

### **To what extent did the context and achievement of the Northern Renaissance differ to those of the Italian?**

*'All this, although it pleases some persons, is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skill, selection or boldness and finally without substance or vigour.'*

With these words Michael Angelo displayed a typical attitude of people towards the Northern Renaissance. For centuries it has been accused of being 'in the shadow' of the Italian Renaissance. Burckhardt, a Victorian historian, created what is known today as the 'myth of the Renaissance,' glorifying and praising the achievements of the Italian 're-birth', whilst completely dismissing the Northern Renaissance. One might therefore expect to find mainly similarities and attempts to imitate the achievements of the Italian Renaissance, if it had been so flourishing and influential. However, this would seem a biased opinion, as, although there are some similarities, there are clearly many distinctive areas of achievement from the Northern Renaissance that emerged as a result of their own context, which greatly differ from the Italian Renaissance. Thus, Burke's interactive idea of 'creative adaptation' would seem the most accurate explanation.

The contexts from which the Renaissances resided, were in some ways similar but were essentially very different. Both Renaissances had many types of patrons, often with individual patrons included in paintings and scenes celebrating the courts and cities. Both were seeing the extension of the classes from the aristocracy to a developing middle class. (Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding* shows this). For both Renaissances, the arrival of the printing press in 1454 revolutionised the culture. Lorenzetti, an Italian artist's '*Palazzo Pubblico*,' for example, was the first panoramic landscape painted in the western world and this became a popular way of praising the city. It was partly driven by the competition of civic pride between the city-states, each wanting their courts to be the best in Europe and between the aristocracies, for example the Italian family, the Medicis. The Arts of both Renaissances put emphasis on showing off their prosperous centres (for example Lorenzetti's *The Effects of Good Government in the City*), and the Burgundian court of the North even travelled around Europe, parading their beautiful, portable tapestries, illuminated texts and wooden panels.

However, the Italian's patrons were *mainly* the rich businessmen, city statesmen and merchants who used culture as a way of furthering the prosperity of their already successful cities, whilst the Northern Renaissance relied almost entirely on guilds and the late medieval courts run by dukes. These settings greatly affected the subject matter of the fine arts produced; the North had scenes of court life, for example Jan van Eyck's *Virgin of Chancellor Rolin*, tournaments and parties, whilst the Italians were more focused on propaganda for the chancellors and the city-states (Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *The Effects of Good Government in the City*). The difference in location of each rebirth also greatly affected the achievements. In the North, architects adapted the Italian buildings to suit their own cooler climate. Sloping roofs and glass windows can be seen on the Palace at Chambord, built for Frances I and wooden panels were frequently used for paintings, frescos being unsuitable. Thus, the methods used by artists also varied between the two Renaissances. Jan van Eyck pioneered the new method of oil painting, which became a characteristic of Northern art and later spread to Italy where it was also adopted. It was very different to the egg white and plant extracts that had previously been used as mixers in the paint.

Religion during the time of both Renaissances is another key area that affected the achievements, where there are some similarities, but mainly differences. The subject matter of their creations was usually religious and the dawn of the printing press revolutionised the spread of Christianity for both Renaissances. Religious texts like Plantin's *Polyglot Bible* was now available to all in multinational languages. However, although the underlying religion for both Renaissances was Catholic, other key influences affected the achievements.

The Italians had religious influences from the pagan classics, Greek mythology and their own Catholic tradition, which explains the characteristic hybrid of ancient and catholic themes in many of the works produced. Fra Angelico's '*The Annunciation*', which features the famous Christian scene under classical arches shows this. The North contrastingly was influenced by the Reformation, resulting in far more emphasis on God, the Bible,

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and less on human achievements. Juan de Flandes's '*Christ and the Samaritan Woman*' depicts the importance of the Bible, this story being from the New Testament. When comparing the religious responses of Erasmus, a Christian humanist with those of the Italian, Machiavelli, one can clearly see where the two renaissances differed. In Erasmus' book, '*The Complaint of Peace*,' his pacifist views contrast sharply with Machiavelli's values of war in his book, '*The Prince*'. Whilst Machiavelli was the first modern politician who could distinguish between political and Christian principles, Erasmus intended to join both these principles together again through syncretism. Whereas Erasmus felt that politicians should be humane and civilised people and that war should be avoided, Machiavelli said that being highly ruthless was the key to success, 'glory is war.' These differences clearly display that the main reason for the contrasting ideals are due to the fact that Erasmus centred all his beliefs on the Bible, Christianity being the centre point for his notes.

Perhaps the fundamental contextual difference between the two Renaissances, however, is the diversity in each of their heritages. Some classical features could be found in the North, some gothic in Italy, for example Cavallini's '*Presentation at the Temple*', as ideas did spread between the two (through the 'open market,' for example). Passionate beliefs and knowledge of the classical world spread significantly through texts and dictionaries, made possible by the printing press. For example, Erasmus and Machiavelli's similar beliefs included that a lot could be learnt from antiquity, and that the classical art of rhetoric was essential for political leadership, were spread more accurately to a wider audience. Although their responses to religion were different, humanists studied classical literature and culture in both Renaissances, and held a huge importance to the potential of the individual. They were important people in society.

However, the centre of classical heritage was in Italy. Antiquity became the 'ideal', the source from which ideas were taken, a fascination that influenced most of their works. The remains of the classical world of architecture surrounded them. One of the surviving buildings is the *Pantheon* in Rome. Also, Italian architects from the fifteenth Century, including Brunelleschi, visited the Roman architectural sites using measurements and principles for themselves. The survival of a treatise on architecture by Vitruvius, aided their studies, emphasising the need for symmetry and proportion and comparing the structure of a building to that of the human body. Increased interest in ancient philosophy, sculpture and art also completely revolutionised Italian culture becoming a model and a vast reservoir of knowledge for Italian people.

Contrastingly, the Northern heritage is mainly a mediaeval, gothic one with far fewer classical features. Their works were influenced by mediaeval and gothic architecture, for example the *Notre Dame Cathedral* in Paris and the vast collections of tapestries, for example, the famous *Lady with the Unicorn*. Van Eyck's method of oil painting was ideal for imitating the tapestries, as the range of tonal colours required and the detail, could be more easily achieved through this medium. Manuscripts and individual records of real people and places, as opposed to classical idealised ones, for example the people in Gerard David's *Marriage at Cana*, were also of great influence.

Therefore, the Northern Renaissance was mainly influenced by their local heritage, (for example, the busy, hometown scene in Hans Memling's *Passion*.) just as the classical heritage in the South drove the Italian Renaissance. If the achievements of both Renaissances are observed in more detail, it is evident how these differences affect them.

Due to some contextual similarities, parallels can be drawn in aspects of the achievements, for example, the importance of the individual. In medieval times, emphasis was placed on society as a whole. Now people strove to be different and innovative. This humanist change completely revolutionised the way artists were treated (especially their wages) and they became valued as important citizens. Van Eyck signed his painting showing the pride in his work and Michelangelo had so much confidence in his talent that he called himself God. In *The Creation of Adam*, he depicts man (represented by Adam) as equal to God by their fingers

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touching and by God being in the human form. Leonardo da Vinci and Durer's countless self-portraits also demonstrate this new interest people had with themselves.

The use of realism and drama is also sometimes similar between the two Renaissances. The Italian, Giotto's vivid painting of *St. Francis* receiving the wounds of Christ, is typical of the Christian scenes that were frequently chosen as the subject matter, as is the northern artist Roger van der Weyden's sculpture imitation of *The Deposition*, which is painted in a realistic and explicit style. The sculpture of both Renaissances is often very moving, with carvings showing this same extreme realism and drama, perhaps due to the frequency of visits made by most sculptors to the classical works in Rome. They are also often profoundly religious. The Italian, Donatello's work was unusually described as, '*they convey a spiritual message with an almost brutally physical realism*', showing how similar some aspects of the two Renaissances were. The religious features displayed by both Donatello in his portrayal of *The Feast of Herod*, and the northern, Sluter in his life-like sculpture of Christ on the cross, also show these similarities. The detail and realism is striking on Sluter's most famous and laboured work, *The Well of Moses*, a tomb for the celebrated Duke of Burgundy. It shows the characteristically northern, individual, life-like expressions and the hard work put into it also emphasises the importance of Dukes in their society.

However this similarity is superficial as other details reveal a fundamentally different attitude to realism. Italy strove for simple images, editing out all unnecessary detail and real-life flaw with most reassured classical values of order and reason. The young, fit body and curly hair in Michelangelo's *David* and the long, wavy hair, 'hourglass' shaped woman's body and subject matter of a Greek goddess, in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, are clearly attempts to imitate this classical 'idealised beauty'. A most mathematical approach to proportion and harmony is evident in Brunelleschi's *San Lorenzo*. With the perfectly symmetrical and proportional round arches, columns and classical décor, the classical ideals for architecture were clearly being imitated. The rejection of medieval style art drove a new interest in using linear perspective (for example the broken spears in *The Battle of San Romano* by Uccello, actually lying on the line of perspective) and having 3D rather than 2D figures. This gave the art a different realism, allowing the paintings to show believable emotions through the sense of space, created by the perspective and the body language of the people. However, this realism was still within the bounds of the classical rules of form, which the Italians chose to rigidly obey.

Although the Northern Renaissance artists were aware of some artistic 'rules', generally they dispensed with the Italian obsession with Classical perfection, and used 'melodrama' for example. They painted life as it really was, 'warts and all'. Weyden's *Last Judgement* shows images of a realistic depiction of suffering. This was done purposely to stir the religious souls of the spectators, reflecting the fact that the Northern Renaissance coincided with a movement for religious reform. The reform stressed the importance of lay spirituality; hence the appeal of the paintings to everyone, not just the clergy and the literate. Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, whose vision of hellfire seems almost ahead of its time, is another example of melodrama. The detail used for the grass, is another distinctive feature of Northern Renaissance art. By varying the intensities of the oil paint, the full range of tonal colours is achieved and thus the realistic detail results in an impressive overall effect. It takes the art to a new level, assimilating what had already been developed and making it personal and surrealistic, rather than merely realistic. The paintings are a chaotic mix of incongruous objects, but portrayed with such a delicate precision and sense of form, they create the most emotional and bizarre, tangible presence. Returning to Giotto's *St. Francis*, the contrasting simplicity of it highlights the difference in the use of detail used between the two Renaissances.

The comparison between Bosch and Giotto clearly shows how fundamentally different the achievements of the two Renaissances were and it demonstrates how the traditional view held by Burckhardt is clearly superficial and inaccurate.