized in the late fifteenth century. In real life, both women and men sought to portray standards of character in different ways that were depicted by artists whom, through the visual image, were able to reinforce those ideals. Antonio de Pollaiuolo's *Portrait of a Young Woman* exemplifies the idealization of the female as beautiful and pure through presenting her in a full profile format. She has all the attributes associated with the image of physical beauty; her elegant dress, necklace and transparent veil sumptuously contain her features. Her blonde hair, fair skin, and elongated neck show perfect proportion and features. Even her upper lip demonstrates an ideal overbite, highly regarded in poetic descriptions of beautiful women. That she is nameless and not bound by a domestic space suggests she is of the imagination. She does not address the viewer, leaving how she is to be regarded ambiguous and for the beholder.

As the idealized female was depicted in full profile view, the male was depicted in a frontal and confrontational format. The frontal format reinforced the male status primarily as a political symbol, yet as with Botticelli's *Portrait of a Young Man,* may be presenting the ideal potential for becoming a prominent figure of society. His expression is confident and well mannered with strong facial features that are highly naturalistic as opposed to the generalized features of Pollaiuolo. Painted closely in time to each other, Botticelli's portrait shows that the Flemish influence on Italian portraits came sooner for the depictions of males than they did with females, who were idealized longer. The darkened background emphasizes the focus of the portrait on the figures facial features and his red beret and clothing, which indicated his social class. This presented the subject's actual physical characteristics rather than the ambiguous and psychological interpretation left in the ungrounded atmosphere created by Pollaiuolo.

Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of a Young Man,* c.1480, Tempera and oil on wood, 37.5 x 28.3 cm

Raphael, *Maddalena Strozzi Doni*, 1506, Oil on panel, 63 x 45 cm

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, portraits followed the advancements that artists such as Leonardo has accomplished regarding including a deeper sense of the inner world of the sitter. Raphael, built on these advancements and added his own contribution in the form of *varieta'* or variety. *Maddalena* was painted as a marriage portrait and exemplifies the earliest impacts of the *Mona Lisa* , particularly in the attention to her hands. Raphael used her hands for both formal variety and to display the wealth and status of the family. Her three-quarter view reflects the progression of how females were depicted in that she is no longer non-confrontational; her gaze does not allow the viewer to access her beauty unchecked. Here her beauty is just as idealized by Raphael's emphasis on exaggerating her proportions to convey beauty, yet she is situated in a landscape, which establishes her as real and also shows the influence of Flemish motifs now apply. The rich coloration of her garments, the display of her wealth, education and beauty address the viewer in three-quarter posture, asserting that the standards for depicting women have changed to include her intellect, beauty and status.

Ghirlandaio retains a frontal format in his *Portrait of a Young Man,* yet instead of the conventional representation of a male, he presents a glimpse into a moment of retrospection and contemplation. Here, the figure's head is tilted slightly to the right as he gazes down at the emblem he holds gingerly in his right hand. His left hand draws back his cloak as if he is taking a private moment to connect with something that makes him feel. The sfumato and chiaroscuro add to the psychology of the portrait. In the background, features of landscape and several figures are shrouded in a misty atmosphere that moves the eye to the focus of the painting in a way that suggests veiled thoughts and inner emotion. The expressive hands connect Raphael and Ghirlandaio's portraits, yet it is *Maddalena's* hands that display emblems of wealth and status, whereas the male's hands in this portrait cherish a single emblem. The viewer will not miss the beauty and status of the woman, yet the man asserts no intent to express his role or power in society, rather he shows that he is capable of internal emotion that his expression fully reveals.


Ridolfo Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of a Young Man (Goldsmith),* 1517, Oil on panel, 43.5 x 31.4 cm

Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of Costanza Alidosi*, 1594, Oil on Canvas, 157 x 120 cm

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the convention of dynastic paintings secured members of nobility into perpetuity. In this painting by Lavinia Fontana, the viewpoint of the painter has allowed almost all of the figure to be presented. She takes up most of the space ensuring her status as the focus of the painting. In this official image of an elite family, emblems of wealth and status adorn the figure as well as the setting. Here, she engages the viewer from an inside space rather than outside. The commemorative portrait sought not to show psychology, but a personal legacy for the future.

In a very different representation of a male in portraiture, Bronzino is not painting an image meant to define a personal legacy, rather he is making a statement on the legacy of art itself. Exemplifying all the advancements of technique in Italian painting to depict surface texture, esquisite rendering of anatomy and capturing meaning, Bronzino's *Portrait of a Man Holding a Statuette* signals the development of personal artistic style. The standards for depicted males had changed significantly by the end of the sixteenth century and artists were no longer the means to projecting personal power and status. Rather, artists were claiming autonomous and equal status with contemporary intellectuals and making statements regarding the status of the arts as the ultimate expression of universal, lasting truth through the manifestation of the imagination as the created image.
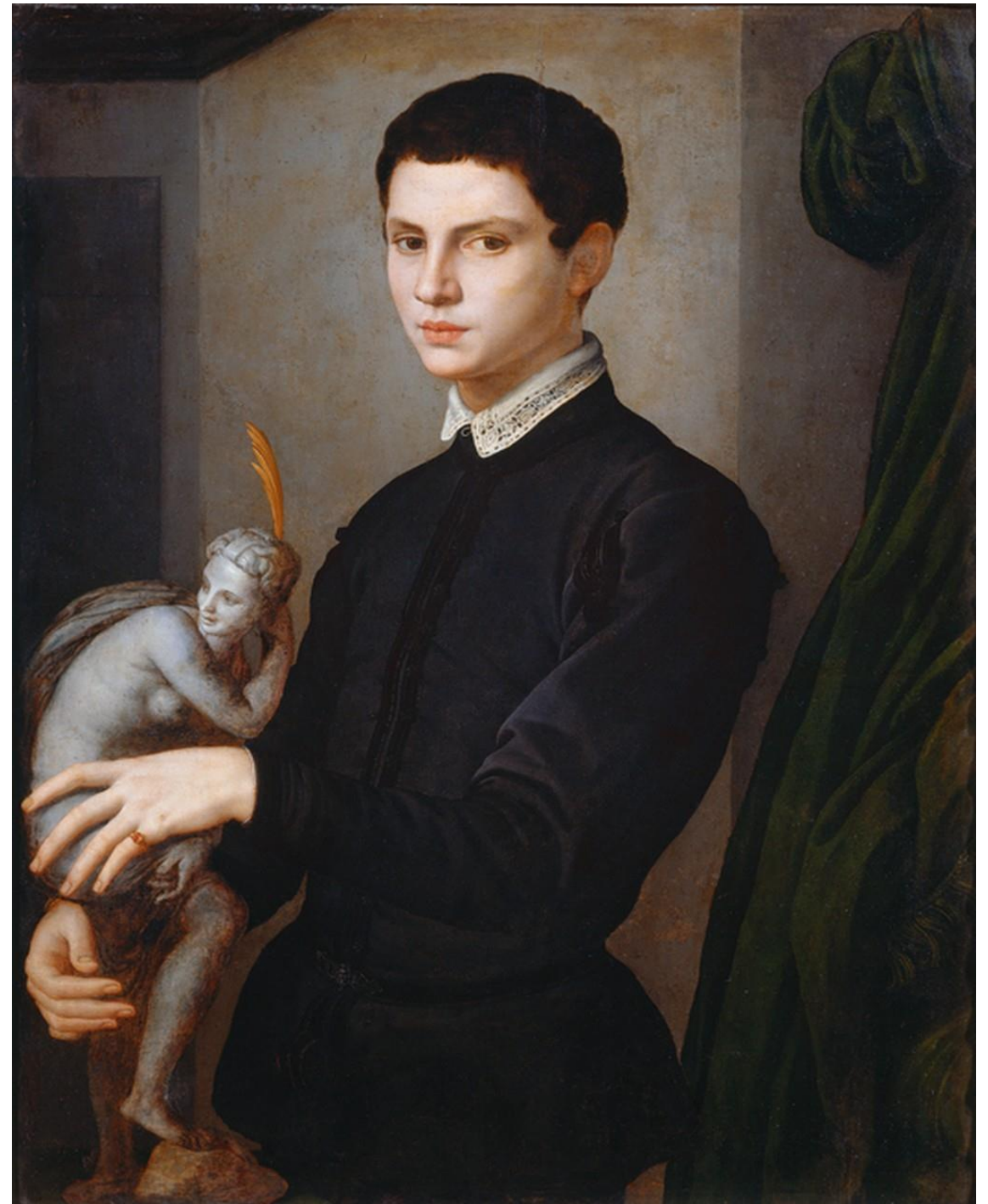
Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of a Man Holding a Statuette*, 1545, Oil on canvas, 99 x 79 cm

Conclusion
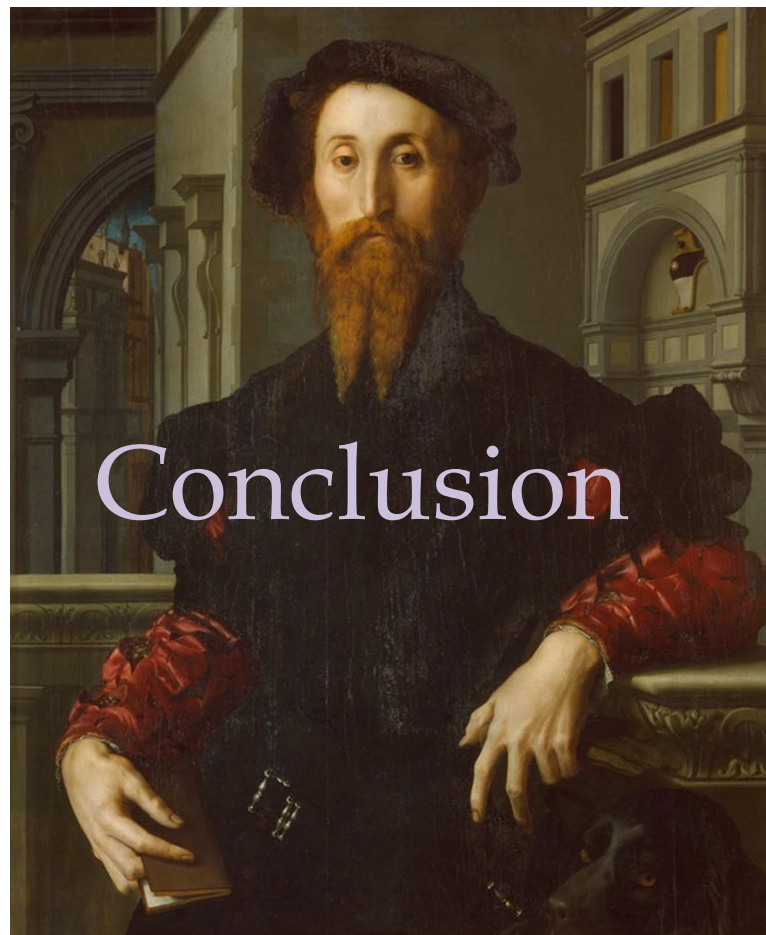
Agnolo Bronzino,
*Portrait of Bartolomeo
Panciatichi*, 1540, Oil
on panel, 104 x 84 cm

It is important to take into consideration the many different views of how we have interpreted the portrayal of women and men in the Renaissance portrait. The dialectic between regard for women has sought to reconcile the ideal and real amidst differing beliefs across time. These range from the idealization of beauty to regarding the intellectual and emotional inner world of women to the display of women's status as equal and powerful to that of the male. In terms of the male, occupational and societal standing evolved from prominent political messages of asserted power towards a reconciliation of his own. As artists became more independent, the male became less a symbol of power than an allusion to art itself. Through the power of the imagination, great changes in male and female roles emerged and as artists made deeper inquiry into the nature of meaning, the figure would take on more subtle and provocative musings.

7. Changes Within the Renaissance

The changes that characterize the period of time from 1400 to 1550 are representative of a conflict between how religion was defined by orthodox Catholicism and the emergence of philosophy that sought to embody a more ancient definition of the idea. The perplexing interplay of influences that sought to reconcile an age old tension between heaven, earth and hell coexisted in era where the dialectic between what was, what was not and what could be imagined produced an amalgam of images that sought to depict the nature of reality. If we are to look at the Renaissance as an era, wherein artists rose to attain a meaningful contribution to the understanding of the sacred, secular and beyond, we must consider that it was the visual message that was used to uphold orthodox religion and at the same time it was the image that reconciled the inherent fragmentation that existed by offering alternative visions. By the decade of the 1550s, artists had successfully changed the cultural narrative from one of subservience to patriarchal control to the possibility of the imagination as the true hand of God. Through analyzing the changes in imagery produced during this era, it can be seen that artists sought to redefine the notion of religion by reclaiming vital ancient truths that organized religion had sought to demonize starting from the myth of original sin. The Renaissance was a reinstating, a rebirth, of an ancient way of thinking that merged opposing forces while still leaving room for the imagination to prevail. Through humanism and the study of ancient wisdom, artists created images that over time would reclaim a universal rather than dogmatic spirituality through iconography that increasingly reflected the coexistence of the sacred and secular nature of reality.
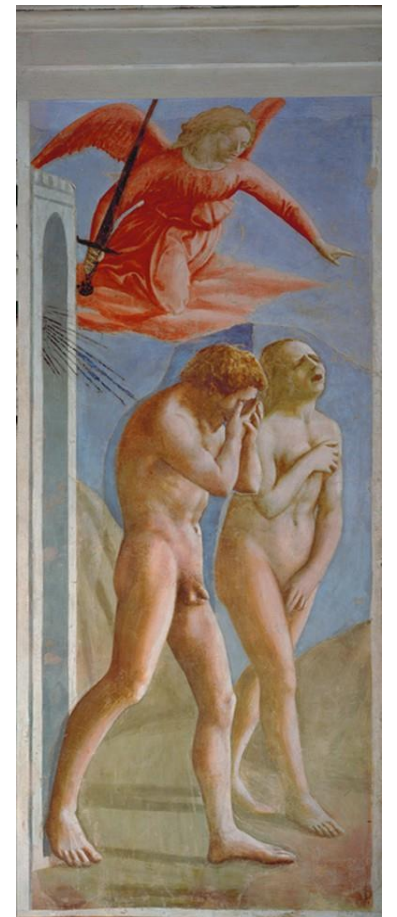
In the beginning of the quattrocento, this process was limited to artists who were still working in guilds as apprentices to more experienced artisans who were making didactic images for the Church. These images were defined by the customizing of a set of basic forms. [1]Because the church was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, it is no wonder that the majority of the subject matter and compositions of the early 1400s focus on heavenly depictions of the Virgin and Christ as a symbol of the rewards awaiting devout Christians. The miraculous powers that images of the Virgin Mary were attributed with began in the quattrocento as spiritual icons and can be seen in altarpieces such as Lorenzo Monaco's *Coronation of the Virgin* from 1414. Because religious communities, wealthy patrons and artists working in guilds were mutually dependent, the paradigm of the devotional image dominated the quattrocento. However, early on in the quattrocento, there existed a divide that separated Florentine painters from other localities such a Siena. Following that humanism existed before this time, along with the influence of Giotto's suggestion of naturalism, artist from Florence began to include elements that brought the sacred into the world. For example, painters acknowledged their patrons through adding references from their world to scenes that were intended to be other worldly.

Lorenzo Monaco, *Coronation of the Virgin,* 1414, 506 x 447.5 cm

Masaccio, *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden,* 1426-28,Brancacci Chapel

In Masaccio's *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden*, the viewer is introduced to the religious narrative frescos in the Brancacci Chapel by way of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. This introduction shows the source from which all Catholicism is found; the fall from grace because of Eve's mistake casts humanity into sinners, yet through Mary and Christ salvation is possible. Yet even in this early depiction, Masaccio paints the pair as nudes, and in motion, an attempt at naturalism that had not been carried out for a thousand years. Adam holds his face expressing his shame while Eve's face reveals her pain; yet her posture shows that Masaccio was aware of the classical prototype of the modest Venus. Ironically, that someone other than Masaccio later painted a vine that covered Adam and Eve's genitals is telling of the views held regarding nudity at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The artist may have been introducing a religious narrative, but he was also making a statement through presenting images that would be censored by the church.

What distinguishes this time period from earlier and later time periods within the Renaissance era was a conflict between the wisdom and beauty of the ancient world and the demands of orthodox belief and morality. For example, some painters remained working in a conventional style such as Filippino Lippi and Pietro Perugino, who made images that reflected religious piety of Savonarolan Florence. Other artists such as Luca Signorelli' pushed the opposite extreme by making statements about the end of the world through bold claims about the visionary power of poetry and imagination in images such as *Deeds of the Antichrist*.

Luca Signorelli, *Deeds of the Antichrist,* 1499-1502, Fresco

Through means of mythological invention and naturalistic mastery, the end of the quattrocento had elevated artists' status to the level they needed to reclaim autonomy and creative influence regarding subject matter that reflected a combination of contemporary and ancient truths. This evolution is exemplified in works such as Rapheal's *The School Of Athens,* where the four major areas of learning are represented: Theology, Philosophy, Poetry, and Law. As frescoes decorating a papal library, the implicative merging of spirituality and religion are demonstrated by the humanistic emphasis of learning and human evolution in Raphael's invention of bringing to life the historical practitioners across time into one painted space.

1500	Luca Signorelli, *Deeds of the Antichrist*
Compostition	Continuous narrative
Subject matter	Mythological Invention
Space	Perspectival ,rational
Figure	Anatomically precise, reflecting Albertian principles
Location	Cathedral of Orvieto, Bologna
Patronage	city's dominant faction
Artist's role	Established creative autonomy in depicting Italian poetry

1540	Titian, *Danae*
Compostition	Figurative portrait
Subject matter	Mythological symbolism; poesie
Space	Shallow interior with atmospheric background
Figure	Suggestive, sensual and soft, heavily layered to resemble alabaster
Location	Museo del Prado
Patronage	?
Artist's role	Working out a Venetian approach to painting

By the decade of the 1540s, the merging of mythology and naturalism had fully combined to produce paintings that reflected the modern philosopher's contemplation of nature and human nature. The focus on figures set in poetic, imaginary landscapes suggests the principles of Venetian painting as a rival tradition to that of Florence and Rome. Departing completely from the rational and geometrically based styles of the High Renaissance, a new generation of younger artists transformed the observational study of natural phenomena and structure into the investigation of artificial, single plane relationships between sensual and symbolic objects. After such perfection of naturalism, scientific rationality was abandoned as the basis of coherence between figures and space. As Christiane Joost-Gaugier states, elements that were, early on, the avant-garde became conventional and those that had been, early on, conventional became the new avant-garde. What distinguished this period from the beginning of the quattrocento or the beginning of the cinquecento was the emphasis on the poetic idea that contained alluring ambiguity which challenged the viewer participate in the making meaning.

One example of this was in the ambiguity of representing the female nude as either erotic image or mythological symbol. Titian's *Danae* was a new subject matter that tells a story through hand blended paint rather than illustrating a particular text. The intimacy created in the treatment of the figure is suggestive as opposed to the idealization or anatomical accuracy demonstrated by Leonardo or Durer. The stormy weather and gold coins are rich in symbolism, yet one observes divinity removed from a physical form. The nature of the environment becomes the poetic source of information in this image of personification and purity.

Titian, *Danaë*, 1544, oil on canvas, 129 x 180 cm

Bronzino, *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid, 1545, Oil on wood,* 146.1 x 116.2 cm

In another example of the changes that occurred in the 1540s, Bronzino's *Allegory with Venus, Cupid and Time,* exemplifies the erotic nature of subject matter and makes reference to the invocations of Venus to refer to the power of visual attraction and duality of human sexuality. The bodies of the figures are more believable as sculptured porcelain rather than painted representations of flesh. As a gift for King Francis, who was keenly interested in erotic subject matter, the sexual behavior is being revealed by father time as a warning of the trappings of sensual lust. This image is less about the unnatural tones of coloration as it is about the complexities of the story it tells through allusions to ideas represented through the emotions of the figures and the presence of objects that present a visual riddle of wonder.Possibly the meaning is more elusive and revealing about the nature of humanity; that it leaves us with more questions than answers may be part of the message. This decade was distinctive in that it was characterized by arousing the senses and engaging the imagination through the visual equivalent of poetic story.

By the end of the 1540s, the direction of artists reflected a rejection of the elements that glorified the earlier turn of the century. The scientific, rational depiction of anatomically idealized perfection could not have been exceeded after the accomplishments of artists such as Raphael and Michelangelo. Not unless, the inventive spirit is paralyzed by the perception that greatness has reached its apex. Instead, as Joost-Gaugier pointed out, that what had been seen early on as conventional became the continuing thread that leads the creative culture into Mannerism and beyond. As artists turned to the subtle, sensory world, the techniques of applying paint directly on the canvas focused the attention on blending both in the sense of material and meaning. The duality of human nature is such that artists, poets, philosophers, religious leaders, political leaders, the wealthy and the common citizen will all in their own way experience the eternal story; yet regardless, it is the imagination that prevails.

8. Renaissance Conclusion

The dialectical iconography of the imagination reflects the artistic process that sought to respond to the circumstances within the Renaissance era by drawing from the past and reaching for the novel. Regardless of the interpretations we ascribe to a historical time period, the Renaissance was the emergence of an idea, the exploration of an idea and the manifestation of that idea into visual forms. The art from this era is reflective of such inquiry, manifested in imagery that sought to reconcile opposing ideas and opinions on the nature of reality, religion and power. From this viewpoint, the Italian Renaissance was an integral part and product of society. More than a rebirth of antiquity, it was a complex interplay of ideological and sociological influences that resulted in emergent and novel ideas.