

Aesthetics of the age of enlightenment



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The age of Enlightenment is characterized by the emergence of a value system that is based on reason, and it was a reaction against what was judged to be Church dogma.

It was believed that the Catholic Church, through theological hegemony, had for long ages suppressed the human intellect and its creative potential. The philosophers of the Enlightenment preached in particular against theocracy, and upheld rationalism as an alternative to religious doctrine. They were of course buoyed by the rapid advances in scientific knowledge and the general evolution of society towards secularism and capitalistic modes.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment were extremely sure of themselves, thinking that they were justified according to natural law, and therefore infallible. But as Adorno and Horkheimer have pointed out, strict rationalism becomes a form of totalitarianism in the end, and therefore the Enlightenment only replaced one form of dogma by another (217).

Keeping this aspect of the Enlightenment in mind, I attempt to trace a certain aesthetic that moved the thinkers and artists of this movement. This essay considers examples in painting, architecture and sculpture in order to identify the nature of this aesthetic.

In architecture, the Palace of Versailles serves as an ideal example. Originally a chateau for King Louis XIII, it was expanded greatly in the 1680's in order to serve as the Palace and administrative quarters of King Louis XIV. Known as the Sun King, and an ardent champion of the enlightenment, he made sure that the designs reflected the emerging ethos of the age.

The most noticeable feature is the absence of gaudy ostentation, characteristic of Baroque and Gothic architecture which had flourished in the previous ages. Instead, the palace exudes simplicity and mathematical harmony.

The outlines are by and large flat and rectangular, which is in marked opposition to the Gothic style. The latter style, originating in Germany, incorporated upward curving lines, and spires that point sharply towards the sky. It is a style that emphasizes the other world, where the upward arching outlines were meant to suggest heaven.

In contrast to this the Palace of Versailles very much directs us back to earth, telling us that the focus has shifted back to this world. Other mathematical motifs are triangles and circles, found incorporated in the extensive lawns and gardens that surround the Palace, all suggestive of humanism, as opposed to religion.

The Enlightenment also saw a marked revival in the attention paid to the accomplishments of ancient Greece and Rome, a trend known as Neoclassicism. The Greeks were imbued with humanism, and this was reflected in their sculpture, which aimed for a realistic representation of the human form. After the advent of Christianity sculpture became forbidden, because the Church did not approve of physicality in art. Though it used human representation, devotional art developed highly formalized forms, removing all suggestions of physicality.

The result was iconic images that served the purpose of worship and devotion. A common theme was 'Madonna and child', depicting the baby

Jesus in the lap of Mary. At the beginning the portrayal of Mary was more as Theotokos, or 'mother of God', in which she is enthroned, haloed and drawn with highly formalized gestures, and only incidentally touching upon the normal 'mother-child' relationship.

During the Renaissance artist like Lippi and Mantegna took the liberty to paint the theme with strong human sentiments, making the pair seem far more natural. The culmination of this trend is the completely realistic style of painting that emerged with the Enlightenment. Depiction of feminine beauty had changed from the mystic towards the purely physical, which in truth marks a relapse into pre-Christian and pagan norms that flourished in the Classical period.

The Medici Venus is a case in point. The original is a life-size bronze sculpture from the Hellenistic period, and it depicts the goddess Aphrodite in the nude, and with a dolphin at her heels, suggestive of her emerging from the sea. In the 18th century the sculpture became the focus of intense attention, with the emergence of Neoclassicism, which set the accomplishments of ancient Greece as ideals.

Copies of the Medici Venus were made in abundance, and connoisseurs throughout the continent studied them intently, believing the statue to be an almost perfect depiction of the feminine form. The English diarist John Evelyn declared it to be "a miracle of art", but the Pope at the time deemed it to be lewd, and ordered that the original be exported from Florence to Paris (Evelyn 275).

A 1765 painting by Greuze shows a connoisseur measuring the dimensions of a miniature copy of the Venus, as if to discover perfection of form (Munhall 242). It perfectly pictures the Enlightenment fixity on physical beauty. This stands in contrast to the austere depictions of the Madonna, where physicality is suppressed in favor of the mystic and the sublime. A similar contrast may be observed between Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and Paul Peter Ruben's *The Bacchanal*.

In both the subject matter is of a feast in a religious context. Da Vinci's painting is Biblical and austere Christian in tone, while Ruben depicts the pagan rite of the Bacchanalia, observed in honor of the god Bacchus (Neret 30). In his painting Reuben abandons all propriety and tries to portray the feast as only a sexual orgy. It is hard to find any religious tinge in the painting, which emphasizes physicality to the utmost.

In conclusion, the aesthetics of the Enlightenment is very much a reaction against the austerity of Christian art, and expresses a newly established humanism. Where the previous generations stood in awe of God and the other world, the proponents of the Enlightenment gloried in human potential.

The new aesthetic found expression in architecture through an incorporation of geometrical forms, as found in the design of the Palace of Versailles. In painting and sculpture the focus shifts towards physical beauty, at the expense of the sublime. Much of this can be seen as a relapse into pagan values that flourished in the Classical Age, and indeed classical accomplishments were held up as ideals for artists and thinkers.

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