

An abstract painting featuring vibrant colors like blue, yellow, red, and white, layered and textured. The colors are applied in broad, expressive strokes, creating a sense of movement and depth. The background is a mix of these colors, with some areas appearing more saturated than others.

# Contemporary Discussions In Art History

Sociohistorical  
And  
Psychological  
Observations

Bruna Bejarano

 EDITORA  
ARTEMIS  
2020



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## PRESENTATION

Art History is a vast field of study which, loosely explained, deals with the effort to understand how, historically, different groups and people represented their artistic talents. Philosophical and religious beliefs, economic conditions, psychological constructions — all the elements that play a role in the development of human beings — influence stylistic choices of artists, whether they are manifested in painting, sculpture, ceramics, architecture, or any other form of artistic efforts. An interdisciplinary field *par excellence*, Art History looks at art from a holistic perspective, trying to understand artistic manifestations in their relation to the time periods and social context in which they are produced. Cultural influences — such as religion, social arrangements, institutions and gender constructions — all have a direct impact on every human intellectual manifestation, including the arts.

This book, entitled “**Contemporary discussions in Art History: sociohistorical and psychological observations**” is a collection of six articles that point to some ways in which specific art works are either (or both) a revelation of a sociohistorical moment or a subversive attempt to transform their context by denouncing operating power structures. In one way or another, all artists studied in this book used their craft to affirm what they perceive as an agenda worth advancing.

I hope you enjoy reading it!

Bruna Bejarano

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>CHAPTER 1</b> .....   | <b>1</b>  |
| THE ART OF RESISTANCE IN THE WORKS OF GUSTAVE COURBET, JACOB LAWRENCE,<br>PABLO PICASSO AND BARBARA KRUGER |           |
| DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406201  |           |
| <b>CHAPTER 2</b> .....   | <b>18</b> |
| RENE MAGRITTE: A TENTATIVE PSYCHOANALYSIS  |           |
| DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406202  |           |
| <b>CHAPTER 3</b> .....   | <b>28</b> |
| DECORUM IN RELIGIOUS PAINTINGS   |           |
| DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406203  |           |
| <b>CHAPTER 4</b> .....   | <b>39</b> |
| DISEGNO VERSUS COLORE  |           |
| DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406204  |           |
| <b>CHAPTER 5</b> .....   | <b>49</b> |
| THE RENDERING OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AT THE CHAPEL OF LA MERCED                                      |           |
| DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406205  |           |
| <b>CHAPTER 6</b> .....   | <b>62</b> |
| LAS MENINAS  |           |
| DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406206  |           |
| <b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b> .....  | <b>73</b> |
| <b>INDEX</b> .....   | <b>74</b> |

# CHAPTER 4

## DISEGNO VERSUS COLORE

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**ABSTRACT:** While wealth and classical tradition contributed to the birth of Renaissance, it was the rivalry between independent states that stimulated competition and fostered an exceptionally productive period for the arts. The desire to maintain a long-established local identity was also at the heart of a peculiar aesthetic discussion which arose between Florence and Venice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: the *disegno* versus *colore* paragone. The artistic preference for *disegno* was strong in central Italy, particularly in Florence, where drawing was considered the fundamental skill of Renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Venetian painters, on the other hand, mastered the use of oil paint, using color to develop aesthetically innovative techniques, creating a uniquely rich style. Through the harmonization of pigments and tones, artists such as Tintoretto, Veronese, and Titian created expressive works which left a profound influence on future generations of Western artists. The *disegno* versus *colore* paragon debate would reemerge a century later in France between Poussinists, who defended the supremacy of *disegno*, and Rubenists, who defended *colore*. Finally, the legacy of the colorists influenced the development of

the impressionist movement that took place in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**KEYWORDS:** *disegno* versus *colore*; Florentine versus Venetian painting; Renaissance Art.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a discussion about the superiority of different techniques with which artists of Venice and Florence executed their works emerged in the peninsula of Italy. The question of whether *disegno* or *colore* was more important in painting was at the core of the debate.

Florentine practices were faithful to *disegno*, meaning drawing or design, which was believed to be the foundation of all art. Foremost essential to painting was the use of line to depict form. Precise contour and lines were characteristics of a clean, concise aesthetic which appealed to the intellect and reason, adhering to the principles of classical art. *Disegno* was considered by the likes of Michelangelo to be the foundation of architecture, painting and sculpture.

Venetians, on the contrary, prioritized *colore*, *colorito*, or color. By blending and layering pigments, it was possible to achieve

the natural effects of light found in nature and allow artists the liberty of expressive creation. Furthermore, color was believed to attract the viewer emotionally and thus could be enjoyed by everyone – it was more appealing.

Although the paragone (comparison) between *disegno* and *colore* was a technical discussion about stylistic preferences, its origins are much deeper and not always clearly defined. Historical factors help explain why similar disputes took place between different independent Italian states.

## 2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The political organization of Italy had been, for more than 600 years until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, characterized by the phenomenon known as city-states – small, independent states which grew in the Middle Ages to become important trading centers. The revival of trade in medieval Europe facilitated the growth of urban areas, and by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy was the most urbanized region in western Europe.

Ancient Roman tradition marked the development of the city-states, many of which consolidated their position as important commercial, banking and cultural centers during the Renaissance. Venice (the Republic of Venice) was a sovereign state from 697 to 1797, and Florence (the Republic of Florence) from 1115 until 1532. The spirit of independence, therefore, dominated these urban centers in which political power belonged to wealthy merchants and bankers.



Figure 1. Italy at the end of 15<sup>th</sup> century

It must be highlighted that independence always involved both internal and external conflicts: internally, between powerful families who disputed political power; externally, cities fought constantly to expand territories, to access seaports, to control commerce and trade routes and to gain access to smaller cities' natural resources.

The fragmentation of Italy and the rivalry between the prosperous independent states stimulated competition and contributed to the flourishing of the arts. Among other things, cities disputed who had the largest and most beautiful cathedral and the best artists: Leonardo Da Vinci, for example, was disputed between Milan, Florence, Venice and Ferrara. Besides the rivalry, the combination of wealth and classical tradition help to explain why Italy was the birthplace of Renaissance.

By the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, several smaller and previously independent cities had been absorbed by powerful neighbors and Italy was largely dominated by five states: Milan, Florence, Venice, the Papal States and the kingdom of Naples. Florence and Venice, therefore, were two very important cities which had fought hard to maintain and expand their power by promoting a long-established regional identity, as opposed to a national sentiment.



### 3. THE AESTHETIC COMPETITION

Although the *disegno* versus *colore* paragon was closely related to the interstate competition of the time, and artistic expression was one of many ways by which a state could claim cultural supremacy, it developed from a larger and previous comparison to determine what forms of art were superior: painting or sculpture.

The artistic preference for *disegno* was strong in central Italy, particularly in Florence. Drawing was the fundamental skill of Renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo (both representative of the Florentine tradition), who mastered sculpture and architecture as well as painting. *Disegno*, it was argued, was a unifying prerequisite to all arts, and a key activity in the training of new artists. The painting of frescoes (an ancient technique of mural that became a hallmark of Italian Renaissance), in particular, often required several drawings before the execution of the final product, and both Michelangelo and Da Vinci left extensive studies attesting to the highly intellectual activity undertaken prior to the creation of their works.

Since *disegno* means both “design” and “drawing” in Italian, the mastery of *disegno* meant not only that the artist could execute the work with technical knowledge, but was also capable of inventing or envisioning (designing) an artistic idea. The painting of Adam in the fresco *The Creation of Man*, for example, on the vault of the Sistine Chapel, evolved from a series of drawings:



Figure 2. *Study of a reclining male nude*, Michelangelo, c. 1511.



Figure 3. *The Creation of Adam*, Michelangelo, c. 1512.

Giorgio Vasari, in his biographical collection *Le Vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* (Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, 1550) described *disegno* as the supreme skill required for all creative process. The painter and writer from Arezzo, a town dominated by Florence since 1384, considered the artistic value of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and Michelangelo superior to those demonstrated by other artists of the peninsula and abroad. Vasari regarded the painter of the Sistine Chapel, in particular, the greatest of all masters: a “divine” artist so beyond perfect that there would be nothing to be improved in the arts after him. Titian was forgotten from the first edition of Vasari’s work, and when included, in the second edition, he was used to highlight the superiority of Raphael and Michelangelo and to solidify the assumption that he lacked the study of *disegno*:

(...) and I remember that when Fra Sebastiano del Piombo was discussing this work, he told me that if Titian had been in Rome during this period and had seen the works of Michelangelo, those of Raphael, and ancient sculpture, **and if he had studied the art of design, he would have created the most stupendous works**, given his fine knowledge of colours; and he added that Titian deserved the reputation of being the finest and most able imitator of Nature in his use of Colour in our time, and that **with a foundation in the grand art of design, he would have reached the level of Raphael and Buonarroti.** (VASARI, 1991, p. 492)

In 1557, Ludovico Dolce published the first theoretical treatise about painting produced by a scholar. In *Dialogo della Pittura, Intitolato l’Aretino* (Dialogue on Painting or L’Aretino) the Venetian intellectual discusses, among several other topics, the role of invention, drawing and color in painting. The Dialogue compares those who were, in the opinion of the author, the greatest painters of the moment: Raphael, Michelangelo and Titian.

Although Ludovico partially agreed with some of Vasari's ideas, his writings were an indirect critique of the Florentine’s work. Besides sustaining the relevance

of Venetian Art, which he paralleled in greatness to the art of central Italy, Vasari refuted the superiority of Michelangelo's artistic virtues. Using an earlier critique written by Pietro Aretino, Dolce agrees that Buonarrotti's drawing is superb, but condemns the exaggeration in the contorted and overly-muscular figures. According to Dolce, Raphael was more virtuous and skilled than Michelangelo, and Titian was superior in comparison to both – not only did he master invention and drawing, he surpassed his contemporaries in the technique of color.

*Colore* appealed to the taste of Venice, a city in northeastern Italy with an artistic tradition close to the Byzantine Empire, which ruled the state briefly after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and with whom Venetians had a long history of commercial partnership. The embellished style of the Byzantines can be appreciated in the architecture and decoration of many of the city's touristic places – including the opulent Saint Mark's Basilica, the Muraro Church and Ca'da Mosto, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Venetian-Byzantine style palace.

With the prosperity of Venetian trade, oil paint quickly became popular, slowly replacing tempera. Oil was much more resistant to moisture, thus better suited for the humid climate of Venice. It was also less costly than its predecessors and allowed more blending and a wider range of pigments. Artists were able to explore and play with a new medium, typically working out their images directly onto the canvas – this generally resulted in more expressive and spontaneous creations.

Skilled in the use of rich colors and the study of the effects of light, Venetian artists created forms defined not by lines, but by highlight and shadow effects accomplished by the use of layered brushstrokes of color. This is not to say that drawing was abandoned – just as color, obviously, was an integral part of the work of those who favored *disegno*. However, it was color, or the subtle modulations of it, and not precise lines, which defined form.

The painting *The Venus of Urbino* justifies Ludovico's praise of the Venetian painter for the mastery of *colore* as well as *disegno*:



Figure 4. *The Venus of Urbino*, Titian, 1534.

Titian's skill in the use of color accentuates the sensuous and soft surface of Venus' pale and luminescent flesh. The flushed red cheeks of her face and the cascading curls are defined by highlights and shadows, all emphasizing the sensuality of the scene. Although the artist uses thick paint to create the character's form, the brushwork is not painterly, but precise and contoured. The composition is neatly balanced, divided by the resting and horizontal Venus and vertically by the curtain backdrop while the floor tiles create linear perspective. Titian contrasts the lines of the architecture with the arabesque curve of Venus' form.

The harmonization of color to define forms and the use of contrasting light and dark (to create the feel and look of fabric) can also be appreciated in the painting *The Rape of Europa*:



Figure 5. *The Rape of Europa*, Titian, ca. 1560-1562

A master of the oil medium, Titian pays close attention to garments and texture, playing with vibrant crimson and subtle pinks to give life to Europa's windblown scarf. Likewise, muted grays, beiges and whites of all tonalities create dimension in the bull's coat and Europa's torn dress. He employs similar techniques to the sky: creamy peach colors start mid-canvas and slowly draw the eye to orange clouds, which melt into varying hues of blue. Through his knowledge and understanding of colors, Titian is able to create volume, depth and dimension.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The artistic discussion known as the *disegno* versus *colore* paragon was, to a large degree, a manifestation of a deeper, long-standing regional dispute which stemmed from political and commercial interests.

The prosperous town of Florence was home to artists of the status of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael, who achieved glory in their mastery of *disegno*.

The Florentine school was, undeniably, a chief contributor to the skills so long associated with the development of Renaissance Art. Compositions were detailed in several drawings before painting and perfection was achieved through studies that helped create carefully contoured, sculpture-like figures.

Venetian artists, on the other hand, were great contributors to the mastery of the technique of *colore*, engaging in the study of light and shade, and their effect on the creation of form. Through the harmonization of pigments and tones, artists such as Tintoretto, Veronese, and Titian created expressive works with softer effects of shape. The contribution of the Venetian school, as it was argued by Ludovico Dolce, was the opening of a new perspective in painting. Through mixing and layering of color, creativity and intuition could reveal the artist's perception of how light shapes form.

The *disegno* versus *colore* paragon was not settled in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and it resurged in France in 1671. Reflecting the same regional competition and animosity, the Poussinists (named after French painter Nicolas Poussin) defended the supremacy of *disegno* over *colore*. Rubenists (named after Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens) defended *colore*. Only in 1717 the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, which had *disegno* as one of its key tenets, recognized the value of Rubenists: *the Embarkation for Cythera*, by Antoine Watteau, was accepted by the French Academy as his reception piece.

Finally, the legacy of the colorists would, as many art historians point out, influence the development of the Impressionist movement that took place in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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## INDEX

### A

Agnolo Bronzino 35  
Art History 1, 17, 49, 62, 65, 70, 73  
Art of Resistance 1, 2, 14  
Art of Spain 62  
Avant-Garde 2, 3, 5

### B

Barbara Kruger 1, 2, 3, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17  
Baroque Art 38, 51, 52, 60, 61  
Bartolomé Murillo 55, 58, 59, 62

### C

Chapel of La Merced 49, 57  
Colore 39, 40, 42, 44, 46, 47  
Council of Trent 28, 29, 31, 35, 38, 51  
Counter-Reformation 28, 30, 31, 32, 36, 37, 51, 52, 55, 62

### D

Decorum 28, 31, 34, 38, 60, 70  
Defense Mechanisms 19, 24  
Diego Quispe Tito 50  
Diego Velázquez 62, 65, 72  
Disegno 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 46, 47

### F

Francisco Pacheco 55, 56, 62  
Francisco Zurbarán 55, 58, 59

### G

Giorgio Vasari 43  
Gustave Courbet 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 17

### I

Immaculate Conception 30, 49, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61

### J

Jacob Lawrence 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 16, 17

## L

Las Meninas 62, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72

Leonardo Da Vinci 36, 39, 41, 42, 43, 46

Ludovico Dolce 43, 47

## M

Michelangelo 10, 31, 32, 33, 36, 38, 39, 42, 43, 44, 46

## P

Pablo Picasso 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 11, 16

Pachamama 60

Propaganda 3, 28, 29, 30, 50, 52

Protestant Reformation 28, 30, 51, 64

Psychoanalysis 18, 19, 20, 21, 27

## R

Raphael 36, 43, 44, 46

Religious Painting 62

Religious paintings 28

Renaissance Art 31, 36, 38, 39, 47

Rene Magritte 18, 19

## S

School of Cuzco 49, 50, 53

Sigmund Freud 18, 19, 27

Spanish Baroque 49, 50, 51, 57, 60, 61

Surrealist Movement 18

## T

Tintoretto 36, 37, 39, 47

Titian 36, 39, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47

## V

Venetian painting 39



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