

The High Renaissance in Italy

The period known as the **High Renaissance** prevailed between c.1500 and c.1527 (the Sack of Rome) and is seen as a second wave of cultural flowering in Italy, following the preceding **early Renaissance** centered upon Florence. The visual arts of the High Renaissance were marked by a renewed emphasis upon the classical tradition, the expansion of networks of patronage, and a gradual attenuation of figural forms into the style later termed Mannerism.

Philosophy

The two most characteristic texts of the High Renaissance are, in fact, books of practical instruction, namely Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Castiglione's *The Courtier*. Given the approach by both authors is pragmatic, it makes a striking contrast with the Neo-Platonic philosophising of their fifteenth-century predecessors.

Castiglione's book takes the form of a series of discussions between regular members of the court at Urbino. The theme is the formation of the consummate courtier and what goes into making the perfect "gentleman." He introduces the important concept of *sprezzatura* in encouraging a manner of "calculated nonchalance." Machiavelli's contrasting tone of aggressive practicality coupled with a disregard for conventional standards of morality, shocked his contemporaries.

Literature

The early sixteenth century saw the appearance of the most important long poem to have been written in Italy since the *Divine Comedy* of Dante. Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* was first published in 1516. Whilst Orlando goes mad when the woman he loves prefers another, many other chivalric heroes and heroines appear in the story. Ariosto uses many tones and voices in the poem; he can be heroic and romantic, but also comic, and matter-of-fact. The poem is full of magical episodes, reflecting a contemporary attitude toward the knightly ideal. The theme of "courtly love" he inherited from Arthurian romances and the world of troubadours, and more broadly, an admiration for old chivalric ideas.

Music

The High Renaissance counterpart to Ariosto in music was the Fleming Josquin Des Prés, who became the most celebrated composer of his time. He was a true *virtuoso* whose work represented the marriage of Flemish composition and Italian Humanism, which, inspired by Greek sources, sought unity between text and music. He found his ideal outlet in the song and motet. He cultivated a smooth style which found its parallel in Raphael as the embodiment of the classical ideal in its calm, balanced perfection. He was also important for beginning to lead music away from the system of modes used throughout the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance. The most characteristic musical form after about 1530 was the madrigal. The madrigal was also closely connected to the resurgence of Italian poetry in the work of Ludovico Ariosto.

The Council of Trent which spearheaded the Counter-Reformation in the Catholic church objected to the growing use of secular melodies in sacred music. In response, Giovanni Palestrina based his masses on traditional Gregorian chants. The vast space of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice encouraged the colourful music of Palestrina's contemporary, Andrea Gabrieli. His compositions emphasised sensuous effects of sound over counterpoint. His nephew, Giovanni Gabrieli, was the first composer to specify which instruments should play which parts, and to include dynamic markings in his music.

Sculpture

More than any other works of art, Michelangelo's sculptures sum up the meaning and achievement of the High Renaissance. What is embodied in them is the human spirit itself in action: the power to imagine something, and then give it convincing form. His failure to complete the tasks he set himself is symbolic both of the difficulty of those tasks and of his courage in undertaking them. His colossal *David* is perhaps the most celebrated of all of his works; the subject chosen resonated with his republican Florentine compatriots in symbolising the victory of the underdog over tyranny. Michelangelo's originality lay in the moment in David's story which he chose to depict – the hero before, not after, his combat with Goliath; not triumphant, but contemplating the danger that awaits him.

Architecture

Donato Bramante has been considered the real progenitor of High Renaissance classicism. He synthesised ideas found in the work of predecessors such as Brunelleschi and Alberti, and also in Vitruvius and surviving examples of Roman architecture. The most important of his projects was his design for rebuilding St. Peter's. A vast new classical church with a dome was to be erected on the site of the old Constantinian basilica. The plan was for a Greek cross, and the classical forms were to represent the antiquity of the Church in Rome.

The building often cited as an example of the way in which Renaissance architects made direct imitations of Greek and Roman models is Bramante's *Tempietto*, or "little temple." At the church of San Pietro in Montorio, the Tempietto intended to mark the place of St. Peter's crucifixion on the Janiculum Hill.

Painting

The special position of Venetian painting is emphasised when one looks at the way in which the High Renaissance spirit expressed itself in Venice.

Venice in the early sixteenth-century represented a progressive artistic culture, open to change and development. The wealth of the "Queen of the Adriatic" was mirrored in the rich, colouristic atmospheric quality of Venetian art – an art which needed to appeal to the aesthetic tastes of private patrons. The artistic style in Venice eschewed the intellectual rigour, scientific accuracy or academic precision of Rome and the classical style, in favour of a splendid sense of light, colour, surface ornamentation and rich atmosphere. This may account for the greater emphasis on the spiritual and contemplative, which appealed more to the senses than to the intellect. The light in Venice as a soft and shimmering form suffuses the city, reflecting off every surface. The finest dyes and pigments from the East arrived in the port of Venice, and the rich materials, textures and colours were then found in the paintings. Harmony and warmth of atmosphere are key, finding the greatest expression in the *sacra conversazione* form of altarpiece.

Much in the way that Masaccio, Donatello and Brunelleschi represent a trinity of genius in the Florentine Renaissance of the fifteenth-century, Bellini, Giorgione and Titian are hailed as the key protagonists of early sixteenth-century art in Venice.