The High Renaissance

In my last lecture we considered the three outstanding masters of the early Renaissance, Donatello, Brunelleschi and Massaccio, and a group of painters, which included Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca and others who belonged to the first generation of the early Renaissance. Today I want to consider the work of some of the artists of the second generation of the early Renaissance; that is those who are active after 1450; and then turn to a discussion of the High Renaissance.

The first important architect of the Renaissance died in 1446. During the second half of the century the dominant architect was undoubtedly Leon Battista Alberti whom Burckhardt takes as his first example of that full development of the individual which is, of course, one of the features of the Renaissance. Alberti was particularly important for the art of the Renaissance as the first theorist of the new humanist art. His first Treatise On Painting was completed in 1435. It dealt with the theoretical basis of painting, particularly problems of proportion and perspective; his second treatise on Sculpture appeared in 1464, and finally his great work on architecture, De Re Aedificatoria (Ten Books on Architecture), was completed in 1452 and first published in 1485, modeled upon the earliest architectural treatise, the Ten Books of Architecture of Vitruvius.

You will find valuable extracts from his books on painting and architecture in volume one of Elizabeth Holts Documentary History of Art. It was Alberti who enunciated the theory of beauty which became so influential for the High Renaissance. He defined beauty as a ‘harmony and concord of all the parts, so that nothing could be added or subtracted except for the worse’. If one is going to understand and enjoy Renaissance architecture it is essential to grasp from the beginning that it was not based on theories of function and use to which most architecture at least pays lip service today, but upon a mathematical theory of proportion. Therefore to condemn Renaissance architecture because it is not functional is just about as sensible as defining beauty in terms of a pale skin and asserting that all coloured people are ugly.

Let us look at some examples of Alberti’s architecture in order to grasp his approach. First, the façade of the Palazzo Rucellai* completed in 1451. If we compare it with the Coliseum,* we note that Alberti’s inspiration in practice was Roman, as it was in theory, being grounded in Vitruvius. The Romans used the Greek Doric, Ionic and Corinthian orders not structurally as the Greeks did but as a form of visual articulation and embellishment of the wall surface. Here is the Palazzo Rucellai, Alberti has used the three orders, Doric, Ionic and Corinthian, superimposing one upon the other as the Romans did. But by contrast Alberti’s pilasters are so thin they appear to be almost a part of the wall. The problem which Alberti faced here was a central one for Renaissance architects, namely how to apply a classical system of orders, its proportions and articulations, to the exterior of a non-classical structure.
Let us turn next to Alberti’s church of San Andrea at Mantua designed in 1470. Here he has designed a new kind of temple front based on Roman architectural motifs; but in a way quite different from the temples of classical Rome. He has taken the three portal Roman triumphal arch* and used it as a motif to articulate the façade. It must be stressed that Albert is using antique motifs in a very free way; he is, in other words, not copying Roman building but using them to provide a system of motifs and a system of proportions to create a new kind of architecture, inspired by classical architecture yet not imitating it. If we compare the plan of St Andrea* with the plan of Brunelleschi’s S.Spirito* we will note that the whole plan is become wider, the dome over the crossing more prominent. This new compactness of plan will be a feature of eh Renaissance Church.

The compact plan was best expressed in Alberti’s ideal church, which was a centrally planned church; and the centrally planned church was a visible expression of the Divine Proportion, that so much exercised the minds of the Humanists, became of paramount importance for Renaissance church design. By far the best account of the development of the centrally planned church of the Renaissance is contained in R. Wittkower’s Important book Architectural Principles I the Age of Humanism. Alberti based his argument on the assertion that the circle was the most typical and most perfect of nature’s forms: the globe, the stars, trees, birds nests were all circular—or tried to be* and all other ideal geometrical figures, the square, hexagon, octagon and dodecahedron, were all determined by the circle. After Alberti’s treatise on architecture was published in 1485 the centrally planned church became popular. The church of Sta Maria delle Carceri* began in 1485 is an early example of the type. [The exterior; the interior].

This church, St Maria, was the first Greek Cross structure o the Renaissance, the plan being based on the two elementary figures of square and circle. The interior* shows the fine dome, the single light at the top represents Christ, the twelve lights below, the apostles, and the our roundels in the spandrels the evangelists. Albert’s harmonic symbolism was of course an essentially Christian symbolism. But it affords a striking contrast to the Gothic symbolism of men like the Abbot Suger for whom richness of effect both in light and precious materials was fundamental. For Albert and the architects of the Renaissance the emphasis is differently placed. A clearly stated mathematical order and the simplicity of whiteness symbolizing the purity of God has replaced the medieval desire for rich sumptuous effects.

The most important sculptor of the second half of the Quattrocento was Andrea del Verrochio, who was probably a pupil of Donatello. But Verrochio’s work reflects the different temple and spirit of the later Quattrocento. If we compare Verrochio’s David* ca 1476 with Donatello’s David* of 1430 we may note that Verrochio is concerned with lightness, grace, elegance of pose. Or if we compare Donatello’s
Gattamelata statue with Verrochio’s equestrian statue of Bartolomeo Colleone of 1485 we note that Verrochio’s interests are centered upon the rendering of movement and the sense of energy and power, a feature to become of the greatest importance in the work of his most famous pupil, Leonardo de Vinci.

The interest in rendering violent action and rapid movement is an important aspect of late quattrocento art. It was developed greatly in Florence in the workshop of the two brothers, Antonio and Pier Pollaiuolo.* Anatomical drawings become important; and it is possible that Antonio was one of the first artists to dissect human bodies. His style is best known from his *Battle of the Gods*, of which we have a copy at the Gallery.

This interest in anatomy and vigorous action continues in the work of Luca Signorelli, who had been a disciple of Piero della Francesca and combines in his work Piero’s solid and cubic feeling for form with the Pollaiuoli’s interest in dynamic movement. This may be seen clearly in Signorellio’s *Damned Cast into Hell* in Orvieto Cathedral. Here the nude human form has become a highly expressive instrumental and Singorelli’s art was to exercise a considerable influence upon Michelangelo.

All this was must realize was in large measure a working out of the potential of Donatello’s art. One of the most original artists to be directly influenced by Donatello was Mantegna who grew up and trained in Padua during Donatello’s ten year’s there. His master however, was the painter Squarcione, a humanist with archaeological interests and Mantegna’s art reveals close study of Roma ruins in his minutely accurate architectural settings. This may be seen in his frescoes of St James Led to Execution from the Eremitani Church, Padua (one of the great losses of the last war). Note too the interest in perspective devices. The vanishing point is here place below the base and to the right of the centre. In 1460 Mantegna settled in Mantua and there painted the frescoes of the *Camera degli Sposi* in memory of Ludovico Gonzaga and his family.* The ceiling fresco depicts figures looking down over a balcony, beneath an open sky. This is a most important development in perspective, being the first illusionistic *sotto in sù* (i.e. From below upwards) a device to be taken up later by Correggio and developed greatly as a pictorial device by the Baroque masters. Mantegna was also an extremely beautiful and delicate colourist, but his colour is always contained within a firm and wiry contour line.

By contrast Venetian art, to which we may turn for a moment, made use of softer contours and became interested in light and colour. We can see the emergence of these interests in the work of Mantegna’s brother-in-law Giovanni Bellini. The change may be observed in Bellini’s magnificent *Pieta* in the Brena Milan. It still has something of Mantegna’s sharp line, but the largeness and simplicity of the forms and the tragic pathos is Bellini’s own. Note, too, that in Bellini a landscape setting has been introduced, horizontal grey streaks against a luminous background suggestive of
a mood of hopelessness. The difference of persona; style and of regional style, Mantegna and Bellin, Padua and Venice, may be seen by comparing Manegna’s Agony in the Garden with Bellini’s Agony in the Garden, both in the National Gallery, London. Mantegna’ taking a low viewpoint places Christ well above us. Line is firm and there is much interest in detail, the withered tree, cormorant and rabbits; at top left a group of putti bearing the instruments of the passion; at right soldiers led by Judas; above, the city of Jerusalem.

Bellini’s Agony is more poetic; the lines of the rocks softened by the morning light. He makes far greater use of tone to turn the landscape into an expressive symbol of the agony; and the pink clouds of the dawn may well symbolize the coming Passion.

Late Quattrocento painting in Florence was markedly was markedly different. We have already noted the linear style of Andrea Contagne (? Fra Lippi?) in his Fra Lippo Uffazi Madonna (? Tobias and the Angel). This was continued and developed in the work of Lippi’s (?) pupil Boticelli, who became he favorite painter around the court of Lorenzo the Magnificent. During the last quarter of the fifteenth century.

The learned circle of poets and courtiers around Lorrenzo were deeply influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy which found expression in the work of the two leading humanists of the Lozeno’s Platonic Academy, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. Just as Brunellescho had gone back to the fourth century Christian basilicas of Rome for inspiration so did the humanists of Lorenzo’s court go back to the third century philosophers of Rome, Plotinus and Porhpory. Plotinus, like all mystics, was preoccupied with the one and the many, and saw all the universe as a kind of spiritual circuit, a Ferris wheel, moved from the top by the One or the Good. Ideas, World Soul, Material World: the individual can break fro the world soul by spiritual exercises such as ‘recollection’ that s concentrating the soul on the presence of the one, by this process sensibility, memory, and reasoning all disappear and one attains to a condition of joyously stupefied oneness with the one. By means of neo-platonic philosophy the humanists of Lorenzo’s circle sought to unite the pagan and Christian traditions. Pagan history, pagan myth, pagan gods were all considered to be a foreshadowing of Christianity, every pagan myth possessed a hidden Christian meaning. In this they were supported by the statement of St Augustine ‘The thing itself, which is now called the Christian religion, was with the ancients, and it was with the human race from its beginning to the time when Christ appeared in the flesh, from whence the true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian.’

Botcicelli’s Birth of Venus was painted for some unknown member of Lorenzo’s neo-platonic circle. It was the first monumental image of the nude goddess since antiquity which was actually posed in a manner derived from classical statues of Venus. The neo-platonic humanists were thus in a position to interpret the nude Venus born o the sea as emblem or foreshortening of the Classical Venus, or the Virgin Mary, the
source of Divine Love. Her twin the earthly Venus represents human love. Note that the two wind gods look rather like hovering angels, and that Spring on the right is in a position rather like St John at a Baptism of Christ. In other words the picture must not be interpreted simply as a depiction of a purely pagan legend, it possesses a quasi-religious double meaning. The iconography of the picture is discussed in detail in Edgar Wind’s *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance.*

I want to turn now to Leonardo da Vinci, who was born in 1452 and trained in the studio of Verrochio. You will find an excellent account of his art and life in Sir Kenneth Clark’s book on Leonardo, available as a Pelican paperback. The earliest painting we have from Leonardo’s hand is probably that of the angel in Verrochio’s *Baptism* which Vasari said he painted; this, though questioned, is generally accepted. It dates from between 1470 and 1472. If we compare Verrochio’s angel with Leonardo’s, we note that the frank, bright linear grace of the one; and the air of strange elegant mystery, which foreshadows Leonardo’s peculiar genius, which clings to together other. Note too the minutely defined rippling hair; and the drapery of Leonardo’s angel, stiff and angular but rendered with great finesse. Vasari tells us that he made clay figures and covered them with soft linen dipped in clay, and then drew them great patience. Some of these drawings still exist*, and the angel’s draperies were most probably painted from them. Kenneth Clark has suggested that the landscape of the Baptism is also by Leonardo made in 1473, with its shining rocks and trees farming a distant plane.

To the years 1472-3 belongs also Leonardo’s *Annunciation*. It still possesses an immature and quattrocento quality in the somewhat unhappy relation of the figures o the architecture, the angel annunciate still possesses Verrochio’s elegant contour, ad the features of the virgin’s head are drawn on the face, not felt as part of the structure. The picture however doe show Leonardo’s great and early sympathy with nature; the greases and flowers drawn with that intense interest in nature which marked his life from early life, as indicated in Vasari’s story of how he painted a dragon on the shield of one of his father’s peasants, and in order to do so carried into his room lizards, cricket, butterflies, grasshoppers and bats, from which, variously put together he fashioned a great ugly creature. In the Annunciation the angel’s wings have been clearly based on life drawings of bird wings, though lengthened by another hand later.

About 474, Leonardo painted the portrait of a Lady in the Liechtenstein Collection, Vienna, probably the portrait of Givevri de Benci, painted, as was the custom of the time, upon the occasion of her marriage. The juniper bush (ginepro in Italian, ginevra in dialect) is probably a visual pun upon her name. It is probably Leonardo’s most beautiful early painting. The modeling of the head is extraordinarily delicate but firm, the soft ringlets of the hair contrasting with the spikey juniper, the sot reflections of water on the distant landscape all revealing Leonardo’s profound interest in the surface of things.
The Benois Madonna of about 1478* in the Hermitage is not so successful a composition. Several beautiful drawings for it exist, notably this one from the Louvre. Perhaps on this occasion, as Clark has suggested, Leonardo found himself caught between two Florentine quattrocento traditions: the tradition of linear elegance and grace typified by Botticelli and the tradition of scientific naturalism founded by Massaccio and kept alive in Leonardo’s day by his own master Verrochio. The composition is based upon an unusual scheme of diagonal recession and the relative absence of ornament and the amplitude in the treatment of the drapery foreshadows to some extent the High Renaissance. But the drawings* possess a freshness and immediacy of observation which the painting lacks.

In 1481 Leonardo was at work on his first great composition, the Adoration of the Kings,* now in the Uffizzi. He made, as was his custom, numerous drawings for it. Here is an important study for the background. On the one hand it is an elaborate study in centralized perspective, a type common since Brunelleschi; but into this ordered space an extraordinary mob of animals and figures toss and struggle, as Clark puts it ‘in dreamlike confusion’. The drawing, therefore, as well as anything in Leonardo’s oeuvre demonstrates the two poles, of order and disorder, between which Leonardo’s imagination oscillated.

A similar dualism exists in the monochrome* painting which was never completed. It is constructed on a geometric basis. Virgin and kneeling kings form a firm triangle, held down by a wide sweeping arc and a series of verticals. But within the geometry Leonardo’s phantasy breaks loose, charging horseman, fantastic architecture and those heads of youth and age; the sweet faced youth, and the old nut-cracker faced bearded men, that recur constantly in Leonardo’s notebooks.

About 1482 Leonardo completed the Louvre Virgin of the Rocks. A drawing in the Metropolitan Museum may be a preparatory study; note in both study and painting the protective hands of the Virgin. But in the painting the two children no longer play as equals: ST John kneels in adoration, and the hands of the Angel and the Virgin above the head of the Christ child, who is giving a blessing, create emblematic haloes wonderfully suggestive of his spiritual sovereignty. The cave-like setting may possibly refer to a legend of the apocryphal gospels concerning the holy family’s refuge in a cave during the Flight into Egypt; they were also symbols of the desert in quattrocento painting, and they are of course, a persisting interest of Leonardo’s questing, scientific imagination; as in this study of rocks from Windsor.

Leonardo left Florence about 1482 before he had completed the Adoration of the Kings and found employment with Lodovico Sforza the tyrant of Milan, where he presided as court genius, executing scientific ad artistic projects, such things as the military defense of the city and designs for pageants occupied much of his attention.
Shortly afar his arrival in Milan he probably painted the Lady with an Ermine* which most probably represents one of Lodovico’s mistresses Celia Gallarani. In Milan he also painted the Last Supper at the command of Lodovico for the refectory of the Convent of Dominican Friars at Santa Mariadelle Graie. It was probably begun in 1495 and completed in 1498. Leonardo used a mixture of oil ad varnish and the wall was damp so that the mixture began to deteriorate shortly after completion. By the early 17th century only a few traces of the figures remained and it was very difficult to make out the subject. What we see today, therefore, is largely the work of restorers.

The original painting however exercised an overwhelming influence upon Leonardo’s contemporaries and is usually regarded as the first painting of the High Renaissance. If we compare it with Ghirlandio’s Last Supper, we can see how Leonardo has radically altered the traditional iconographic scheme which placed Judas on the other side of the table and St John in Christ’s lap. For the older painters represented the moment of the Eucharist; Leonardo represents the dramatic announcement of the betrayal.

You will find excellent accounts of the composition and expressive qualities of the Last Supper in Wolfflin’s Classical Art, Cecil Gould’s Introduction to Italian Renaissance Painting and Clark’s Leonardo; so that I will not dwell at length on it here.

Instead I want to turn to two versions of the Virgin with St Anne. First the cartoon formerly at Burlington House and now in the London National Galley drawn about 1498 and secondly the unfinished painting in the Louvre of about 1508. Berenson has rightly compared the magnificent treatment of the draped figures with those upon the Parthenon pediment; and the cartoon reveals the central qualities of Leonardo’s arts. Notably, firstly, his mastery of the art of light and shadow or chiaroscurio (light dark) of which he was the first outstanding master, not only as an aid to modeling the figures but as a basic way of composing the groups, secondly his sfumato, that is the transition of tone imperceptibly from light to dark. Leonardo made a great many drawings of light falling upon spheres to perfect this technique. It became the aspect of his art most copied y his followers. Thirdly, his magnificent use of contrapsto in the figure. ‘Always make a figure he wrote so that the breast is not turned in the same direction as the head’ Let the movement of the head and arms be easy and pleasing, with various twists and turns’. The twisting and turning composition was in fact already present in the work of his old master Verrochio such as Verrochio’s fine statue of St Thomas and Christ, and it is to become an important feature of mannerist composition. Note too, lastly, the compactness of the composition with the figures dominating the greater part of the picture space. This too is a feature of High Renaissance art.
The compositional problem set by the Burlington House cartoon, seating one woman in the lap of another was taken up again in the Louvre Virgin and St Anne of 1508-10. Again we have the compacted interlocking forms within a single shape. In the Burlington House cartoon the Virgin is still much to the left and the heads are on the same level; in the Louvre painting Leonardo has changed the relations of the heads, and created a far more complex fugal type of rhythm of great complexity and beauty.

The background to the Louvre painting contains another of hose mysterious landscapes of a rocky, watery world. His later years were devoted largely to those investigations of natural phenomena which had interested him since childhood. A drawing at Windsor dated to 1813 of an old man remarkably like Leonardo himself,* contains on the other side drawings of the movement of water and compares it with ringlets of hair. He made countless drawings of water, of deluges. Such drawings show the essentially unclassical direction of Leonardo’s genius.

In this drawing of a deluge of 1514 he is seeking to draw the lines of pressure and force in the storm. Renaissance thought as of course grounded upon the humanist contention that man is the measure of all things; but the whole direction of Leonardo’s art lead away from a finite and measurable universe to a universe whose principle was not measurement but uncontrolled power and force. As Sir Kenneth Clark has phrased it at the end of his book ‘The intellect is no longer supreme, and human beings cease to be the centre of nature; so they gradually fade from his imagination, or when they appear as St Anne or St John they are human no longer but symbols of force and mystery, messengers from a world which Leonardo, the disciple of experience, has not explored, though he has earned the right to proclaim its existence’.

* Leonardo’s drawing of an old man is known as the ‘Aged Man’ or the ‘Old Man of the Bridge’.
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