

VISUAL ARTS

Key Concepts – Conventions Essay

In Greek and Renaissance art history, it can be seen that there were different stages that succeeded each other; there were development of ideas and knowledge of the world. All these developments in both cultures have influenced the conventions of art at the time where artists have used these conventions in order to create masterpieces that reflect the ideals and perspective in that stage of art history.

In Greek art history there were five influential stages including; Archaic Age, transitional period, High and Late Classical and the Hellenistic Period.

The Archaic Age (660-480 BC) was a time when Greek artists tried to achieve a likeness to human figures, although this proved unsuccessful, their art shows influence of Egyptian art in stiffness, gracefulness and idealisation. Kouros statues in this period displayed these conventions; they were freestanding statues of nude male and females. They had strict symmetry with different parts of their anatomy depicted as simple geometric forms, an influence by the mathematician at the time, Pythagoras. There was no expression on the face only a slight curving of the lips known as the 'Archaic smile'. These figures prove that artists in this period were incapable of portraying figures that interacted with the environment around them.



Kouros



Discobolus



Apoxyomenos



Aphrodite of Knidos

The Transitional Period (480-450BC) was a time when sculptors wished to reinvent conceptions of appearance. There was new insight into the structure of the human figure and the way it interacted with its environment. There was the introduction of the Contrapposto stance—a weight shift on the left foot while the right remained relaxed, this gave the sculpted figure a definite presence and enhances its realism, at the same time it is interacting with the environment, as opposed to the rigid Kouros. The sculpted figures were portrayed with contemplative, moody expressions of sobriety—known as the 'Severe Style' of transition. This change in facial expression reflects the re-evaluation of human potential, and self-knowledge by thinkers in this stage and the next. E.g. Discobolus of Myron represents the ideas of representation, personality of figure shown by its posture and actions.

In the High Classical period (450-430 BCE) Greece has reached its height of economic success and cultural and artistic splendour. The art is characterised by a joyous freedom of movement and expression. An important development in sculpture was the re-evaluation of the bodies of figures themselves, as opposed to earlier sculptures where they were mere representations of appearances. Sculptors wished to capture the ideal human figure; based on the Greek philosopher, Plato's belief that "for all things like the human figure, there exists a perfect form that embodies beauty and good" all existing human bodies are copies of this 'perfect' Platonic body. This led to an idealised canon of proportions to be developed by a sculptor Polycleitus of Argos—it was a "manner of representation that conveys a vitality of life as well as a sense of permanence, clarity and harmony." According to the canon, there was a concept of symmetry for the ideal model of the human body, which was a 'perfect mean between tension and relaxation, between thinness and solidity.' Figures in this stage tended to be more squat and muscular, and were intended to be viewed from only one or two certain angles, usually frontal.

As the Classical Age slowly drifts to its end (430-323BC), the canon of proportions is remade. There is a change from symmetry and rational balance to a more sensuous, flowing form. The Contrapposto form becomes more naturalistic and the sinuous curve in the body is more pronounced. There is a new relationship between the sculpted figure and its enclosing space, as they begin to interact with the environment in all three dimensions. The statue Apoxyomenos by Lysippos has the properties of the canon, but has arms outstretched in the act of scraping, reaching out to enclose a three-dimensional space. Logic and reason are the dominant human qualities in sculpture, characterised by a solemn facial expression, even during the most dramatic situations the sculptures are placed in.

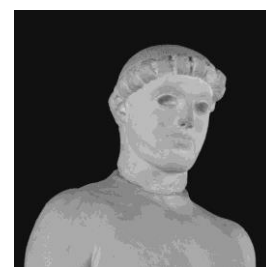
As the Classic Age ended, it gave way for the Hellenistic Period (320-90 BCE). It was in the time after Alexander the Great's conquests, a time of prosperity and the fusion of cultures with the watering down of Greek ideals. Art was of a more secular nature e.g. the nude Aphrodite reflects this increase secularisation of traditional religion, instead of depicting ideals of logic and suppressed emotion or perfect beauty, reality was explored. Humane themes such as childhood, old age, ugliness, and suffering were of particular interest. It was a period of eclectism, with dramatic poses and emotions, high contrasts of light and shadow etc. There was more experimentation and freedom as artists strived to explore subjects from different points of view.

Two examples from Greek Art history that reflect the classical conventions at the time they were created are: Kritios Boy and Doryphoros.

The Kritios Boy was created in the Transitional Period 480BCE, is attributed to the Greek sculptor, Kritios. It is made entirely of Parian marble at 1.17meters tall, smaller than life size, and portrays a nude standing youth, probably an athlete.

The Greek artist had mastery of the way the body moved each body parts function. This is shown in the sculptures frontal pose, Contrapposto stance, where his weight is put on his left leg, while the right one is bent slightly at the knee in a relaxed state, (this is less stylised than later Contrapposto stances) hence, the pelvis is pushed diagonally upwards on the left side while the right buttock is relaxed, this causes the spine to attain an "S" Curve to reinforce the body for balance.

Kritios boy is one of the first statues in the early classical stage that displayed the Contrapposto stance which gives the figure a definite presence with conveyed gravity. This enhances its realism, but the stance does not imply motion, therefore, it is still not seen to be 'actually' interacting with its environment. Although, his form no longer exhibits the rigidity of the Kouros stance, which implies that sculptors were moving on to develop their conventions.



Kritios Boy

The muscular and skeletal structures are depicted with unforced life-like accuracy; he has round, muscular features that are quite soft, they define the muscular contours of the body. His rib-cage is naturally expanding in order to breathe and his hips remain relaxed. This shows that the artists had knowledge of human anatomy at a particular level; all the small anatomical movements create the life-like figure that was of particular interest in the transitional stage.

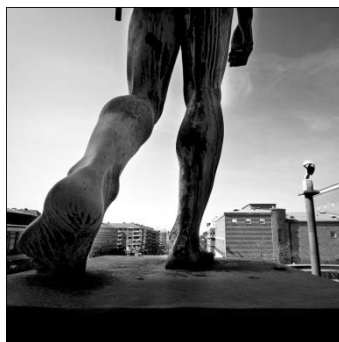
His head was found disconnected from its body so it seems quite offset, despite this, he has a round chin and emphasized cheeks. He is wearing a broad, rounded hairband around his head. Concentric strands of hair were wound around the band to create a 'puff' in his hair.

The 'Archaic Smile' has been replaced by a contemplative, moody expression of sobriety; his face remains vacant which reflects the re-evaluation of human potential and self-knowledge by thinkers, poets and writers alike. The Ancient Greeks in this stage believed that suppression of the emotion was a noble characteristic of all civilised men, while display of human emotion was known as barbaric.

The piece is not characteristic of the usual idealised work of Archaic Greek sculptors where the figures are in a rigid frontal position. Instead, Kritios' portrayal is far more life-like due to the shifting of the weight and defined muscles. He is a non-representational figure, but a development towards the later naturalistic form of the Classical Age.

The second example of Ancient Greek sculpture is Doryphoros by Polykleitos of Argos. The sculpture was created in the High Classical Period between 450 and 440 BC, a time when the goal of sculptors became to capture the ideal human figure; Polykleitos devoted himself to the concept of symmetry that constituted his ideal model of the human being, Doryphoros or 'spear-bearer.'

The sculpture is a Roman copy of the original which was created of bronze due to its ability to show more movement than in marble—no bronze sculpture made by a famous Greek artist has survived to this day as they were normally melted down in times of warfare for weapons, this makes Doryphoros quite valuable.



Doryphoros

He represented a nude athlete or soldier carrying a heavy spear; he had broad shoulders with clearly defined, thickly muscled limbs. He has adopted fully developed Contrapposto stance which reflects the artists conceived ideal of symmetry; the weight of the figure is put on the front leg while the arm which carries the spear is tensed, the back leg is slightly bent at the knee with his heel up, the other arm is hanging loosely at his side; front leg and spear arm are tensed while loose arm and back leg are relaxed. The hips are offset due to the weight shift and this creates the "S" Curve in the spine, the head faces the opposite direction which illustrates the counter balance technique also due to the weight shift. The sculpture realistically demonstrates how every part of the body is affected by its pose, and the state of symmetry in the limbs contributes to an overall sense of balance in the figure.

The locks of his hair have been chiselled into a distinctive pattern, and other small details have been incorporated: the inner components of the ear and locks of hair at the back and top of the head, muscles in the neck, chest and calves—such attention to detail of the human body shows that developments were made in the studying of the human anatomy, compared to the sculpture of Kritios boy where attention to detail was a level below Doryphoros. His eyes peer serenely and the

expression on his face seems quite distant and contemplative, slowly leaving behind the transitional sombre and blank facial expressions, and moving on to expressions that relate characteristics and personality in the sculpture itself. His face is devoid of individual features, which suggests that he is meant to represent an idealized version of the everyman, the perfect Greek male citizen. Yet, his body—proportional, balanced, naked and strong—is one that the viewer might aspire to achieve, but never could.

Doryphoros would be one of the earliest developments to be interacting with his environment mainly due to the fully developed Contrapposto stance where the figure seems to be relaxed but with a certain tension, like he is ready to spring into action, as opposed to the earlier Kritios boy who had a less stylised stance. The canon of proportions developed by Polykleitos represented the perception of the ideal of beauty; Doryphoros defined the perfect male athlete and embodied the Greek ideals in this period. He combined the naturalism of the human body at rest and in motion, an idealisation based on theoretical perfection from the canon.

The proportions of Doryphoros along with its perfect balance between tension and relaxation create a visual image of harmony that has been exceptionally influential throughout history even to this day.

In Renaissance Art History, there were three influential stages including: Early, High and Late Renaissance.

The Early Renaissance (1400-1475AD) marked the end of the Middle-Ages and the beginning of a new era, the Rebirth of classical ideals of the Greeks and Romans and a surge of interest in classical learning and values. Artists and scientists alike strove for mastery of the physical world by study of the anatomy in order to create a more accurate representation of the human body and the perspective in painting in order to render on a two-dimensional surface, the illusion of three-dimensions. This was based off the Convention of Perspective, which centres everything on the eye of the beholder, meaning the world is arranged for the audience, as the Universe was once thought to be arranged for God.

Early Renaissance artists sought to create art forms consistent with the appearance of the natural world and their experience of human personality and behaviour. For this to be successful, efforts were made to discover the correct laws of proportions for the representation of the human body, a development from the Classical Era. Artists like Giotto di Bondone who was the first important Renaissance painter, deeply studied nature in an effort to create paintings of reality and life-like expressions e.g. The Visitation. Perception at this stage was only developing, as well as facial expressions that reflect inner emotions and chiaroscuro—the use of light and dark colours to create depth and realism, this was apparent in the High Renaissance stage.



The Visitation



The Mona Lisa



The School of Athens



Madonna with the Long Neck

These paintings embraced the aesthetic of classicism that typically featured simplified detail (e.g. plain-coloured robes) so as not to distract from the overall balance and harmony of composition, and to remain faithful to the classical ideal of simplicity.

At this stage Humanism emerged; it was man's freedom of thought and making his own judgement through his reason to self-determine his values. It is secular-meaning non-religious, as opposed to the Gothic period when God and the Church determined these values.

The High Renaissance (1475-1525 AD) was further development from the Early Period, with inventions like the printing press to reproduce ideas to share with the known world. There was great social change where rich and powerful families like the Medici were able to influence the course of art and ideas. They spent quite a bit of money to commission artists to decorate Florence so all could enjoy it. It proved to be a time of great transformation of the artist where they were given credit for their works and drew towards the production of works that displayed more artistic freedom and individualism. The essential characteristic of this stage in art was its unity-a balance with a sense of stability and order. It was breaking down the visible world into basic forms: line, colour, shape, space and texture.

Artists that typified this period included Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael; they displayed advanced knowledge of the human anatomy in their painting and sculpture through the study of human and animal anatomy. It is through the lines and perspective as well as gestures of the figures and their facial expressions that tell us the story in their paintings and sculptures. E.g. the Mona Lisa by Da Vinci, and the School of Athens by Raphael. The painting technique favoured in this stage was that of tempera and fresco; Tempera was tempered egg with paint on a dry surface and Fresco was wet plaster and colours on a wall, when dried the painting would be permanent.

The conventions in this period was that of no halos (unlike Medieval times), naturalism of figures, sculptures that interact with their environments and paintings that tell a story at a particular moment (normally biblical stories), definite light sources (shadows, three-dimensions much more developed than the early stage) etc.

Lastly, the Late Renaissance (1525-1600 AD) held its focus on style or manner and less on the substance. Mannerists used loud and clashing colours, figures with abnormally elongated limbs that combined classicism, Christianity and Mythology. They depicted forms in contorted poses with more emotional content than that of High Renaissance; emotion became quite disturbing, mostly suffering. It reflected the turmoil in Europe with the sack of Rome in 1527 and outbreaks of plague. The Italian artist Parmigianino who painted Madonna with the Long Neck is a classic example of what typified Mannerism art, as seen in the elongated limbs of the baby.

Two examples of Renaissance Art that show the conventions in a specific stage of history are The Last Supper and David.

The Last Supper was created by Leonardo Da Vinci in the High Renaissance (1495-1498 AD). It was commissioned by the Duke of Milan, and painted at the Santa Maria delle Grazie Abbey in Milan, Italy.



The technique used to paint this masterpiece was that of Tempera on plaster-mixed paint with tempered egg (the medium) then painted straight onto wet plaster and once this dried, the paint would become permanent. This broke away from the traditional convention of fresco style which lasts longer.

Da Vinci's painting depicts the moment of the Last Supper that Jesus Christ reveals to his disciples that someone would betray him. Da Vinci was able to translate successfully the emotions of each character and the tension of the moment to the beholder.

Jesus is located at the centre of the table –quite calm due to his divine nature. The apostles are all confused, angered and with disbelief. There are no two apostles that share the same reaction, which is a testament to Da-Vinci's belief in naturalism. He not only portrays their facial expressions but their gestures and stance, which reflects the story of the moment-a narrative component. Judas Iscariot, the betrayer, is portrayed as both guilty and shocked of Jesus' awareness of his bad deed.

Leonardo's painting is thus more humanistic and less religious than most: Judas the betrayer is as much a part of the group as anyone, and everyone in the group is equally human rather than saintly and holy, where there are no halos, unlike Early Renaissance. This reflects Leonardo's humanistic and artistic beliefs which were also instituted in the High Renaissance Period.

The composition of the painting is perfectly symmetrical; Jesus is at the centre where a triangle is created by his outstretched hand, symbolising stability, equality and furthermore, the sign of the Holy Trinity. There are two groups of three apostles on either side of Jesus which gives balance and maintains a sense of visual unity. Da Vinci uses one point perspective where all lines in the painting converge to a vanishing point, being Jesus Christ, to emphasis His importance and central position, thus also creating a non-traditional halo with the lines.

The space is defined by a coffered ceiling with four pairs of tapestries that extend the dining hall into another room; this creates an illusion of depth enhanced by the distant view through the three windows. This masterpiece received much recognition for its composition, narrative quality of the particular moment and the life-like emotional expressions of his subjects with the connection of the tension created between the apostles juxtaposed by the serenity of Christ's presence.

The second artwork, David by Michelangelo, was also created in the High Renaissance of 1500-1504 AD. The piece of marble was originally started by Agostino di Duccio 40 years earlier and Michelangelo was asked to finish the majority of it. "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free" Michelangelo. It is a 5.17 meter statue that portrays the Biblical King David at the moment he decides to battle the giant-like Goliath. This narrative quality was of particular interest in the High Renaissance, as was the rising secularism, where Michelangelo has used a religious theme in his art, this religious theme was not used to glorify God, but to glorify the artist himself.

The sculpture symbolised strength and courage in the city state of Firenze, at the time it was surrounded by enemies. It was different from traditional depictions of King David, who was normally depicted triumphant over the sleighed Goliath after the battle. It is said that Michelangelo chose this depiction of David because it shows his anticipation and strong will to beat Goliath. His face conveys a mixture of emotions being pride, strength, rebellion and righteousness.

King David is portrayed as a nude with an athletic form; clearly defined muscles in the arms, legs and abdominal regions-this is due to the interest in the human anatomy at the time and the appreciation for life-like forms, ones adopted from the Greek Classical Period of the ideal male, believed to be physically perfect with strong-toned muscles. Michelangelo payed particular attention to the small details as many sculptors did in this period; the individual locks of hair, tiny veins and muscle in his neck and wrists and bone structure in the face and entire body.

David has assumed the Contrapposto stance, which is fully developed, a revitalisation of the stance formerly used in Classical Greek statues. This stance means most of David's weight is on one foot while the other foot is bent at the knee and relaxed. This makes the figure seem more dynamic and allows the audience to view it at several angles.



The Contrapposto stance causes a series of anatomical events to occur; his spine will acquire an “S” Curve in order to maintain balance and his shoulder where the weight shift is will dip down diagonally.

David’s head and hands (mostly his right) are slightly larger than they should be in contrast to the rest of the body. The right hand is said to imitate a strong hand which was commonly seen in the Middle- Ages; used to show his power and strength. Another reason that is supported for the un-proportioned hand is due to the statue being intended to be viewed from a top the Basilica (Church), making the size of his head and hands to seem normal from the distance.

Overall, David was a masterpiece that incorporated Greek elements – Contrapposto and their ideals to be blended it with Renaissance aspects-marble and incorporated knowledge of the human anatomy from study. It is considered to be the most famous work of art ever found.

As it can be seen from both cultures, there were many diverse conventions that characterised the different stages in both Greek and Renaissance art history. The classical conventions in Greek history were then developed further by artists in the Renaissance who were highly influenced by their ideals and broke away from traditional conventions from the Middle Ages. These conventions on a general level were incorporated into masterpieces like Kritios Boy, Doryphoros, The Last Supper and David, which remain extraordinary pieces of work even to this day.

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