An African Interpretation of Ten Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries' Paintings in the Uffizi Gallery

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Abstract

This study attempts to examine ten paintings from the Uffizi gallery in Florence, some of which the researcher had studied, taught and encountered. A closer analysis of these paintings show a combination of ideas derived from art scholars, the Uffizi gallery and those of the Renaissance writers. Art-historical methods of formalism, iconography and psychoanalysis were systematically infused into the study. The Uffizi paintings constitute a large number of works in the gallery, comprising early European works of Renaissance to Baroque pieces. A deeper examination of these works further reveals distant African connections in the development of these art styles. It must be noted that African influences supersede the fifteenth to seventeenth century European styles. Indeed, Influences of Africa date back to the Egyptian pyramids as well as the rock painting and engravings.

Introduction

On the fourth of July 2015, Harrie Bazunu (b. 1966) and Ese Odokuma (b. 1968) paid an historic visit to the Uffizi gallery at Florence. The gallery was packed full with works of art showing mainly sculptures and paintings. During my observation, it appeared that all the works had already been interpreted. Even scholars describing and interpreting the works on the spot, seem to repeat what was written in the books. It was of this point, I decided to look at the works from a different perspective, rather than accept the already documented interpretations as final. Using an African and Western perspective to explore the mixed possibility, I attempted a cross examination through analytical observation.

In this study, ten works were chosen for the purpose of this analysis. The works are not arranged in chronological order but according to the writer's choice. The works in questions fall between the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Before embarking on this study, a peep into the fifteenth to seventeen century artistic styles becomes necessary.

Growth of Renaissance

In the words of several scholars such as Adams (2001), Getlin (2002), Janson (1986), Peterson (2014), Ormiston (20110, Strickland (1992), Chilvers and Osborne (2001), Fleming (1995), Neret (2006), Gombrich (1995) just to mention a few, the fifteen century was a period of rebirth. The rebirth of ancient Greek and Roman antiquities. This was the period were lost and ancient towns, paintings, sculptures and architectural structures were discovered. Ancient scrolls with humanistic writings of great personalities such as Plato, Socrates and Aristotle were excavated (Adams 2001). These findings affected the lives of persons in diverse fields of study. The artists were not left out. Getlin (2002) opines that the discovery of the Laocoon statues influenced many Renaissance artists. Renaissance means rebirth, or "revival of the knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman antiquities which started between the fourteen" to the sixteenth century in Florence, Italy. Florence became the artistic

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town of this fundamental generation of artistic development. Apart from the artist, patrons also played prominent roles at sponsoring artist from Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519

Small wonder, even in the twenty-first century, Florence still hold considerable evidence of these fifteenth and sixteenth century works so much that works of art adorn every corner, street or building in Florence.

Adams (2001) claims that Florence was the intellectual financial and artistic centre of Renaissance. She spoke about the Medici' a dominant Florentine banking family in the fifteenth century as patrons of art and humanism. The Medici families encouraged the study of works of men like Plato and Aristotle and were great collectors of ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. It must be noted that the humanist interest which developed from the fourteenth century, blossomed through the fifteenth century to the early sixteenth century was associated with the arts more than for financial and political powers. It is true that wealthy and educated leaders began to patronise the artistic creativity of artist. These artists succeeded in merging the ancient antiquities of Greece and Rome with the demands of the fifteenth century. So much so that, great political and religious teachers wanted to be associated with the likes of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti.

The artist themselves strove to surpass the achievements of the ancient Greek and Roman past. Hence, the great pilgrimage some of the artist took to see these antiquities. Indeed, it was also a voyage for me as an Art historian to visit the same city where the Renaissance was born. It was not a mistake that when the opportunity came I grabbed it. It is more experienced than imagined. The works studied here therefore, contain more of my flavor and experiences than those obtained from the source.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) to Raphaello Sanzio (1483-1520) to mention a few.

Mannerism and Baroque Artistic Styles

Between high Renaissance and baroque is the term scholars often refer to as mannerism (Janson, 1986). Chilvers and Osborne (2001) define mannerism as the period between high Renaissance and Baroque that is the era around 1520-1600s (Chilvers an Osborne, 2001). Adams (2001) traces the birth of mannerism to after the death of Raphael Sanzio (1483-1520). She further claims that new developments in art emerged in Italy after 1520 (Adams, 2001). Mannerism seemed to have co-existed with Michelangelo and Titian's later styles (Adams, 2001). In Adams book, "a history of Western Art, she attempts to link the religious reformation and counter reformation of the fifteenth century as a factor leading to the mannerist developments. At a stage, works associated with this period were looked down at. But after much analysis on these works, the assumption changed. It is now seen as a reaction against the naturalism of the Renaissance style.

Analysis of the Paintings from the Uffizi Gallery

Leonardo da Vinci, 1452-1519, *annunciation*, oil on panel, Uffizi, 1472.

Ormiston (2011) speculates that an unknown patron may have commissioned this painting. There is also the belief that this piece may be Leonardo's first solo work after being apprenticed to Andrea Del Verrocchio (1435-88). The Uffizi gallery has on record that this work arrived the gallery in 1867 from the sacristy of San Bartolomeo Monteolivetor outside the gate of San Frediano.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Annunciation*, oil on panel, 1472, Uffizi

Description, Analysis and Interpretation

This work reminds us of the Annunciation made by Angel Gabriel to Mary about the birth of Jesus Christ. When the Angel told her that she, Mary, was to expect a child. And that this child, was to be conceived by the Holy Spirit simply because she was favoured amongst women.

The figure of Mary here, seems surprised after seeing a winged human coming to announce the birth of Christ. She may have wondered why she? That was the expression on the face of Mary in Leonardo's work.

The background shows trees which are grouped in threes, except for the simple tree at the extreme right. Closely looking at this tree. It is supported by three rock-like vegetation which fade into the background.

Leonardo's versatility in gesticulations is evident as he uses Mary's hand to speak. The Angel on the other hand, points at Mary as if he were saying "Hold your peace". Looking at Mary's posture one is forced to notice what seems to look like a third foot. The draperies are so well folded with the technique of chiaroscuro.

The choice of colours are reduced as Leonardo uses greens, reds and yellow with tinges of white. He uses green as a cool colour and yellow and red which help to bring the work forward. While white, which is neutral, is systematically used to highlight significant areas.

The foreground, occupies a large part of the picture plane, allowing the angel and Mary to sit properly in the picture. Perspective and the pyramidal shape which Strickland (1992) considered as two of the four breakthroughs in Renaissance art are obvious. The work is a remarkable piece, executed by an artistic genius of Naturalism.

Raffaello Sanzio, 1483-1520, *Madonna and child with St. John*, Uffizi, 1505-6.



Rapheal Sanzio, *Madonna and Child* 1505-6, Uffizi, oil on Wood.

Vasari (In Adams, 2001) tells us that this picture was executed for a Florentine Merchant named Lorenzo Nast, prior to his wedding with Sandra Cenigiani in 1505.

From all indications, the information gathered states that the work was buried in rubbles of the palazzo in which it was hanging in 1547. Its scattered parts were collected and restored probably by one Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio (Uffizi gallery).

The painting shows the virgin Mother, Jesus and John the Baptist. Mary seems to look over the children as they play. While reading, she supports John with her right hand. The figure of Jesus which is nude, looks knowingly at John. Here, John who is clothed with silk brown linen running from his shoulders to above his waist pulls what seems to be a cloth from Jesus hands. The expression on Jesus face tells us that even at a tender age, Jesus somewhat identified his mission on earth. Raphael's execution of the pyramidal form is displayed in his depiction of Mary and the children. The use of complementary colours of blue and red are emphasized in his work.

The foreshortened legs and the contrapposto pose of Jesus re-echo traits of the ancient Greek and Roman style. The foreground of the piece is adequate enough for the figures to sit, while in the background, Raphael uses aerial prospective to show distance.

On the ground, just in front of St. John's figure, and Jesus, are six white flowers. In the case of Jesus these flowers were not clustered together. Around Mary's head are clouds designed as angelic wings.

Interpretation

This painting explains the role of St. John and Mary in the coming years of Jesus Christ. St. John as the forerunner had come to prepare the way for the task Jesus is to perform. The tightly clustered flowers close to St. John the Baptist's feet shows his task on earth while the loosely clustered flowers in front of the figure of Jesus shows his role on earth and heaven.

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Raffaello Sanzio, 1483-1520, portrait *of Pope Leo X with two Cardinals, Givlio de Medici and Luigude Ross, 1518.*

The work depicts Leo X Giovanni de Medici 1475-1521 and Pope in 1513 together with his cousins Giulio de Medici.



Raffaello Sauzio, 1483, Uffizi, *portrait of Pope Leo X with two Cardinals*

Analysis
What is interesting here is in the technique Raphael used in creating three dimensionality in his painting. Facially, all the three figures are alike. The main figure dominates the picture plane. Gombrich (1995) states that the time this picture was painted Luther had attacked the Pope for the way he raised money for the new St. Peters. And Raphael was in charge of this building project. So, of course, in depicting Pope Leo X he emphasized his status, position and relationship.

The pyramidal placement of figures is evident in the figure of the Pope. This he effectively executed by balancing the main figure with his two cardinals. The choice of colours, throws

out the importance of the dignities. Although Raphael seems to take a liking for red, the colour seems to connote the spiritual significance of divinity and royalty.

Correggio Antonio Allegis, 1489-1534. *The Virgin in Adoration of the Child,* 1518-20 oil on canvas.

Information derived from the Uffizi suggests that this painting was donated by the Duke of Mantua Ferdinando Gonzaga to Cosimo II de Medici in 1617. The Madonna is depicted as kneeling before baby Jesus looking down passionately at the baby as she plays with him. In response, the baby raises his arms in excitement as he returns his mother's loving gaze. The red, blue and brown hues of the clothing were a common choice of colours in the high Renaissance period. The pyramidal structure which is an element of the fifteenth century art style is evident.

The biblical story of Jesus birth in a manager is depicted in Correggio's work. Here, Jesus is seen born from a humble background and was destined to be the greatest man in history.



Correggio Antonio Allegis, 1489-1534 Oil on canvas 1518-20. *The Virgin in Adoration of the child*.

Girolama Francesca Maria Mazzola (Parmigianino) 1503-1540, *Madonna and Child with Angels and a Prophet*

The piece was commissioned in 1534 by a noble woman named Elena Bajardi at the church of Santa Maria dei Servi in Parma. The work is also called the Madonna of the long neck. The Uffizi tells us that the work was not complete after being offered to Cardinal Leopoldode Medici in 1674. It remained in the church until in 1698 when it was sold to Ferdinando de Medici. It must be noted however that after the late Renaissance style Mannerism was born. It was a reaction against the symmetric naturalism and arrangement of the Renaissance technique.

Analysis

Parmigianino attempted to create a different approach in art. He must have become tired of the late sixteenth century Renaissance style, thus the need to create something different. The intention here was simply to stylize naturalism with exaggerated proportions. It is significant to note that the urge to create something new, has always been a preoccupation of the European artist.



Girotana Francesco Maria Mazzola (Pamigianino). *Madonna and child withAngels and a prophet,* oil on wood, Uffizi, Florence.

A Critical examination of the proportions of the human bodies in this work seems highly exaggerated. For instance, the proportion of the central figure is a misnomer. From the

head to the body, is longer than from the kneels to the toes. The neck is reclined and long. The body of the baby seems disproportional as he lies coldly in Mary's arms. The winged angels look on. The angel at the right hand side of the picture has long leg which re-echoes the movement of Mary's leg. The entire picture plane is lopsided. Behind Mary, is a reduced column. In front of it, is a man speculated by Adams (2001) to be a prophet. The work is an actual reaction against the laws of perspective and colour selection.

Sebastiano del Piombo *death of Adonis*, 1512, Oil on canvas.

This piece was completed immediately after Sebatiano came to Rome. It was in response to an invitation from Agostino Chigi the banker, who commissioned the work. Sebastiano del Pombo, *death of Adonis* 1512, oil on canvas, 19th century frame.



Sebastiano del Pombo, *death of Adonis* 1512, oil on canvas, 19th century frame.

Analysis

Sebastiano's female figures are well formed. It shows a period in Western culture were plump ladies were in vogue. The treatment given to the figures are highly naturalistic. The draperies show a detailed observation made by the artist. Of the women sitting on a tree trunk in the picture plane, is another figure whose hands are seen manneristically twisting.

The figure on the background is pale and so can be considered life-less. The angelic figure in this work seems to be communicating with the female in front. Behind the scene some thing seems to be going on. A male figure drags what seems to be a cloth from the huge man. In the extreme left, one of the females points at the woman with the angelic child. While, the male figure looks on with the intention of consoling the lady, which the angel has already done.

The trees, clouds and buildings at the background maybe pointing at the woman with a blue scarf. From the title, it definitely meant that the dead man was Adonis. But his death seems to resurrect other occurrences. As it appears other gods are showing interest in his dear wife. But the good spirits are with her.

Caravaggio Michelangelo Merisi

The shield in question was given to grand duke Ferdinando I by Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, a Medici agent of the Papal's court in Rome.



Caravaggio Michelangelo Merisi, *shield of Medusa*, 1597, Uffizi, Florence.

The first time I heard about the Medusa was in a twentieth century film. The shield which was based on a myth, depicting a head consisting of snakes as hair. There is the story that if one

looks at the eyes of this creature, one would turn to stone. Ormiston (2011) believes that Caravaggio's Medusa is actually a copy of leonardo da Vinci's unfinished work. The painting is expressive as it opens its mouth with eyes agape while blood issue's out from the neck. The painting is set on a green background in the centre of the shield. The work however, shows that despite influences from other European cultures, the Renaissance artist held on to their myths and fables. It is important to note, that in parts of Africa, precisely among the Ife, Igbo Ukwu and other related cultures, peoples beliefs, ideologies, myths and fables were usually embedded in their art forms.

Gherardo Do Delle Notti Gerrit Honthorst 1592-1656, *Good Fortune* 1617-1619



Good fortune, 1617-1619, oil on canvas, restored in 1993-1994, Uffizi, Florence.

The Uffizi informs us that this work is probably one of the six canvases that was purchased by Cosimo II. This was in 1620 via his secretary Andrea Gioli. Information has it that in 1627, Ferdinando II gave the work to his mother, Maria Magdalena of Austria.

Analysis

It shows seven figures including a female figure which seems to be a diviner or poker player. One of the black scalfed ladies is carrying a baby. Everyone on the table is captivated by the ability of the woman on the right side of the picture. The painting is bright are set in front of the person's sitted on the table. The woman wearing a hat seems to be very pleased as her face is well lit up. Her bright face complements the standing with colours such as yellow and red. It is seems to be set on a dark background which is accentuated by light.

Interpretation

The reason Ferdinando II gave this painting to his mother seems to necessitate certain questions? He may probably be wishing his mother good fortune or warning her about some fraudulent persons. The colour scheme of the artist is warm. As he chooses the advancing colours such as yellow and red in other to create light in the scene. On the table appear three closely knitted substances. Card woman's shaded face. In fact, her outstretched hand is supported by the gentlemen behind her. Every item on the table seems to be closest to her. She, in deed, is the fortunate

lady. A closer look at this painting reveals that the man close to the fortunate woman seems to be pulling the black sleeves of the woman. In highlighting the woman's face as well as her black stockings, it seems the painting shows a fantastically corrupt woman with a cynical smile.

Gerardo Delle Notti Gerrit Honthorst, *Supper with Lute Player*, 1619-1620, OIL ON CANVAS

This painting is outstanding because it reminds me of my stay in Florence where for the first time, I saw and heard the sound of a Lute. The lute is like a "Ukelele" with a unique sound. A *Ukelele is* a small guitar with a peculiar sound.

The same light and shade (chiaroscuro) common to all Hothorst's other works is evident here. What is significant is that whilst the lute is playing, two women seem to be forcing a mouse down the throat of a guest. Apparently, the guest is drunk and he has a big plate of food before him.

The artist's tends to highlight again, the evil deeds and faces of the bad persons in his paintings. Rather than darken them he highlights them. Then he groups his figures into threes or fours and keeps a single person backing the audience. Their faces are either inclined towards the right or left.

Conclusion

It must however be noted that not all ten pieces analysed belong to the Renaissance period. The paintings are very narrative and expressive and involve a lot of information. What is significant here is the fact that, given

The lute is also small, but according to some players may come in diverse sizes.



Gherardo Delle Notti Gerrit Honhorst, *supper with lute player*, 1619-1620, oil on canvas

an ideal situation the paintings were discussed from aspects of colour usage, picture placements and personal interpretations from an African's view. That, European naturalism stems from ancient Greek and Roman antiquities, is possible. However, Greek art is an off shoot of Egyptian art and Egyptian art has a lot of African influences as well as Asiatic traits. In other words, what was experienced in Europe in the 14^{th}, 15^{th} – 16^{th} centuries were just different expressions stemming from African and Asiatic culture. Since, anthropologist and archaeologist firmly believe that life and civilization started in Africa, there is a truism that traces of Africa art exist I European culture. Thus, analysing works from an African perspective digs deeper for an understanding that goes beyond the artist society and even era. What is on the surface of the works, are societal and cultural influences. The researcher had attempted to excavate meanings below the surface level to achieve the original beginnings.

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