

St. luke drawing the virgin and other early essay



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St. Luke Drawing the Virgin and other early Renaissance Flemish and Italian paintings / Eitan Kenner The piece St. Luke Drawing the Virgin, c. 1435-40 by Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden is an oil and tempera painting presented at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Its narrative is a popular theme in art, showing St. Luke painting the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus. Such paintings were often painted for chapels of Saint Luke (saint patron of artists) in European churches during the Renaissance.

Fifteenth century Flemish painting in general and this particular piece are characterized by oil painted human figures and objects featured realistically and with meticulous attention to detail. Many Flemish paintings including Van der Weyden's St. Luke Drawing the Virgin are based on biblical narratives but happen in a contemporary 15th century Flemish setting. In those paintings, there are many symbols and motives presented intentionally to convey different moral, philosophical and mostly religious messages.

Through studying and comparing different 15th century Flemish paintings as well as 14th century Italian paintings, one can really learn about the characteristics, expand their knowledge and therefore enjoy the beauty of paintings of that era and St. Luke Drawing the Virgin in particular which is among the most important northern European paintings in the United States. St. Luke Drawing the Virgin is a masterpiece painted with oil and tempera. Oil painting gained popularity in northern Europe around the 15th century.

Its advantages over previous painting techniques such as tempera (which will be discussed later), made it become the principal medium for creating

artworks later on, and also made it possible for artists such as Van der Weyden to paint with such attention to detail. Oil is translucent, and dries slowly. It lets the artist paint in many different layers, and by varying the ratio of pigment and binder (oil), achieving many different colors. Oil makes it possible to really diversify texture and create such realism so there is no resonance of the artist's presence.

In St. Luke Drawing the Virgin there is a distinct difference between textures of materials: the wooden throne Mary Magdalene is seated on, the marble tiles, the pillow St. Luke is kneeling on. There's a great distinction in the different fabrics of Mary's robe. One could almost "feel" the difference between the heavy thick golden parts of her robe and the light white cloth infant Jesus lays in. Van der Weyden utilizes the oil painting media to really show every pleat of the clothes, every little leaf in the garden, and wrinkles (especially in St.

Luke's face, the reason may be Van der Weyden's intention to model the Saint's features on his own 1, while Mary and Jesus are cleaner as a symbol of purity). There are very subtle lines drawn on the tapestry to show it was once folded before being hanged on the wall. The use of lights and shades emphasizes the foreground, or the main narrative of Luke, Mary and Jesus with dark colors, volume and shades, against the beautiful clear and sunny landscape in the background.

One cannot describe oil painting without mentioning another great Flemish painter, who is considered by many (including himself) as the "inventor" of painting with oil media on panel wood, a man by the name of Jan van Eyck.

Although it is known that oil painting had been used before, Jan van Eyck is definitely the first to really understand what oil could do. Jan van Eyck was a big influence on Rogier van der Weyden, and in fact, Van der Weyden's St. Luke drawing the virgin is clearly derived from Van Eyck's Madonna of Chancellor Rolin, c. 1435.

Madonna of Chancellor Rolin presents Mary, crowned by a flying angel, presenting the infant Jesus to Rollin, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Burgundy whom the piece was commissioned by. Although the two pieces present different narratives, they are similar in setting (two figures -one is Mary holding the infant Jesus- seated facing one another inside a loggia, landscape in the background and two figures outside standing on a balcony), in the magnificent use of oil and the meticulous attention to detail, and in a few other characteristics of Flemish painting which will be explained shortly.

Lastly about oil painting: over the years paintings are not preserved fully, and little cracks appear on them, which are noticeable when one looks closely. Unlike Byzantine or Gothic art inside churches who's message is to show the divinity and mysteriousness of the unknowable God, Flemish painting is about making God tangible, setting biblical narratives into contemporary environment and so bringing God closer to men. It is easy to see in Van der Weyden's St. Luke Drawing the Virgin that it doesn't take place in biblical times. The viewer can tell by the clothes, the loggia and the landscape that we're in fact in 15th century Flanders.

Another way of seeing the intention to make the painting more tangible, and earthbound is by the lack of halos for the holy figures. Presenting biblical

narratives into contemporary setting occurs in many paintings of that era, including Jan van Eyck's *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin*. Another great example is Joos van Cleve's *Crucifixion*, c. 1525. This painting of the famous theme of Christ's crucifixion is also a great example of the use of oil painting (brown in the foreground, green in the middle ground, blue in the background - to create three dimensional space) but this piece is brought up here in order to show the similarity to St.

Luke Drawing the Virgin in terms of symbols with religious meaning (in other words, religious iconography). In *St. Luke Drawing the Virgin* there are many symbols with religious meaning. The main ones are: Adam, Eve (and the snake with a human head) carved on the armrest of the wooden throne symbolize Jesus's and Mary's role in redeeming humankind from original sin. 1, Mary sitting on the throne's step and not on the step itself represents her Chastity . Alfred Acres * Rogier van der Weyden's Painted Texts Alfred Acres

Artibus et Historiae Vol. 21, No. 41 (2000), pp. 75-109 Published by: IRSA s. c. Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1483636> Suggests that the ox as Luke's symbol being parallel to the ink bottles, and the open book representing Luke's Gospel being parallel to the drawing of Mary mean they are all bound tightly under the figure of the artist-Evangelist. The two small figures standing on the balcony, even though they're looking at the horizon and not at Luke and Mary, might represent the viewer looking at the painting.

Their size, besides being located far from Mary and Luke might emphasize that even if the viewer can see the holy figures as if they were normal people

just like himself, he is still smaller and of less importance. And so, in Joos van Cleve's Crucifixion we encounter two of the most popular, widely acceptable symbols over the years when one paints the crucifixion: Adam's skull at the foot of the cross, and the plaque marked with "I. N. R. I". The skull is believed to have been buried in Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified.

In the painting, the skull of the "first Adam" symbolizes Jesus's role as the "new Adam" in redeeming humankind from original sin - a similar meaning to Adam, Eve and the snake carved on the armrest of the wooden throne in St. Luke Drawing the Virgin. "I. N. R. I" is a Latin inscription which translates in English to "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". The story is that it was written there in Hebrew, Latin and Greek during the crucifixion. In Crucifixion we see St. Luke and Mary located at the same spots and wearing the same colors as in St.

Luke Drawing the Virgin. This is one example of presenting certain figures in certain ways over the years (Crucifixion was painted around 90 years after and by a different painter). As written before, Oil painting gained popularity in Northern Europe around the 15th century. In order to see the qualities of oil painting and understand why it's become so popular, one must examine how painting was done in previous times. St. Andrew is an egg tempera painting from the early 1320's by Italian painter Simone Martini. This painting medium was used in 14th century Italy.

Painters would cover a wood panel with a plaster called gesso, mix the pigment with an egg as a binder and apply it on the plaster. The difference from Oil painting is that tempera dries fast and it's opaque, difficult for light

to pass through. Therefore, one is essentially limited to painting with just a few layers and so cannot diversify textures that much and create a very realistic painting with great attention to detail like Flemish painters using oil. Excluding Martini who had the privilege to work in France and be exposed to the Gothic art, most Italian painters were not very interested in visual details anyway.

Martini's knowledge of Gothic art is evident in this piece: The Saint's hair, beard and clothes are elegant, ornate, refined; his fingers are elongated. Another technique Martini utilizes to decorate the piece is engraving. This piece is similar to St. Luke Drawing the Virgin in its attention to detail but also includes 14th Century Italian painting characteristics that will be explained through studying a piece by a contemporary of Martini, Giotto. Fifteenth century Flemish painting is full of details and realism, and helps make god tangible by setting biblical stories in contemporary environment.

Fourteenth Century Italian painters have done the same thing in a different way. One of the most revolutionary Italian artists who is considered as a pioneer of the Renaissance is Giotto di Bondone. In his Crucifixion, c. 1304-1306 we witness a total different artwork from Van Cleve's piece of the same theme or Van der Weyden's St. Luke Drawing the Virgin. We witness similar symbols, only this time Giotto is not focusing on decoration, but on human psychological complexity. Giotto makes God tangible to the viewer by presenting a human experience, utilizing a lot of volume, shades, weight and bulk.

In opposition to Van Cleve or Van der Weyden, there are indications of divinity (the saints' and angels' halos, and Christ's Cruciform Nimbus), and so Giotto makes one feel close to god not visually but emotionally. An interesting symbol in this piece is the hovering angels in attempt to catch Christ's blood, symbolizing the Eucharist. Lastly, this painting is also different in the technique it was painted with, called Fresco. The artist essentially puts a plaster on a wall and while it's fresh, the artist applies the pigment mixed with water to the wall. When the plaster dries, it locks the paint in. This is called True or Wet Fresco.

The blue pigment which was the most expensive back in those times (and therefore was used for frescos in chapels to show the patron's wealth and dazzle the eyes of the people) cannot be added on wet plaster, so in fact in Crucifixion the blue was added in Dry Fresco, using a different binder. In Conclusion, by studying and comparing just a handful of 15th century Flemish paintings and 14th century Italian paintings, one can actually learn about a huge amount of paintings from those times, as the intention of the painters, the themes and symbols and the technique used to paint have repeated themselves over the years.

St. Luke Drawing the Virgin is a great example of 14th Century Flemish painting and most of all it can be seen and studied closely as it is available for everyone at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Other selected pieces in this paper helped understand its characteristics. It is possible to analyze deeply each painting and write dozens of pages about its meaning and symbols, but even by noticing a few main things, one can enjoy and understand the spirit of how things were done in old times and therefore <https://assignbuster.com/st-luke-drawing-the-virgin-and-other-early-essay/>

learn to enjoy and appreciate the art of modern times.

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