

Perceptions of beauty in Renaissance art

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Summary

The Renaissance was a cultural revolution that spread from Florence, in 1400, throughout Italy and into the rest of Europe. Its impetus was the philosophy of Humanism, which strove to resurrect and emulate the literature and art of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Artists had previously been limited to formulaic religious iconography. They now began to reproduce descriptions of classical paintings and copy the antique statues that were being newly rediscovered.

The Renaissance artist's perception of beauty was therefore determined by his philosophical environment, his visual experience (the 'period eye'), the demands of his patrons and by attempts to enhance his professional status in society to equal that of poets and architects. The image of Venus portrayed by Botticelli as the idealization of beauty in Renaissance Florence is significantly different from the Venus portrayed by the German artist, Lucas Cranach. The northern European Venus is much less voluptuous than her Italian counterpart but is still inspired by humanist principals and retains considerable sexuality. Raphael's paintings epitomise the idealization of female beauty of this period but, by his own admission they were rarely based on real models. Often the same facial type was repeated in many different paintings. Indeed Renaissance portrait artists tended to avoid realistic interpretation, emphasizing instead the positive attributes of their subjects, both physical and political. Thus, Bronzino's *Portrait of a Young Man* not only depicts his subject's idealized appearance but also his scholarship, background and potential.

The depiction of beauty in Renaissance art is shown to be more complex than a mere photograph-like representation of sexuality or of a person's physical appearance. Instead, Renaissance art created physically perfect images resulting from scholarly expectation, the artist's ambitions and his developing skills.

Keywords: artist, beauty, humanism, perception, period eye, portrait, Renaissance

Introduction

The setting is Florence in the closing years of the 15th century. Many would easily recognize the proud streets and piazzas, which have changed little in 500 years. Since around 1400 however, the cultural climate of Florence had changed with global consequences, as the new learning of the Renaissance spread like a tidal

wave across Europe and beyond. Italy was rising out of the Dark Ages and into a new Roman Empire, where the arts and philosophy of the classical world were actively studied and incorporated into modern life. This inspired a new breed of progressive and innovative artists, who constantly strove to improve their art and to emulate the ancients. Brunelleschi (1377–1446) had crowned their cathedral with the largest dome since ancient times in 1436, and Donatello (1386–1466) had rediscovered the art of bronze and marble sculpture. Masaccio (1401–28) finally mastered the science of perspective, and Alberti (1404–72) had set down the principles of Renaissance art and architecture in his groundbreaking works, *On*

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Accepted for publication 27 November 2004

Painting (1435) and *On Architecture* (1450). The philosophy of Humanism was based on the reinterpretation of pagan classical literature and philosophy to comply with contemporary Catholic beliefs, and the depiction of classical mythology provided a more ambitious vehicle for the artist than purely devotional subjects. Obviously, such an atmosphere of innovation and creation required money, and immensely rich banking families like the Medici were keen to ensure their influence and immortality by patronizing the greatest artists of the day. Against this background, the young Michelangelo (1475–1564) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) were apprenticed and their artistic prowess developed.

Alberti proposed in 1450 that ‘beauty is an order or arrangement such that nothing can be altered except for the worse.’ Admittedly, he was writing on architecture, but the same philosophy applied to painting. Indeed the primary pursuit of the Florentine Renaissance artist was the depiction of beauty in as realistic a manner as possible. Many different disciplines cooperated to create new advances in painting. Anatomical dissection led to new accuracy in depicting musculature and the form of figures, mathematics helped develop the laws of perspective to position those figures into a believable landscape, and chemistry blended new pigments to enhance their impact.

Many original Roman paintings were discovered around 1480 in the Domus Aurea, the Golden House of the Emperor Nero, and more came to light during archaeological excavations in Pompeii.

Renaissance perceptions of beauty

An artist’s perception of what is ‘beautiful’ is determined by many factors, not least of which are the requirements of his patron. Basic aspects of the brain’s visual capacity have been shown to be innate, such as a newborn baby’s ability to recognize the structure of a face, but most are learned during the visual stimulation received during early development. This confers a particular ‘period eye’ on an

individual and his contemporaries, a concept introduced by the art historian, Michael Baxendall in his seminal book, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*.¹ Think how dated an image from the sixties or seventies looks now, however fashionable and familiar they seemed to contemporary eyes. The artist will therefore tend to reproduce familiar references in his work, such as facial types or landscapes, which his clients would recognize and find pleasing and familiar. Compare the mountainous backgrounds in the works of German artists with the green Tuscan hills of Raphael and Michelangelo. It is also no coincidence that the art of perspective was developed in Florence with its straight streets and angular tall buildings, or that colour was so important to Venetian artists working within a lagoon of reflected light.² The implication here is that perceptions of what is beautiful will vary over time and from place to place, as can be illustrated by studying the following paintings.

Depictions of Venus in Renaissance Italy and Germany

This beautiful painting (Fig. 1) is Botticelli’s *Venus and Mars*³ in the National Gallery in London. It was probably painted as a backboard for a large chest (cassone), usually given to women on the occasion of their marriage, and would have decorated some large Florentine town house. Venus, the goddess of love, lies opposite her lover Mars, god of war, who has fallen asleep apparently after making love to Venus. The message looks clear enough, as love will always conquer in the end over conflict (note the little satyrs carrying away Mars’s lance thus disarming him in more ways than one). The woman Botticelli has painted was based upon neither a model nor a Tuscan lass he met in a trattoria but was the personification of beauty as he perceived it. No contemporary woman would have had such perfect alabaster skin, or such symmetrical features as was shown here. This idealization gives us some idea of what fifteenth century Italian artists, and their patrons,



Figure 1 Venus and Mars by Botticelli.

considered beautiful: note the high forehead, the sharply defined chin, pale skin, strawberry blond hair, high delicate eyebrows, strong nose, narrow mouth and full lips. She has a confident but delicate manner, typified by the positioning of her fingers. Her body is clothed, but the diaphanous and sumptuous gown covers a full figure with an ample bosom, rounded abdomen and wide hips. She is a chimera, taking the best bits from many sources, especially the classical statues that were being unearthed and studied in Rome at this time. Botticelli had worked in Rome, frescoing the walls of the Sistine Chapel in 1481–1482, so would have had direct access to these statues just before he started painting this Venus. The beautiful folds of her gown have certainly been copied from, or inspired by ancient statuary.

The Renaissance painter was constantly trying to improve his status from mere artisan (or decorator) to learned artist, respected in the same way as the poets, sculptors and architects, who could most easily copy and even improve on ancient original works. Virtually no ancient painting had yet been discovered however,⁴ so the Renaissance artist had to emulate classical painters in the only way he could: by copying statues or by reconstructing classical paintings from contemporary ancient descriptions (a complex discipline known as *ekphrasis*). Botticelli may be attempting this here, as a similar classical painting of *The Marriage of Alexander to Roxana* was described by the 2nd Century BC Greek writer, Lucian. It apparently depicted cupids playing with Alexander's spear and armour, as Botticelli's satyrs were doing. The 'period eye' can also be considered as an actively pursued intellectual discipline, as well as the innate actions of an artist just painting pictures to order.

This theory however, seems to sterilise the rather more earthy aspect of beauty: that such images should be sexually attractive in some way. Certainly, many Renaissance patrons commissioned work primarily to display pretty naked girls on the walls of their studies, thinly disguised by the scholarly excuses of recreating classical mythologies. Italian princes of the time were usually successful generals who had conquered city states, and were more used to the barrack-room than a university lecture hall. There is certainly no indication that Botticelli was anything but heterosexual, which cannot be said for many other artists of the time, so the implication is that this image of Venus would also have been his own perfect sexual partner. Michelangelo famously used highly muscular male models even for the female figures on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, before settling down with his muse, Tommaso Cavalieri. Botticelli has also consciously exploited the basic rules of attraction, making Venus bilaterally symmetrical with perfect proportions, the so-called 'golden proportion.' So not only does Botticelli



Figure 2 Cupid complaining to Venus by Lucas Cranach.

achieve the ultimate in contemporary physical attraction but also the philosophical beauty demanded by the scholars around him in Florence and Rome, which will raise him (and his art) into the higher intellectual echelons of society. What initially appeared to be a simple decorative backboard has revealed greater depth and insight into the artist, his patron, and the requirements of their culture.

It should also be noted that the image of Mars here is hardly sexually neutral with his suggestive pose and appropriately god-like physique and classical features. Obviously the bride who received this chest deserved some sexual provocation as well as her groom.

The next painting (Fig. 2) by the German artist, Lucas Cranach the elder (1472–1553) is also of Venus⁴ with a miserable looking Cupid holding a wasps' nest at her feet. The painting dates from the early 1530s, well after the influence of the Italian Renaissance had penetrated the intellectual life of northern Europe. Indeed, Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) had first travelled to northern Italy in 1494 bringing back considerable Italian influence to

his native Germany. His many prints could be mass produced on recently invented printing presses, distributing his newly acquired knowledge of perspective and classical form to a mass audience. He influenced many artists in his circle, including his contemporary, Lucas Cranach, who never himself visited Italy. Cranach spent the years 1501–1504 in Vienna with its newly founded university and there absorbed many aspects of the humanist theories which fuelled the Renaissance. In 1505 he was appointed court painter to Friedrich the Wise, the Elector of Saxony and patron of Martin Luther (1483–1546), whom Cranach painted on numerous occasions.

At first the painting appears to be an image of Eve reaching for the apple, straight from Christian iconography. But on closer inspection it is clearly inspired by classical mythology and ancient literature. In the top right hand corner there is a Latin version of an ancient Greek poem by Theocritus, which refers to Cupid getting stung by a bee whilst stealing honey from a tree trunk. Venus dismisses Cupid with her right hand, saying that the wounds of love he inflicts can hurt more than a bee sting, whilst she knowingly stares straight out of the picture at us. She is naked apart from a large hat covered in pom-poms and thick gold jewellery, which was highly fashionable at the Court of Saxony at the time. She retains the physical attributes of beauty which any Venus should have, such as bilateral symmetry, but the individual components are entirely different from Botticelli's Venus. Her forehead is so high that she appears to be bald (women in the German courts routinely plucked their hairlines to make them higher), and her eyes are much narrower and brooding. The lips remain full, with a strong nose, but isn't that a double chin above the thick necklace? She is certainly much slimmer, with narrow hips and small nulliparous breasts and no pubic hair. She is posed against a typically Germanic background, with a stag hiding in dark woods before craggy rocks with a castle by a lake. She may appear even more remote and stylised than Botticelli's Venus, but Cranach's young woman is coquettish and inviting, with a humorous and specific eroticism that would appeal to members of the Saxony court. The philosophy of ideal beauty here is the same as that intended by Botticelli, but the physicality is entirely different. Both are equally unrealistic, but Cranach displays a natural beauty inspired by courtly paintings of a century earlier, compared to Botticelli's more classically influenced beauty.

Portraiture and realism

Raphael (1483–1520) wrote in a letter to his friend, Baldassare Castiglione, that 'in order to paint a beautiful



Figure 3 St Catherine of Alexandria by Raphael.

woman, I would have to see several beautiful women ... but because there are so few ... I make use of a certain idea which comes into my mind. Whether it carries any excellence of art I do not know, but I work hard to achieve it.' So this beautiful image (Fig. 3) of Saint Catherine⁵ is not a model's face but a distillation of experience and formulaic reproduction. For this reason, many of Raphael's women and his various Madonnas have very similar facial characteristics. But what happened when the Renaissance artist was asked to paint an actual portrait rather than the Virgin or Venus, who really ought to be the epitome of beauty? Should he paint an exact likeness or try to improve on nature and flatter his subject? Portrait artists have faced the same dilemma for the past 500 years, and most will understandably represent their patron in a favourable light. Some of Gainsborough's (1727–1788) fashionable portraits are almost indistinguishable from each other, conforming to a contemporary facial type. In this picture (Fig. 4), *Portrait of a Young Man*⁶ by Bronzino (1503–1572) painted in 1550–1555, the artist was commissioned to portray an adolescent nobleman, possibly a young member of the Medici family, to whom Bronzino was court painter (the sitter's name



Figure 4 Portrait of a Young Man by Bronzino.

did not survive). He is portrayed before an imperial purple curtain, behind which is a classical statue, referring to his cultured modern intellect. The skin of the face is marble smooth, almost unthinkable in a teenager 450 years ago, and his hair is tightly curled in the style of a Roman emperor's statue. The eyes, nose, and mouth are all perfectly symmetrical, and indeed perfect in form in their own right. This could not have been an exact likeness. The sitter was probably recognizable from the portrait, despite being physically enhanced, but other positive attributes have been accentuated: his learned nature, maturity beyond his years, confidence, and future potential are all evident in the image. The painting flatters its sitter, but also helps define his personality and background. The portrait artist was able therefore to adjust his image to suit his patron's requirements, just as a modern photographer uses digital technology to make his models thinner, and remove an extra chin and blemishes.

Discussion

Beauty and its perception have therefore always faced a similar dilemma: realism vs. idealism. Modern magazines

are often criticized for portraying models who are too thin or whose images have been enhanced in some way. They may lead to unrealistic expectations in young people, contributing to anorexia and low self esteem. The image of beauty we currently aspire is as unrealistic as Botticelli's *Venus* and is hardly fair to impose on society at large. But as can be seen from studying a few Renaissance paintings, the problem is not new. There seems to be an innate desire to depict and look at idealized and unattainable features and bodies. By doing so, the Renaissance artist was striving to emulate his classical forebears and enhance his status within society, as well as his prestige amongst the patrons. He depicted the perceived image of beauty demanded by his philosophy, era and geographical location.

One artist who relished in challenging the accepted formulae of beauty and methods of painting was Leonardo da Vinci. When painting *The Mona Lisa*, it is said that he set up an orchestra and performers in his studio to entertain his enigmatic model. She was obviously amused by the show, and the genius of Leonardo managed to portray a deeper, more genuine beauty, so rarely captured by an artist of any age.

Conclusions

Our perceptions of what is beautiful vary with time and culture, so the accepted concept of beauty in Renaissance Europe varied between countries and even between cities. The idealized figures of Florentine art are a composite of perfect and symmetrical features, inspired by classical statues and humanist philosophy. By recreating classical beauty, the Renaissance artist was not only aiming to impress and flatter his patrons, he was also striving to enhance his own reputation, as well as elevating his discipline compared with the other artistic professions.

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- 6 Bronzino A. (1503–72) *Portrait of a Young Man*. London: National Gallery. Oil on wood, 1550–55.

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