

Status of art during the renaissance period



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‘ So it seems to me that painting is nobler and allows for greater artistry than sculpture, and I believe that in the ancient world it reached the same perfection as other things ...’

(Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, from *Renaissance Art Reconsidered: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, 1. 7. 5, p. 155)

Drawing from four examples from at least three different chapters of Book 1, consider how this statement casts light on debates relating to the making of Renaissance art.

This statement, from *The Book of the Courtier*, written in 1528 by Baldassare Castiglione, is part of a wider discussion on the status of art, and the artist, during the Renaissance period. The paragone debate was a theoretical discussion, ongoing throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, primarily in Italy, but also in the Low Countries, in which scholars, and artists themselves, sought to demonstrate the relative merits of painting and sculpture (Oxford Art Online, 2018). The debate was a way of discussing artistic procedures and determined the aspects of painting and sculpture considered to be of importance during the Renaissance period. By analysing four works from this period we can assess Castiglione’s statement regarding the greater artistry of painting, compared to that of sculpture, and consider how this debate influenced the making of Renaissance art.

The ideas debated in Castiglione’s treatise distilled theories on painting that had already been the subject of earlier discussion. In a treatise of 1435, *On Painting*, Leon Battista Alberti praised painting as a liberal art due to artists understanding of geometry and optics, comparing them to classical Greek

and Roman artists (Dunkerton et al, 1991, p. 205). Whilst in the 1490's Leonardo da Vinci drew comparisons between the liberal arts and painting, and painting and sculpture (King, 2007, p. 272). As a liberal art, painting was deemed to be an intellectual and 'noble' activity, raising the status of the artist from that of a mere craftsman. In his treatise, Castiglione discussed the intellectual superiority of artists over sculptors, declaring that artists had not only overcome the technical challenges of perspective and proportion, but also had skills enabling them to depict light and shade and use colour to reproduce realistic representations of the natural world that were not available to the sculptor. Alberti had declared in 1435 that paintings could be regarded 'as an open window through which the subject...is seen' by the viewer (1991, p. 54). Paintings were then especially suited to the portrayal of complex narrative scenes landscapes depicting 'sky, sea, land, mountains, woods, meadows, gardens, rivers, cities or houses' suggested by Castiglione (Richardson et al, 2007, 1. 7. 5, p. 155).

A tempera on panel work by Andrea Mantegna *The Crucifixion* (1), originally the central panel of the predella from the San Zeno altarpiece of 1456-9 in Verona, clearly reflects the qualities so admired by Castiglione. The panel depicts the crucifixion of Christ at Golgotha, indicated by the skull at the foot of Christ's cross. It is a complex narrative composition of discordant scenes with the collapsing weeping figure of the Virgin Mary, chatting groups of figures and Roman centurions playing dice which emphasise the isolation of the dying Christ. Mantegna's use of linear and aerial perspective provides depth to the painting, drawing the viewers eye to the vanishing point behind the figure of Christ silhouetted against the sky. The partial figures of the two

centurions emerging into the foreground of the picture space and Mantegna's use of foreshortening in his depictions of the horses on the right and the congested winding road filled with people and horses on the left increase the illusion of recession. The background of a naturalistic and illusionistic panoramic landscape of rocky outcrops, distant hills, terraced slopes and minutely detailed depiction of Jerusalem creates a realistic pictorial space. Mantegna uses light and shade not only to achieve three-dimensional effects particularly in the contorted anatomy of the figure of Christ but also symbolically, highlighting the figure of the Good Thief whilst the Bad Thief is depicted in shadow.

Castiglione's assertion that painting was a greater intellectual exercise than sculpture was challenged by other writers during the sixteenth-century. Scholar, Pomponio Gaurico, in his 1504 treatise *De Sculpture* linked the skills of contemporary sculptors with those of ancient Greece and Rome and described sculpture as 'the eighth liberal art' (King, 2007, p. 274). Whilst Castiglione's claims that the three-dimensional effects of reality and illusion using the principles of perspective could only be created using the medium of paint can be disputed by the use of realistic representations of pictorial space in relief sculpture. Such sculptures also lend themselves to the depiction of narrative scenes, such as Lorenzo Ghiberti's fire gilded bronze door panel *Joseph (2)* from the *Gates of Paradise*, circa 1435 at the Baptistery in Florence. A feat of technical mastery, *Joseph* was cast in one piece by Ghiberti himself using the lost wax method of casting (Woods, 2007, p. 106). A large crowd of figures in a busy marketplace dominates the foreground before a classically inspired circular building, whilst Joseph is

depicted with his distressed brothers tearing their robes at the climax of the Old Testament story. In the middle ground and on the background above the building are smaller narrative scenes from Joseph's life. The diminishing scale of these realistic narrative scenes and the perspective of the receding architecture, together with the use of high relief in the foreground and low relief in the background create illusions of depth within the picture space (Woods, 2007, p. 120). Ghiberti's adoption of the pictorial effects used by artists in paintings produces a convincing lifelike narrative in a different medium, and 'may record claims for the supremacy of one visual art form over another' (Farago, 2003).

Sculpture was considered to be the only medium that could demonstrate three-dimensionality and in which figures could be viewed from all sides. Indeed, Michelangelo in his contribution to Benedetto Varchi's discussion of the paragone stated that 'painting was only good insofar as it imitated the three-dimensional qualities of sculpture' (Oxford Art Online, 2018). However, artists were capable of producing painted trompe-l'oeil sculpture that rivalled the real thing, as can be seen in the Donne Triptych (3). This portable altarpiece of oil on oak panels was created circa 1478 by German-born artist Hans Memling for Sir John Donne, pictured in the interior central panel with his wife and daughter kneeling before the enthroned Virgin and Christ Child. The highly naturalistic figures, use of colour and texture, and the detail of the interior panels contrasts with the monochrome exterior panels of the triptych displaying *Saints Christopher and Anthony Abbot* (4). These paintings were rendered employing only tones of grey in a technique known as grisaille, used to create a specific visual effect, the imitation of stone '

alluding to their relationship with sculpted altarpieces' (Billinge et al, 1997, p. 20). Using this limited palette of colour to detail the folds of drapery and contours of the body, Memling uses the effects of light and shade to provide a convincing illusion of three-dimensionality. Depicted as if standing in a niche, imitating the architectural setting of religious statues, shadows thrown by the figures are also incorporated into the illusion. The use of the grisaille technique in emulating the three-dimensionality of sculpture may be a response to the paragone debate and is certainly an indicator of the 'artistry' of painters so admired by Castiglione.

The arguments on both sides of the paragone debate revolved around the guiding principle of naturalism, with sculptors and artists each declaring that their medium produced a more accurate representation of nature. However, it is perhaps when the two media are combined that the potential of naturalistic representation can be exploited to the full. There is a long history of the use of polychromy in which the three-dimensionality of sculpture is combined with the use of colour and texture in order to reproduce a realistic representation of nature. For example, the life-size figures of polychromed terracotta in Niccolò dell'Arca's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (6).

Situated in the hospital church of Santa Maria della Vita in Bologna for which it was originally created in 1464, this is a work 'of astonishing emotional realism' (Woods, 2007, p. 127). The work is composed of a group of seven naturalistic figures modelled in dramatic postures, particularly that of Mary Magdalene whose flying drapery is moulded to her body. The faces of the four women in the composition are carved in expressions of torment, mouths gaping; a moment frozen in time drawing the viewers' attention to the lying

figure of the dead Christ. The affective power of the *Lamentation* would have been heightened by the use of polychrome, little of which remains today. A yellowish base colour would have been used to prevent the paint soaking into the terracotta and then the figures would have been painted using pigments mixed with oil (Woods, 2007, pp. 127-8). It was the combination of the two media, terracotta and paint, which permitted dell'Arca to produce such a realistic and expressive representation of humanity.

It can be seen therefore that Castiglione's statement regarding the artistry of painting was part of a wider debate contributing to emerging ideas about the importance of art and the changing social status of artists themselves. One in which scholars and artists wrote theoretical treatises concerning the unique advantages of one art over another. As seen the paragone debate was enacted in practice, artists and sculptors adopted each other's materials and techniques, evolving new ways of depicting, and producing more accurate representations of, nature.

[1500 words]

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