

Northern renaissance art

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The epoch of Renaissance in general was an age of humanism characterized by a new spirit of freedom, a new sense of the individual, a new realism in visualizing nature and the emergence of the artist as an individual creator. The Renaissance art traditions developed in Italy and then traveled to the north of the Alps and there became known as “ Northern Renaissance”.

Though the Northern Renaissance displays some differences from that of the South, it shares with the Italians in the three essential Renaissance qualities, namely, “ a new interest in the world of fact, a new acceptance of that world as having independent value for artistic creation irrespective of any super sensuous presuppositions, and the separation of the several arts”. (Rowley, Sarton, Schevill and Thompson, 111) However, these qualities exhibited themselves in the north and south in quite different appearances because of the fundamental differences between the Gothic and the Classic traditions. Italy's climate, customs, and racial tendencies would never permit to assimilate the Gothic tradition, and the northern countries could never forget it. For example, in northern tradition we cannot find the mathematically exact perspective to reveal the space and volume, as well as the interplay of light and shadow is replaced by the scrupulous work with light and colors.

North Renaissance portraits became living entities through the new realism which could render the detailed peculiarities of the individual and courtly approach and this trait derives from Gothic style. For example, Jan van Eyck's realism led to an examination of the details of actuality, so that he painted portraits that are convincing likenesses.

To illustrate how the concept of Art Nova was reflected in the works of northern artists it would be appropriate to discuss some of them. In general

the realism of the north as Rowley and his colleagues put it " was more discursive and more minute than that of the south". (114) Jan van Eyck's painting of Arnolfini and his wife is packed with incidentals, the dog, slippers, pillows, fruit, fly whisk, chandelier, and the mirror which repeats them all again, inscription on the wall of the richly furnished room recording that Jan ' was here'.

The new element of light, which seems diffused through the room, is regarded as illumination for each separate object. Jan van Eyck gives us a realism that is more than real. In Eyck's Virgin and Child with Chancellor Rolin realism showed itself in a microscopic examination of objects. Each hair and each pore of the skin was scrutinized so carefully that the visual unity of the whole was lost in the focus upon small detail. The study of surfaces results in the qualities of things, the masterful use of light and color hues affected by light which makes the work different from Italian Renaissance.

The most surprising characteristic of northern realism is the absence of movement. After the dramatic gesticulation of Giotto's compositions and the Internationalists, the figures of Van Eyck, seem to be absolutely frozen. Perhaps much of the " sanctified mood" (Rowley, Sarton, Schevill, and Thompson, 116) of Van Eyck's paintings is created by the fact that his people never look at anything, which gives them a curiously removed quality.

Another artist of the period, Robert Campin, was one of the earliest and greatest masters of Flemish painting. Characterized by a naturalistic conception of form and representation of the objects of daily life, Campin's work marks the break with the prevailing International Gothic style and

prefigures the achievements of Jan van Eyck and the painters of the Northern Renaissance.

One of his masterpieces is the Mérode Altarpiece, a triptych of the Annunciation with the donors and St. Joseph on the wings. The Virgin is portrayed in a setting of bourgeois realism in which interior furnishings are rendered with the frank and loving attention to detail traditional to the Art Nova of Flemish art. Campin's passion for the natural and domestic world dominates his picturing of the sacred story.

This feature to depict sacred motives within mundane context also testifies to the difference between South and North as regards Renaissance. Campin meticulously depicts even the tiniest trifle in a technique which combines semi-transparent oil overlay on water-based opaque pigments that results in the creation of space. Yet Campin's work includes several symbolic elements like the brass laver or lily flower, both referring to Mary's purity.

The innovations of the Northern Renaissance were apparent not only in painting but also in sculpture art. Thus Claus Sluter was the influential master of early Netherlandish sculpture, established highly individual monumental, naturalistic forms. The grandeur of Sluter's forms can only be paralleled in Flemish painting by the van Eycks and Robert Campin discussed above. The works of Claus Sluter infuse realism with spirituality and monumental grandeur.

Sluter was an innovator in art, and thus it would be just to apply the concept of Art Nova to his works too. He moved beyond the prevailing French taste for graceful figures, delicate and elegant movement, and fluid falls of
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drapery. His sculptures are weighty, massive, dominantly large and balanced forms. The six-sided Well of Moses, presents six life-sized prophets holding books and scrolls. The head and torso fragment of Christ from the Calvary reveal a power and intensity of restrained expression that conveys overwhelming grandeur. Suffering and resignation are mingled, a result of the way the brow is knitted, though the lower part of the face, narrow and exhausted, is calm and without muscular stress.

The figures of the composition dominate the architectural framework but also reinforce the feeling of support that the structure provides through their largeness of movement. Sluter's latest preserved work is the tomb of Philip the Bold consisting of forty figures, each about 16 inches high and made up the mourning procession. Sluter conceived of the figures as weepers, of whom no two are alike; some are openly expressing their sorrow, others are containing their grief, but all are robed in heavy wool, draping garments that occasionally veil a bowed head and face to convey a hidden mourning. Sluter epitomized in sculpture the growing awareness of an individualized nature with an enduring grandeur.

Reference List:

1. Harbison, Craig. *The Mirror of the Artist: Northern Renaissance Art in its Historical Context*, New York: Abrams, 1995.
2. Rowley, George et al. *The Civilization of the Renaissance*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1929.