

Comparison and contrast of the middle ages and renaissance essay sample

[Art & Culture](#), [Renaissance](#)



This essay will compare and contrast the visual arts of the Middle Ages, called medieval art, with the arts of the Renaissance period by giving an overview of each period and illustrate how the collision between these two periods, and what influenced them, brought about new forms of visual artistic form and style. The Middle Ages began after the fall of the Roman Empire around 476AD until the 1400s (Museum of Science, 1997). This time period marks widespread European focus on spirituality, salvation, life after death, heaven and hell, and doing good works. The Middle Ages were times of denying personal enjoyment with a strong focus on faith, corporate unity, and Christian theological scholasticism. The Catholic Church grew substantially during this time by building numerous buildings and establishing government and their influence over society (University of St. Tomas, 2014). The shift toward corporate unity and the loss of classical Roman and Greek learning influenced the visual arts. St Augustine of Hippo, a Christian writer theologian and philosopher who wrote his Soliloquies in 386-387 AD, felt there was no place for Christian images in visual arts.

He felt Christian images were an illusionary deception leading to idolatry of the art image rather than God himself. Though this disapproval for Christian art was made, Christian artists continued their works, but painted images of abstraction with flat appearances and expressionless subjects. Artists no longer used shading, perspective, or detail in order to preclude image portrayal of its natural likeness (Ross, n. d.). Animal symbolism became a large integral part of biblical art. The lamb portrayed as Christ is an example of animal symbolism signifying Christ as the sacrificial lamb for humanity. An example of this form of symbolism is portrayed in a carved ivory work of an

unknown artist, Plaque with Agnus Dei on a Cross between Emblems of the Four Evangelists, dated between 1000-1500 AD (Agnus Dei, 1000-1050 AD). There were many different visual art forms during the Middle Ages such as sculptures, mosaics, architecture, drawings, and paintings. The medieval art of the late Middle Ages, 1000-1200 AD, was termed 'Romanesque art' by art historian and Romanesque sculptor, Meyer Shapiro, in the nineteenth century (Petzold, n. d.).

The late Middle Ages marked an increase in economic stability throughout Europe, forging the church a stable financial platform to build larger and grander churches embellished with different forms of Christian artwork (Collins & Muireadhaigh, n. d.). Romanesque art was initially noted by the return of the classical style of architectural arches from the ancient Roman Empire, but the term was also used more generally to include mural paintings and other art forms during the time period (Spanswick, n. d.). Romanesque mural painting techniques were done by wax, distemper, or fresco, but this paper will focus on fresco. Fresco paintings were widely used throughout Italy during the late Middle Ages, but the technique originated 30, 000 years ago in France. Romanesque fresco paintings became widespread and a platform for artists to accomplish their works. Murals were painted on walls and ceilings of cathedrals and wood panels to educate the illiterate about biblical stories through elaborate scenes and narratives (Collins & Muireadhaigh, n. d.).

The Romanesque fresco is termed buon fresco, meaning 'true fresh,' and accomplished by applying lime plaster to a surface and painting the mural

scene in sections with pure color pigments mixed with water before the plaster dries. The lime in the plaster binds the pigment resulting in color-enriched calcium carbonate, therefore this fresco technique does not allow for fixing mistakes (“Fresco,” n. d.). Many medieval fresco wall paintings have been lost due to structural problems of buildings, changes in artistic style of the Renaissance period, natural causes from climate issues, and careless restoration rendering damaged works (Williams, 2011). Toward the end of the Middle Ages, society began to see a dynamic change called the Renaissance, 1400-1600 AD, meaning ‘rebirth’. Europe had become financially and politically stable by the end of the Middle Ages influencing new technology, science, the arts, and the release of ones self from the foothold of the weakening Catholic governance. The Renaissance began its roots in Florence, Italy after the Byzantine Empire was taken over by the Ottoman Turks. Greek scholars emigrated from Constantinople to Florence because of the thriving merchant market.

These scholars influenced a revival of classical antiquity dating back to the ancient Roman and Greek empires. Classical antiquity is the classical learning style and values prior to the fall of the Roman Empire emphasizing individual growth through philosophy, education, politics, and the arts. The Renaissance was a shift in thought veering away from the medieval church as the center of society, education through Christian theological scholasticism, and self-denial toward individual growth through multiple educational disciplines and valuing humanism by placing oneself as central to life. The Renaissance became a time to enjoy life’s pleasures, explore the

natural world, discover self, self-expression through the arts, and becoming a well-rounded man termed, ' the Renaissance man' (Collins & Muireadhaigh, n. d.). Leonardo da Vinci, 1452-1519 AD, is considered one of the greatest examples of the Renaissance man because he was creatively gifted in the areas of science, music, painting, anatomy, engineering, botany, and sculpturing (History. com staff, n. d.).

The visual arts were heavily influenced during the Renaissance period.

Artists utilized different techniques in their works and incorporated realism of natural human form, utilized depth, shading, and a sense of emotional expression. The technique of linear perspective became prominent by the utilization of line and alignment of space on a flat, two-dimensional surface. Linear perspective gives the illusion of depth by the human eye. Subjects are painted either larger or smaller based on how close or far the artist wants them viewed. A vanishing point is utilized to give depth through the use of linear perspective. An imaginary horizontal and vertical line creates a center point to the work called the vanishing point. The artist creates the vanishing point at the intersection of the horizontal/vertical line by converging parallel lines (Collins & Muireadhaigh, n. d.). For example, if an artist were painting a railroad track from the perspective of the artist standing on the track, the parallel lines of the track rails will converge at the vanishing point to give the illusion of distance.

When utilizing linear perspective, in the example above, the painter paints the track larger to give the illusion of relational closeness by the observer, and gradually paints the tracks smaller as they meet the vanishing point,

which gives the perception of distance. Sfumato is another technique used in oil paintings, giving a smoky appearance to the painting by blending colors to eliminate lines. Leonardo da Vinci was the pioneer of sfumato and this technique is noted in his famous painting, the Mona Lisa, completed in 1506 AD. The three main painting techniques used during the Renaissance were egg tempura, oil, and fresco. Fresco mural paintings continued through the Renaissance by utilizing realism, linear perspective, shading, and depth. The mezzo fresco technique highly utilized during the Renaissance differs from buon fresco and is done with a pigment/water mixture and painted on dry plaster instead of wet plaster. Application on dry plaster allows for mistake corrections and displays vivid color, because the pigments do not set deep into the plaster (Collins & Muireadhaigh, n. d.).

The relationship between the two art periods is seen by the continuance of faith in Christianity through the Renaissance but differs by the adoption of affirming ones self through self-discovery, individualism, and enjoying life influenced artistic impression. Although the shift toward individualism became firmly rooted, the tradition of Christian art continued widely throughout the Renaissance period, but differences are noted in how subjects were presented between the two periods. Renaissance secular and Christian art deviated from fully clothed subjects in medieval art by expressing human beauty through nudity. Renaissance artists created mythical works and continued animal symbolism but represented their own interpretation of meaning rather than a dictated meaning by the church. These deviations of thought, innovation, and artistic individual style

transformed the lowly regarded medieval ' craftsman' to the highly regarded Renaissance artist (Collins & Muireadhaigh, n. d.).

A comparison of two fresco paintings from each time period is important to gain a better understanding of how society influences the arts and the impact of the artists choice of either staying within the societal boundaries and norms or venturing towards ones own artistic creativity. Master of Taüll, an unknown artist from the Romanesque period, painted one of the greatest buon fresco masterpieces, Apse of Sant Climent de Taüll c1123, in the San Clemente de Taüll Church of Catalonia, but later restored to canvas and placed in The Museum of Catalan Art in the early 20th century (National Museum of Catalan Art [Catalan], n. d.). The anonymity of the artists name is a great example of how artists were not held in high regard during the Middle Ages. Italian Renaissance artist, Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni 1475-1564 AD, is considered one of the greatest Renaissance artists and highly regarded as one of the most well rounded Renaissance men of the period. Michelangelo completed his fresco masterpiece, The Last Judgment, in 1541AD on the alter wall of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City (Finnan, n. d.).

These two paintings represent the same biblical story of judgment day of the Apocalypse. For ease of readability of comparing the paintings, I will reference Taüll and Michelangelo when describing which painting I discuss and utilizing my own interpretation from my observations, and historical research of the two periods. In both paintings, Christ is placed at the center of the illustrated story but with notable differences. Taüll presents Christ

larger than other figures in the painting with abstract features and body disproportion. Michelangelo presents Christ with realism and body size is near that of other figures he is next to. Taüll presented the art with a flat appearance, no depth, or shading while Michelangelo used realism, shading and size differences between figures to show distance. Taüll presented human figures fully clothed while Michelangelo painted nude subjects, but was later painted over with loin clothes to preserve modesty.

Michelangelo used the expressions of fear, happiness, and uncertainty on the faces of the judged, but Taüll's painted expressionless faces with a flat affect. Taüll's painting was limited to the figures of Christ, the disciples, Mary, and angels telling a straightforward story. Michelangelo, on the other hand, added Greek mythological figures, one of which is Minos, the king of Crete and a judge from the underworld. After a papal ceremonies master, Baigio da Cesena, criticized Michelangelo for painting humans naked, Michelangelo painted Baigio as Minos with a serpent biting his genitals. Clearly, Michelangelo used his own creativity and individualism to express his hatred toward Baigio (Finnan, n. d.). The differences between these two art pieces illustrate how the earlier society placed God as central to life, whereas the later period illustrates the importance of individualism and placing ones self as central. Taüll painted a story representing current societal norms of the Middle Ages of God as central to life and the importance of salvation.

Michelangelo showed a different perspective during the Renaissance of how all humans have choices, the consequences of those choices and utilized his

own meanings rather than a dictated meaning by the church. Renaissance art had an enormous impact on the future of the arts, not only Europe, but also today's world. The Renaissance elicited innovation of technology, creativity, and the ability to use individual impression to express ones self thereby influencing later art forms. In America, we are free thinkers, not bogged down by a dictatorship of religion and can freely express spirituality by our own interpretation. The Renaissance paved the way for new literature beyond theological writings of different genres of interest such as fiction, non-fiction, science fiction, poetry, romance, politics, philosophy and many others. Its influence architecturally is seen across our country with elements of ancient Roman/Greek architectural features in our nations capital with pillars and arches, and many cathedrals around the world. Seeing a Renaissance influence in our society today cannot be seen without in depth knowledge of its origin through the transition of the late Middle Ages by the revival of classical antiquity. Once this is accomplished, one can see the influence the Renaissance has had in many parts of the world.

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