

Chateau de fontainebleau: decorative themes



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Sixteenth Century Decoration at the Chateau de Fontainebleau

The decoration at Fontainebleau, the royal hunting lodge of Francois I, was led by Rosso Fiorentino in 1530. In 1532 Rosso was joined by Francesco Primaticcio, who held the position of first importance at Fontainebleau after the death of Rosso in 1540 ^[1]. In 1552 Niccolò dell'Abbate arrived at Fontainebleau, and together with Primaticcio decorated the Gallery of Ulysses in the Palace. Much of the original work has been lost and what remains has needed to be heavily restored. This essay will look at the style characteristics of the decoration visible today focusing on the frescoes in the Gallery of Francois I and the bronze relief by Cellini.

The latent themes in the decoration of the chateau are typically representative of the Mannerist style of art that took a hold across Europe during the 1500's. As Bosquet phrases it, 'Mannerism is not a simple phenomenon; it is idealism, but it is also naturalism; it is evasion, but it is also joy of life and hope in the future.' ^[2] The changing nature of the social and economic climate led to experimentation and absorption in the arts, and to pioneering styles which would be followed during later decades.

In *The Royal Elephant* by Rosso (<http://www.musee-chateau-fontainebleau.net>).

the form of the elephant, which symbolises Wisdom and Loyalty ^[3] dominates the composition. Sixteenth century royalty primed themselves for being talented and learned; qualities which would ultimately lead to wisdom, strength and honour. Baldassare Castiglione, in his *Cortegiano* (1528) ^[4], cites the talents which a good courtier should possess. 'The courtier was <https://assignbuster.com/chateau-de-fontainebleau-decorative-themes/>

versed in all the sports (riding, fencing, wrestling, swimming); he had, in addition to strength and skill, acquired grace and elegance of movement by practicing dancing and gymnastics (..) should know not only the Latin language, but also Greek ..., that he should be well versed in the works of the poets ... and, furthermore, that he should be proficient in writing both prose and verse.' It is quite probable that the composition of *The Elephant* is designed to reflect these qualities in King Francois I himself. The animal is placed centrally, with the surrounding figures looking beneath and behind it, thus drawing attention to its sheer size and presence. The sculpted dragon, a symbol of strength and courage, takes central place above the scene of the fresco: in both the dragon and the elephant exceptional attention has been paid to the clarity of line in the gentle curves of their forms. These shapes are reflected in the curving stucco surrounds which are moulded to reach into the picture, thus drawing the eye into the scene. The elaborately decorative surrounds mark the beginning of a trend of such decoration (which would later be imitated in paint) which continued within the School of Fontainebleau. Stucco was an antique medium which was rediscovered in the sixteenth century and encouraged the invention of ' exotic and peculiarly fluid conjunctions of forms.' [5] Here we see twisted scroll-like forms framing the picture. The scene depicts a number of figures, crowded in places, creating a slightly chaotic atmosphere; this is juxtaposed against the serenity of the great elephant which stands rider less. This could suggest that Rosso was intending to reflect not only the character of Fontainebleau's inhabitants, but also the character of the chateau itself. In other words, the serenity amidst the chaos could here represent the rural oasis of the princely court - set apart from the public chaos of the city.

During the sixteenth century it was not uncommon for artists to be both painters and sculptors. In fact, according to Hauser ^[6], French mannerism produced incomparably more works in sculpture than in painting. Francesco Primaticcio first combined allegorical painting in moulded plasterwork at Fontainebleau - a style that was to influence the later baroque and rococo decoration. In plate 198 (Hauser, 1965) a mural decoration originally by Primaticcio, the actual mural appears small in size to the surrounding decoration, the elaborate frame almost becoming more important than the picture itself. The stucco framing is treated as if it were leather or paper, slashed and rolled into the fine detail of fruit and the gently curving female figures. In plate 198 there is a suggestion of early eroticism; the partially revealed naked upper bodies of the women figures becomes a popular theme in expressive sixteenth century art. There too can be seen the mythological figure Pan - with goats' horns, and in ' Danae', plate 199 ^[7], the winged cherub signifies the highest ranking of the hierarchy of angels ^[8]. These images represent the extremes of experience sought after in an age of sensuality. Primaticcio expresses the lusty enjoyment of the era through the image of Pan who represents hedonism, and in contrast the spiritual refinement of the cherub suggests the richness of sixteenth century spiritual life - where dreams and visions were of great inspiration to artists. Blunt ^[9] suggests that Primaticcio's style, as it can be seen from his drawings for the *Chambre du Roi* and from the mantelpiece from the *Chambre de la Reine* was influenced by his time spent in Mantua, ^[10] where he executed classical friezes in the *Sala degli Stucchi* in the *Palazzo del Tè* :

The fruit swags on the mantelpiece recall those in the Palazzo del Tè, and the sphinxes are cousins of those in the Sala di Fetonte. The general design is classical in its emphasis on circular and square panels, but the proportions of the figures are elongated like those in the stuccos on the vault of the Sala degli Stucchi. The whole effect, moreover, is richer than anything to be seen in Mantua, mainly because of the higher relief. ^[11]

It appears that the artists who decorated the palace in France were expanding the ideas which they had been working on in Italy. As can be seen from the Galerie d'Ulysse some of the decoration was extremely complex and took many years to complete. The gallery was of immense length, and filled the whole side of the Cour du Cheval Blanc on the first floor. The walls were decorated with a series of paintings illustrating the story of Ulysses which, as Blunt suggests, show Primaticcio as a master of academic design 'in a style more affected than previously by Michelangelesque influence, particularly in the scenes of violent action.' ^[12]

The appearance of The Salle de Bal differs as the form of the building was more difficult to decorate. The zones and the spaces under the window embrasures were decorated by Primaticcio probably between 1552 and 1556. The condition of surviving paintings is poor, but from drawings made (Hauser, plate 43A) we can see that Primaticcio intended a symmetric design not unlike Raphael's decorations in the Farnesina. ^[13] This design works well in the limited space available and differs to Raphael's work as it depicts whole scenes rather than two or three figure groups.

Being employed by the royal courts had a significant effect on the artists' style of the decoration at Fontainebleau. Paul III declared, when Benvenuto Cellini was brought before him accused of murder, that such a man was above the laws ^[14]. While being held in high esteem allowed the artists considerable independence in their work they had also to consider what their patrons expected and required of them. Cellini's bronze relief 'Nymph of Fontainebleau' was originally designed for the Porte Doree ^[15] but it was never installed at Fontainebleau. The grand lunette (409×205 cm) illustrates the legend of the château's origins, and because of the importance of its intended position it had to be strikingly beautiful and symbolic. The nymph encircles the neck of a stag, an emblem of the King, and it is thought that the relief was inspired by an image by Rosso now only known through an engraving by Pierre Milan ^[16]. According to the local legend, a hunting dog named Bleau found a nymph beside a fresh-water spring. The spring and, consequently, the château both took the name Fontainebleau. In Rosso's engraving the reclining nymph lies among the rushes, with her left arm around an urn. She is nude but her legs are bent slightly at the knees for modesty's sake. Marsengil suggests that Cellini expands this imagery to describe, 'not simply the narrative of the nymph's discovery, but the very idea of the nymph as the personification of the royal hunting lodge. (..) she has three urns under her left arm from which flowing and curling representations of water pour. These, as well as the billowing drapery that frames her, identify the female figure as the presiding deity.' ^[17] Cellini's figure stretches across the entire scene so that her nudity is not covered – this represents the boldness and sanctity with which Cellini deliberately

associated the King and his wife, and also reflects the dynamism with which he executed his works at Fontainebleau.

As well as exploring new territory with figurative painting, the Fontainebleau artists such as Nicolo dell'Abbate also developed landscapes. As Arnold Hauser says of dell'Abbate - 'as a landscape painter he enriched mannerism with a new and autonomous form.'^[18] In plate 114 (Hauser, 1965) the painting depicts a pastoral scene, the smoothly curving forms of the figures reflecting the swell of the landscape behind them. Dell'Abbate appears to seek balance and unity as well as beauty in his landscapes. Work such as this contrasts greatly to some of Rosso's frescoes where he mixes themes and types of character into one scene. For instance, *The Revenge of Nauplius* and *The Sacrifice*^[19] where the bishop retreats to the rear of the scene while mothers with children predominate the front; Rosso deliberately juxtaposes these figures as he does the elements - represented by the jugs and the burning offering. As can be seen from the differing work of dell'Abbate and Rosso, the Mannerist movement stretched to include a diverse range of subjects and styles. The exploitation of space in the landscape by dell'Abbate and the fresco by Rosso represent two totally opposite conceptions. In one, relatively shallow space is crammed with an incredible accumulation of figures, objects and details; in the other, a deep space is created and is left almost completely empty except for the figures threshing the hay. In both cases this draws the eye to the figures and their relationship to each other and their surroundings. As Bosquet says,

Rather than the abolition of space, we are confronted in Mannerism with a more complete mastery over the use of space, a freeing of space through plays of perspective or the creation of atmospheric effects. ^[20]

The use of colour might help explore how such effects were created in the Fontainebleau decorations. In Rosso's 'Venus Frustrate' ([http://www. musee-chateau-fontainebleau. net.](http://www.musee-chateau-fontainebleau.net)).

the entire composition is constructed and coloured to create a serene yet fluid ambience. The utilisation of colour seen in this painting is executed with subtle stridencies and dissonances between the pale female skin tone and the marble-like male figures in the background. The central figure combines together the colouring and figurative elements of the entire scene: she walks towards the right hand side of the painting while looking back behind her thus uniting the two sides. Furthermore, her skin tone is soft, and under painted with the aqua green of her surround, while still imbued with the marble-like qualities of a statue. This amalgamation of different effects is complimented by the use of stucco for the figures of a man and woman which frame the fresco. The interpretation given of this painting ^[21] is that Venus is trying to awake the deadened Love when Mars has left for the war. The scene expresses war coming to disturb the happy love life. The naked figures in stucco of the young man and woman also suggest the admiration that Rosso held for Michaelangelo

In conclusion, the sixteenth century works at Fontainebleau are diverse in their style and expression. Some of the themes are difficult to decipher as they were specifically created for a closed, aristocratic circle to whom they

were perfectly understandable and greatly enjoyed for their erudition and allegorical expression. There are however consistent themes of myth and allegory combined with a dynamic use of space, form and colour. The decorations are clever in that they embrace new styles and bold subjects while fulfilling the standards of excellence and appropriateness expected by the rulers of the court, and it is of no surprise that such work became an important influence in later classical styles of art.

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Footnotes

[1] Bosquet, J., and Taylor, S., W., (transltr) 1964. *The Painting and Style of the Late Renaissance* . New York: Braziller, p. 64. Hereafter cited as 'Bosquet.'

[2] Bosquet, p. 60.

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[3] <http://www.chateaudefontainebleau.net>

[4] Bosquet, p. 62.

[5] Shearman, J., 1977. *Mannerism: Style and Civilisation*. Middlesex: Penguin, p. 121.

[6] Hauser, A., 1965. *Mannerism: the crisis of the Renaissance and the origin of modern art*. London: Routledge, p. 242.

[7] Hauser, A., 1965. *Mannerism: the crisis of the Renaissance and the origin of modern art*. London: Routledge, plate 199.

[8] (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cherubim>).

[9] Blunt, A., 1953. *Art and Architecture in France, 1500 to 1700*. Melbourne: Penguin, p. 35. Hereafter cited as 'Blunt'.

[10] 'Blunt', p. 35.

[11] 'Blunt', p. 36.

[12] 'Blunt', p. 36.

[13] 'Blunt', p. 65. See plate 43A

[14] 'Bosquet', p. 72.

[15] Marsengil, K., *Identity Politics in Renaissance France: Cellini's Nymph of Fontainebleau*, (http://www.fsu.edu/~arh/events/athanor/athxix/AthanorXIX_marsengill.pdf)

[16] Ibid, p. 2.

[17] Ibid, p. 2.

[18] Hauser, A., 1965. *Mannerism: the crisis of the Renaissance and the origin of modern art*. London: Routledge, p. 214.

[19] Franklin, D., 1994. *Rosso in Italy*. London: Yale University Press, p. 199.

[20] 'Bosquet', p. 143.

[21] www.musee-chateau-fontainebleau.net.