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“EXPERIENCE DOES NOT ERR” (LEONARDO DA VINCI) - ARTWORK AS A MIRROR OF NATURE

ABSTRACT

The relation between seeing, knowledge, and language has concerned philosophers and artists throughout history. The current article examines the relation between word, image, and knowledge in some prominent Renaissance artworks. It is argued that the shift from revelatory truth in the word to evidence in “seeing the real” as Leonardo da Vinci (1452 -1519) argues in his writings, marks a moment in history in which the human being takes center stage as the interpreter of knowledge. In the search for perfect proportionality and beautiful harmony, Renaissance artists, therefore, did not just create an aesthetic dimension yet were central in a process leading to a reevaluation and alternative modes of knowledge about the human being.

In the year 1504, the German painter Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) completes a famous copper engraving of the biblical narrative (Genesis 3), [Adam and Eve](#) in paradise [Fig. 1]. Proudly the two display their bodies, a harmony of measured perfection, reflecting divine beauty reminiscent of classical figures. In a nearly symmetrically joined position, tender interaction between Adam and Eve seems to speak. Adam, holding a branch from the tree of life in his right hand turns towards Eve who is traded the forbidden fruit by the serpent. Animals, traditionally assigned symbolic references to the four temperaments, illustrate medieval teachings about the soul. In Dürer's version, the elk, cat, ox, hare, and mouse rest amicably in the forest creating a visual equilibrium, a symbol of nature's perfect accord. The moment in which humanity loses its innocence in the garden Eden has not yet arrived. The engraving evokes the memory of the paradisiacal state Adam and Eve once inhabited, open to a future of salvation, promised in the parrot on the green branch above Adam's shoulder, a symbol for Mary. Dürer's copper engraving employs traditional medieval symbolism to visualize the Christian narrative spanning from paradise to final salvation. Beauty and perfect harmony, stability, symmetry, and balance dominate the engraving. Yet, the figures also evoke a distinct vision of humanity, engraved in lines. The mirror reflection of ideal beauty does not replace the important role of the medieval symbol but as if seen through the lens of a camera, appearance begins to focus on knowledge detected by the viewer who recognizes the world. The engraving has long been celebrated as an outstanding achievement of Renaissance artistic work, exemplary for its beauty.¹ In the current analysis, I am, however, not predominantly interested in the aesthetic value of the work but in Dürer's visual discourse, which, as I argue, reflects significant historically located changes in what is considered true knowledge, particularly knowledge of the human being.²

The word, foremost, the sanctified word of God, has long occupied a privileged location for divine revelatory truth claims. Language, presumed to carry knowledge, rooted in God's creation of the world, promises a magic tool in the search for truth. In the *Phaedrus*, a dialog about the art of discourse, Socrates tells a myth about the invention of letters.³ The ancient Egyptian god Theuth acclaims his invention of letters to be an elixir of memory and wisdom. Although readily accepting

¹ In the context of the article, the terms "Middle Ages" and "Renaissance" are used as very general designations without specific claim to distinctive definitions for their periodization according to time and space. I leave the debate about historical divisions to the art-historians, as for example the work of Erwin Panofsky. *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*. 2nd. ed. Almqvist and Wiksell: Uppsala. 1965.

² In the current context, discourse is understood as an activity which controls various language units, including iconic formations as well as the exchange of signs. Regarding an analysis of objects of discursive formations see Michel Foucault. *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books. pp.21-78.

³ Plato. *Phaedrus*. Trans. Harold North Fowler. Cambridge: Harvard University Press LCL 36. 1941 repr. 1999.

the powerful invention, the ancient King of Egypt, Thamus, raises the question whether the trust put into writing will not rather foster an appearance of wisdom than wisdom. The letter carries the promise to inscribe truth forever into the word, clear and certain. Yet Socrates warns:

Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence (Plato, 275 d).

The analogy to painting highlights the danger perceived in works that “stand like living beings.” Discourse must ensure that truth is inscribed into memory not just the letter because words themselves “preserve a solemn silence.” The comparison to painting is instructive as it highlights the central ambivalence inherent in the nature of the sign. The art of discourse is as difficult as the illusion of lively reality in painting. Both carry the potential to deceive because trust in what appears like a living being only provides those who learn with an “appearance of wisdom but not true wisdom.”⁴ What is the art of discourse that instead of an appearance offers “the living and breathing word...of which the written word may justly be called the image?”⁵ The question also strikes at the heart of this analysis, concerned with knowledge of what is considered the human being. Whether the word or the painting is elixir or toxin finally remains unresolved in the myth.⁶ The initial *aporia* between signs that seduce and wisdom that is alive is not removed in the dialog. With the myth, Plato, the advocate of discourse that enables the learner to know, speaks to the necessity of the kinship between the written word and image. Well aware of dangerous qualities of the sign he acknowledges liveliness and visuality as important for understanding and remembrance of true knowledge, made manifest in the sign. The battleground in the fight for true knowledge is set. At its core are ways in which the written word or image is presumed the sign of truth.

For medieval Christians, the revealed word of God provided knowledge rooted in a firm bond of resemblance as signification of divine truth.⁷ Conscious of St. Paul’s claim in his letter to the Corinthians 1: 13: “videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem” (seeing

⁴ Ibid. 275 E.

⁵ Ibid. 276 A.

⁶ The ambivalence of the word *pharmakon* translated either as elixir or toxin is at the core of Jacques Derrida’s famous essay “Plato’s Pharmacy” (1968) reprinted in *La Dissémination*, 1972, and trans. by Barbara Johnson in *Dissemination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1981. pp. 63-171. Paul Ricoeur is interested in the myth in its relevance for memory and history. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.1441-45.

⁷ Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans. A. Sheridan. Originally published in the United States by Pantheon. 1971. New York: Vintage, 1994.

now in a mirror, in an obscured manner, then face to face), the medieval person perceived signs and symbols as the reflection of invisible things. Sacred texts were particularly scrutinized by experts, guarding the word as “truth”.⁸ The voices of the Fathers of the Church, medieval theologians and respected doctors, the thoughts and ideas of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, are all part of a legacy concerned with textual truth claims. In his commentary on *St. Thomas*, M.-D. Chenu aptly defines medieval scholastics as a discourse in which the text and its elucidation become the central Christian source, a “rational form of thought which is elaborated consciously and voluntarily from a text considered authoritative.”⁹ An analogy of essences opened God’s interaction with the world via the sign. The world of similitudes, resemblances, and codes, captured in lively images, was thus perceived to be extended into a world beyond, as Johan Huizinga argues in his analysis of the sensibilities of the medieval mind.¹⁰ This bond of affinity particularly manifested in the religious context as revealed truth inscribed into text, has nevertheless always been a tricky bond of affinity.

Dürer’s engraving of Adam and Eve affirms the biblical story of the fall (Genesis 3), a central narrative that has played a pivotal role in the Western tradition as source for knowledge. Lines represent a direct reference to revealed truth, making visible what is believed to be true knowledge about the world. Despite a determined close bond between image and text, an engraving such as Dürer’s Adam and Eve, however, offers a dynamic space in which the viewer becomes involved in the process of interpretation. Moreover, during the Renaissance, the medieval *simulacrum* moves away from an equivalence of resemblance between sacred text and image, beginning to establish itself outside of language. In its path, images begin to loosen more and more their traditionally established coherent link to the sacred text, and, instead, unlock spaces that involve imaginative responses. An important reason initiating this process is that the very notion of true knowledge undergoes a decisive change.

Renaissance artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer, in their search for proportionality strive to paint bodies as representations reflecting the ideal order of nature. What the eye encounters as truth in sense experience begins to reshape and finally take the place of the medieval symbol, long

⁸ 2 Cor 1:13.

⁹ M.-D. Chenu. *Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas*. Paris: Vrien, 1954. p 55 quoted in: Pierre Hadot. *What is Ancient Philosophy*. Trans. M. Chase. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2002 repr. 2004. 151.

¹⁰ Johan Huizinga. *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*. Trans. R. J. Payton and U. Mammitzsch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 235. Also: Umberto Eco. *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. Trans. Hugh Bredin. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 52-64.

dominating Western artworks. The image still marks the sanctity of Genesis 3. The process of imagination evoked by the image however opens a new space which ultimately should expose a path that begins to transform not just artworks but knowledge of the human being in general. Disruption between sacred signs and resemblance leads to knowledge that “breaks off its old kinship with *divinatio*”¹¹ The image, no longer absolute designation of the sacred, enters a complex relation to a network of signs still focused on resemblance yet the focus is on what is perceived with the eye. This changing discourse invites the spectator to explore “seeing as” in the illusion of a world apparent as true reality.

In his writings on anatomy, Leonardo da Vinci (1452 -1519) speaks of the eye as path to find true knowledge about the nature of the human body. Known for spending long nights in the morgues, dissecting human corpses at the hospital Santa Maria Nuova in Florence and hospitals in Milan and Rome, the artist describes his detailed work. Leonardo calls it a preparation to achieve “complete knowledge” of the human body for which he proceeds with his dissections via several bodies by degree. As intricate investigations about the corporal structure, his journal entries demonstrate Leonardo’s immense interest in the principle of ideal proportions constitutive for the anatomy of the human figure. Focus on “seeing” and “perceiving” of what is hidden beyond the human flesh, results in the knowledge of nature. Leonardo argues that experience “does not err” – only judgments err.¹² These are bold words. Optical access to what is considered “real,” is defined as true knowledge. Reversed is the Apostle Paul’s “obscured vision” into a quest for truth which no longer begins with a perceived metaphysical dimension.¹³

And you, who say that it would be better to watch an anatomist at work than to see these drawings, you would be right, if it were possible to observe all the things which are demonstrated in such drawings in a single figure, in which you, with all your cleverness, will not see nor obtain knowledge of more than some few veins, to obtain a true and perfect knowledge of which I have dissected more than ten human bodies, destroying all the other members, and removing the very minutest particles of the flesh by which these veins are surrounded, without causing them to bleed, excepting the insensible bleeding of the capillary veins; and as one single body would not last so long, since it was necessary to proceed with

¹¹ Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans.

A. Sheridan. Originally published in the United States by Pantheon. 1971. New York: Vintage, 1994. 59.

¹² Leonardo. *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*. Philosophical Maxims. 1153. Trans. Jean Paul Richter. 1888 Project Gutenberg. Aug. 2, 2006. < <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/8ldvc10.txt> >

¹³ 2 Cor. 1:13. For discussion of medieval sensibilities and references: Umberto Eco. *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. pp. 4-11.

several bodies by degrees, until I came to an end and had a complete knowledge; this I repeated twice, to learn the differences.¹⁴

The detailed analysis of what is apparent to the eye provides the foundation for knowledge of the human body. In contrast to the medieval painter, Leonardo's interest in sense experience as the demonstrative proof for "true and perfect knowledge" reverses the medieval path to erudition. The relation is still one of resemblance between nature and the sign, between the visible and the invisible during the Renaissance.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the trust in what is seen allows the artist to shift documentation from the symbol to what is apparent to the eye in the world. Hence to decipher what is presumed to be the principle of the order that sustains God's creation may now be documented in the sketch or image. The contemplation of the word is not the only foundation upon which knowledge had to be unearthed to decipher the mystery of God's work. Leonardo's writings highlight the relation between the visible and invisible as fountain of knowledge. His work, built on a system of strict resemblances, detect the key for knowledge in the work of the eye. The sketches of the dissected body parts, are not just evidence of his artistic skills, but prepare the path for a fundamental epistemic change in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, a new emphasis on experience versus knowledge of the mind and the authority of tradition and culture. For Leonardo and his contemporaries, this knowledge is still rooted in the revelation of God's Word, a world sustained by a harmoniously created nature. While the artist begins to expand the complexity of the field, searching for relations, no attempt is made to question the system itself. On the contrary, to see resemblances opens space for contradictions.

Leonardo is not alone as a painter using the technique of dissections to enhance his works. In a theoretical work *On Painting* (1435), Leon Battista Alberti first instructs painters to use the layered approach moving from bones, to muscle, and finally flesh. In 1543, the first detailed work of anatomy supported by fine woodcuts was published by Andreas Vesalius, documenting detailed insights into bodies' innermost secrets.¹⁶ Yet Leonardo certainly excels in accuracy and depth of his anatomical documentation. Curious to unravel the ordering principle of nature, the work in the cellars of hospitals promised an understanding of the human body, which Leonardo could not find in the biblical text. Dissections, although performed periodically by medical schools and Universities were a theologically delicate practice, and not easily accessible. Leonardo himself was barred from

¹⁴ Leonardo Da Vinci. *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci* Vol. 1. I. Anatomy. 796.

¹⁵ Foucault. *The Order of Things*. pp. 35-42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 22-3.

further anatomical investigations in the Ospedale di Santo Spirito after accusations of sacrilegious practices in 1515.¹⁷ Yet even these obstacles could not prohibit the new insights gained from the synthesis between illustration and medical treatises. A drawing of a woman's [torso](#) [Fig. 2] and a [human skull](#) [Fig. 3] are two examples of many meticulous studies, which Leonardo uses to investigate the human body.¹⁸ Aided by detailed descriptive comments, the artist relies on his visual experience to come to know the natural order that allows the body to function. To decipher the mystery of nature in dissecting the different layers of bodily structure, diligently documented to detect the principle of its order, carried the promise of a new mastery of the world. Knowledge gained in the observation of nature revealing its mysterious workings to the senses thus begins to complement what previously had been the exclusive domain of the biblical text.

While the eye documents the experience for the memory, sketching allows for the documentation of the experience.¹⁹ Striving for an illusion of nature in art entailed the idea that the lines could replicate perfect order and harmony. Renaissance artists, in using perspective to visually project knowledge, found a perfect tool in the eye. Leon Battista Alberti's (1404-72) *On Painting*, the earliest theoretical description of perspectival constructions, analyzes the function of the eye, the flow of light according to mathematical measures. Stressing that all insights for painting should come from nature, his treatises provide instructions for artists to construct perspective and spatial settings on the canvas in perfect analogy to what the eye sees in the world. Alberti famously introduces the "window" as device for the painter to identify principles for perspectival constructions on the canvas:

First of all on the surface I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen;²⁰

Although *On Painting* was not printed until 1540, during his seventeen years at the court of service of the Duke of Milan (1482 – 1499), Leonardo had become acquainted with Leon Battista Alberti's

¹⁷ *Leonardo Da Vinci. The Anatomy of Man. Drawings for the Collection of Her Majesty Queen Elisabeth II.* Ed. Martin Clayton. Boston; Toronto; London: Little , Brown and Company, 1992. 21.

¹⁸ To sketch an entire *situs* figure clearly posed a major challenge. The work includes many incorrect aspects, perhaps a reason why Leonardo finally abandoned the project of an entire internal study in favor of specific parts. Martin Clayton and Ron Philo. *Leonardo Da Vinci. The Anatomy of Man.* p. 80.

¹⁹ Documentation of the visual is also greatly enhanced through studies in perspective based on geometrical methods during the Renaissance. For an analysis and discussion of the "picture space" during the Renaissance see: Erwin Panofsky. *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art.* esp. pp. 118-33.

²⁰ Leon Battista Alberti. *On Painting.* Trans. C. Grayson. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991. quoted in: *Renaissance Reconsidered: An Anthology of Primary Sources.* Eds. Carol M. Richardson et al. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. p. 36.

Ten Books on Architecture, as well as Piero della Francesca in his *De prospectiva pingendi* *On Perspective in Painting* and the insights of the mathematician Lucas Pacioli, whose work *On Divine Proportion* includes drawings by Leonardo. For artists such as Leonardo and Alberti, the mathematical order provides an exact and predicable knowledge, found as the structure in nature itself which the painter uses to transfer the natural object visually to the canvas.²¹

Accordingly, Leonardo's anatomical studies are not just employing the eye as a reliable sense organ to find new knowledge. The rules of perspective promise a visual language that pretends to transfer an exact replica of what is "seen" on the screen. An illusion is created in which the three dimensional realm appears on the two dimensional surface of the canvas. Like a photographic reproduction, the projection thus achieves the closest possible analogous connection to the object. Knowledge, unveiled in this manner via sense experience and manifested in the analogous projection is judged true knowledge. Using the example of those who are unable to use their senses properly, Leonardo hence argues:

The soul seems to reside in the judgment, and the judgment would seem to be seated in that part where all the senses meet; and this part is called Common Sense... And the common sense is the seat of the soul and memory is its ammunition, and the impressibility is its referendary since the sense waits on the soul and not the soul on the sense. And where the sense that ministers to the soul is not at the service of the soul, all the functions of that sense are also wanting in that man's life, as is seen in those born mute and blind.²²

In the demand for the artist to work from nature via optical impression judgment of what is perceived to be real is radically reversed from the order that it had been given during the Medieval Age. Leonardo's anatomical drawings, supported by his theoretical interpretations in the notebooks are fascinating testimonies for the role of the eye and what is seen. Pamela Smith rightly argues that works of artists such as Leonardo did not just become instrumental in the context of painting. The change in perspective exerted broad influences in domains such as politics, medicine, and philosophical discourses in which nature would increasingly come to be regarded as an "authority to which to make an appeal when other traditional sources of legitimate authority either failed or were

²¹ Renaissance artists are deeply indebted to a concept of proportion and harmony that originated in Pythagorean theory in Greece during the 6th century B.C.E. who argued that the concept of numbers provides the structure of reality, the principle foundation for all things of shape and size, and the concept for universe of all things.

²² Leonardo Da Vinci. *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*. How the Five Senses are the Ministers of the Soul. 838.

not available.”²³ It should be added here that a dramatic modification would appear in the context of religious images in which the body takes center stage.

Genesis 3, as one of the few motifs that required the naked body for textual visibility, becomes a frequently chosen topic among Renaissance artists like Dürer who are deeply rooted in religious tradition yet apply new lenses to seeing and painting nature and the world. The goal of imitating nature opens new venues to uncover the “divine light” that illuminated the canvas during the Medieval Age. Renaissance artists explore corporal reality in the mirror of nature far beyond the traditional template for the biblical text. Like Leonardo, Dürer, developed a keen interest in the theoretical aspects of perspective and painting with the goal to instruct students. In *The Painters Manual*, Dürer himself speaks of art of painting in which “truth meets the eye”

It has until now been the custom in our Germany to put a great number of talented lads to the task of artistic painting without real foundation other than what they learned by daily usage. They have therefore grown up in ignorance like an unpruned tree. ..For this reason I have decided to provide to all those who are eager to become artists a starting point and a source about measurement with ruler and compass. From this they will meet truth as it meets their eyes.²⁴

Truth here is defined in reference to the laws of nature. Experience of sense perception provides the foundation for theoretical knowledge. As Leonardo, Dürer seeks to support theoretical insights with observations documented in his notebooks. The British museum in London houses a study of a [female body](#) [Fig. 4], sketched according to compass and ruler as described by the artist in his painter’s manual. The line through her body serves as an ordering principle, a tool to achieve perfect proportion. She holds an apple in her right hand, her loose hair flying in the wind. In this study, Dürer’s focus is on the perfect proportion, movement, and structure of the body. The few symbols as the apple or the loose hair are an integral part of the body’s movement. Although a study for the painting Eve (1507), the apple is not a symbol in their own right. Aided by the insight of the eye, the artist makes every effort to use the newly gained knowledge to achieve the illusion of a beautiful figure. Perfection, thus, is achieved in drawing or painting under the guidance of detailed observation. The newly documented knowledge serves as a lens through which the body appears demystified by the hand of the artist and objectified in the sketch. In contrast to the fundamental

²³ Pamela Smith. *The Body of the Artisans: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004. 9.

²⁴ A. Dürer. *The Painter's Manual - A Manual of Measurement of Lines, Areas and Solids by Means of Compass and Ruler*. Edited and translated by W. L. Strauss New York: Abaris Books, 1977. 37.

metaphysical truth claim presumed in the medieval symbol, the sketches of the body suggest an ideal, in which proportion, beauty, and perfect dimension give visibility to a discourse on the ideal human form, a form detected in nature itself.

The emphasis on theoretical analysis and experiment, on perspective, proportion, and symmetry does not mean that the religious dimension has disappeared. Instead, as Foucault has argued: “The world is covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs, which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than similitude.”²⁵ In the ideal of beauty, encompassing not just attractiveness of a woman or man but the principle of nature itself, the artist searches for the visible possibility beyond the mere worldly dimension, for the inner secrets of God’s creation. Dürer, in this respect describes the artist’s work as the task to select from the great multitude of bodily features the perfect proportions, since

one often has to look among two-or three-hundred people, without finding more than one or two beautiful aspects of their bodies worth to be used. Therefore, in order to paint a good image, it is necessary that you take the head of many, of the breast, arm, leg, hand and feet...²⁶

The goal for the artist is to make the structure visible that sustains nature and within the essence of beauty, not found untainted in everyday life. As the Greek philosophers had claimed, order and harmony does not just reside in mathematical insights but in the virtuous being and nature itself as an ontological dimension.²⁷ The painter’s task is to make these relations visible in art. Knowledge based on resemblances, therefore, looks back at a long tradition in the West. Plato’s identification between the good and beautiful as Aristotle’s virtuous human being had not lost their influence.²⁸ While John Scotus Eriugena, argued that God revealed himself in his ineffable beauty irradiating throughout the world, Thomas Aquinas deliberated the transcendental qualities of beauty which can be known by the rational mind.²⁹ The splendor and harmony of iconography led the eye back to its origin. Nature appeared to the “symbolic imagination to be a kind of alphabet through which God spoke to men” and revealed the order of things.³⁰

²⁵ Foucault. *The Order of Things*. 33.

²⁶ Albrecht Dürer. *Vier Bücher von Menschlicher Proportion. Schriften und Briefe*. Herausgegeben von Ernst Ullmann. Textbearbeitung von Elvira Pradel. Übers. Eva Maria Räßle. Leipzig: Reclam Verlag 1993. 128.

²⁷ See e.g. Aristotle. *Metaphysic*. xiii. 3; 1090 a 20.

²⁸ Of greatest influence was the work *De Divinis Nominibus* of Dionysius the Aeropagite. For an extensive discussion on the medieval concept of Beauty see: Umberto Eco. *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. esp. 4-26.

²⁹ See e.g. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. I-II. Q. 27. a. 2

³⁰ Eco. *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. 53; 65-73.

Dürer's *Painters Manual* describes the search for the original beautiful design, the Creator's hand in the secrets of proportion and harmony. His studies on Eve are attempts to find embodied beauty based on the same principles as discussed in the theoretical works. The painter, imbued with indubitable trust that beauty is the sign of God's creative hand, masters ideal proportion and female beauty throughout a lengthy process of sketches. Yet indeed reversed in this search is the relation between visibility and the invisible. Was the medieval craftsman interested to mark the symbol for transcendental beauty, the Renaissance artist searches for beauty, becoming a master in transferring into a visual language the knowledge of the structure and order of nature underlying the cosmos. In an attempt to render visible on canvas what brings about the harmonious design, Dürer compiles a number of studies of the human body culminating in an oil painting of the fall which he completed in Nürnberg soon after his return from Italy. He writes in his work on *Human Proportions*:

No human being lives on this earth, who authoritatively could designate the most beautiful form of the human being. Nobody knows than God alone. To judge what is beautiful needs learned discussion.³¹

The studies finally lead the artist to admit that the world will not readily offer perfection. To decipher the order that God has provided as its form is erudition. Artistic visibility, therefore, needs to transcend what nature only provides in corrupted form, transferring to the canvas the signature of God in this world. Was the task of the medieval painter to contemplate the *imago dei* created by the Almighty, Dürer and Leonardo examine the world and human body in search for beauty. In this context, theory, experiment, and analyses become most important sources for the work of the Renaissance artist.

Dürer's copper engraving of the fall [Fig.1], the culmination of his studies on proportionality, thus provides an interesting example of the work process. While the single studies focused on mastering perfect proportion and perspective, the idealized bodies of the first couple are ultimately an integral part of a composition which situates them visually in the center of scriptural references. For the Renaissance artists, balance of proportion and geometry provide a glance of Paradise. The analogy of essences that binds knowledge and language like a seal during the Medieval Age does not disappear during the Renaissance only the play of resemblances becomes more complex.³² Via the

³¹ Kunsttheoretische Schriften: *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion*. Dürer: Das Gesamtwerk, Übers. Eva Maria Räßle. S. 1208 (vgl. Dürer-SuB, S. 127)

³² See Foucault's brilliant analysis of the constructive role of resemblance for knowledge until the sixteenth century. *The Order of Things*. pp. 17-44.

mirror image of nature, artistic images of the body silently engage the viewer in a new regime of discourses in which beauty emerges as *divinatio* as it pleases the eye.³³ In consequence, visibility, as immediate sense experience, lends itself to become a very effective strategy not only pretending to make the human body but to the principle of beauty itself visible.

The ideal of beauty also offered the eyes an apparently seamless transition from Greek gods to biblical figures via visual resemblance. Dürer's figure of Adam, entitled [Nackter Mann mit Sonne und Stab \(Apollo\), 1501](#) [Fig. 5], proudly appears in the form of the Greek god Apollo or *Sol Invictus*. The eye, invited to linger on the perfect body, is guided to follow a very distinct analogy in which harmony, perfect proportions, and God's creation merge. Resemblance provides the relation in a complex system of knowledge centered on its core of the perfect representation of a natural object. From here, the world of mythology is easily accessed, creating a most interesting disjunction between the mirror of nature and fantasy.

For Greeks, Apollo was the embodiment of the perfect young male. The god of reason and light, patron of music and poetry, captured the imagination of famous sculptors as Polykleitos and Pheidias (5th – 4th century BCE) striving to give visibility to an ideal of balance, harmony, and proportion as well as virtue. The Phytian Apollo, excavated in Rome in the 14th century, “like a messenger from another world” stirred the imagination of famous Renaissance artists.³⁴ No wonder the excavation raised the interest of Dürer. Although he had not seen the Phytian Apollo itself, drawings of the sculpture likely served as the basis for his studies on ideal proportions. A drawing of the naked man from 1501 holds a sun disk, inscribed with the reflection of the word “Apollo.” A firm, muscular torso, proportion, and balanced posture characterizes “its godlike bearing”.³⁵ Whether as the Greek god Apollo or Adam, the ideal figure of the nude body had conquered the imagination of Renaissance artists.³⁶ The Renaissance reemergence of the gods is an interesting phenomenon. God and goddesses in the works of artists and poets never directly challenged the

³³ Foucault. *The Order of Things*. 32-33.

³⁴ Kenneth Clark. *The Nude: A Study of the Ideal Form*. New York: MJF Books, 1956. 52.

³⁵ Ibid. 56.

³⁶ Regardless of the strong influences of the Latin Church, the Greco-Roman pantheon never completely disappeared in the West. Christianity solved the contradictions challenging monotheistic belief in successfully integrating most of the qualifications and attributes of the gods into their own iconography. Pronouncing the supremacy of the Christian God, Christians ensured that the classical model was invested with a Christian interpretation during the Middle Ages. Erwin Panofsky. *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art*. esp. 82 – 100. Panofsky claims that classicizing stylization of classical form did not really catch up until the fifteenth century and notes: the “divorce of classical from classical content took place not only in the absence of the representation but also in spite of a representational tradition still available.” (104).

Christian doctrine. Their appearance in painting and sculpture rather filled a lacuna left by Christian imagery. The gods were not openly decorating church walls or adorning sacred texts. Those spaces were by and large reserved for traditional Christian motifs. The gods primarily entered the context of the secular life, serving fantasies about a better world, often supporting the need to proclaim grandeur and secular power. The two spheres of artistic work thus developed with little rivalry. And yet Dürer's studies of bodies for example blur the line successfully and merge Christian and pagan ideals in a previously unseen ways, allowing the artist to work with an ideal of beauty in the distance of myth.³⁷

No one could really know what the gods originally looked like. Therefore, myth provided a welcome resource for an ideal world that, as Dürer acknowledges, could not be found in the real world alone. The increasing recognition of ancient works of art and Greco-Roman poetry contributed to fantasies about the gods. The most important source became Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the version of Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313-75) *Genealogia Deorum*. His work does not just offer ample material for the imagination of Renaissance painters but also establishes a legitimate heritage traced to the poets in Antiquity. In demystifying the stories, the work celebrates Christian theology and Scripture while elevating the poet and artist in their role. The apex of Christ is the ultimate climax of the genealogy since "they [the Greek gods] have been buried forever, beyond any possibility of resurrection by the holy teachings of Christ."³⁸ As Greco-Roman divinity turns metaphorical, Boccaccio successfully locates the gods in history demarcating their human qualities as secular beings while asserting their significance as ancestors for poetry and art. After all, as rightly argued by Thomas Hyde, Boccaccio's steady aim in the *Genealogy* is to reestablish the line of poets and to authorize their fictions. The poet, however, cannot inherit this authority but needs to recreate it.³⁹ *Fantasia* restored to its glory it once held among the Greco-Roman poets of course provided artists with a welcome release from the restrictive code that held religious images in its sacred place.

³⁷ Malcolm Bull. *The Mirror of the Gods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2005. pp. 380-84. This delightful study for example traces early frequent appearances of mythology on *cassoni*, large chests that play an important role in wedding ceremonies. Bull fittingly observes: "There are many dignified and moving representations of the marriage of the Virgin, but they did not contain all that people were looking for in wedding imagery. To provide her husbands with heirs a bride had to follow the example of Venus rather than the Virgin, and no one wanted the wedding celebration to betook solemn." 382.

³⁸ Boccaccio. *Boccaccio on Poetry*. Trans. Charles G. Osgood. Indianapolis: Bobbs, 1956. 135. 15.11.

³⁹ Thomas Hyde. "Boccaccio: The Genealogies of Myth." *PMLA*. Vol. 100. No. 5 (1985): 739.

Dürer's studies of the human body in preparation for his engraving of the fall are not singular with regard to paintings. An irresolvable contradiction thus rested at the heart of Renaissance paintings, "between classicism as naturalism and mythology and mythology as unreality."⁴⁰ The bridge to mend the contradiction, however, was resemblance. Beauty as an ontological quality provided a web of relations in which the virtuous being appears as divine figure and holiness is reflected in idealized bodies. As Apollo, the Greek sun-god, the patron of music, poetry, prophecy, appears in untarnished beauty, Adam's beautiful body reveals his state of innocence in Paradise (Genesis 2:15).⁴¹ Seamlessly, the knowledge about the world entered into the web of resemblances, which proved to offer multifaceted possibilities for artists. Without the bond of analogy, the pagan gods would arguably not have been able to penetrate Renaissance works in the manner they did. Surely, Apollo - *Sol Invictus* had undeniably entered Christian symbolism with Constantine's devotion to Sol.⁴² Yet legends of *Sol Invictus* appearing on coins are not the naked man that Dürer came to draw in 1502. Renaissance artists were not worried about such discontinuities. On the contrary, they seemed to enjoy a certain freedom from the constraints that text and symbol had imposed on the work of crafts for hundreds of years, while at the same time developing rigorous techniques in documenting ideal beauty based what the eye perceived.

New venues allowed that the fantastic received prominence in some of the most prestigious places, among these the palaces of cardinals, bishops, and kings. There were, of course, angry voices, not pleased with the reemergence of the ancient gods under the guise of beauty. Savonarola castigates the "artifice of figures" with fiery words:

Look at all the artifice of figures in churches today, so adorned and affected that they spoil the light of God and true contemplation, as if one considers not God but only the artifice of the figures... You put every kind of vanity into the churches.⁴³

Such criticism was perhaps as indicative of the coming transformation of knowledge as the artworks themselves. Yet in spite of ardent condemnation, the victorious merger of divine and human bodies could not be halted. It was of little help to the opponents of the new artifice that some of the most

⁴⁰ Malcolm Bull. *The Mirror of the Gods*. 391.

⁴¹ Augustine. *Genesis ad litteram*. viii, 10; also Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. I. q. 75. a. 3.

⁴² The panegyric of 310(?), delivered before Constantine in Trier, offers many references to the sun god, especially Apollo, associating Soli – Invictus, the unconquered sun, and the emperor. C.E.V. Nixon / Barbara Rodgers: *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, Berkeley. 1994. pp. 249-50.

⁴³ Savonarola, *Sermon on the Psalms* (1494); text in Menozzi, *Les images, L'église*, p. 156.

famous fusion of Christian and pagan images were implemented by cardinals and popes.⁴⁴ Apollo was clearly a favorite among those who, despite their religious ambitions, were striving for prestige and influence. Apollo's attributes lend itself to the game of resemblances, fittingly for anyone in need of support for his own claim to power as Constantine the Great knew very well.⁴⁵ Beginning with Nicholas V, certain popes considered the association between the sun god and their own Excellency quite appropriate. It does not seem unlikely that we owe the delightful scene of joy on Parnassus in the *Stanza della Segnatura* (Vatican) by Raphael (1483-1520) to the vision of the patrons. [Apollo](#) [Fig. 6] playing in its midst of the circle of muses and poets suggested an apt association to Julius who commissioned the work or the Medici pope Leo X, an extravagant, pleasure loving patron of artists. After-all, illumination was the signature of papal power and as for Apollo; the pope's task was to tend to his flock.⁴⁶ Raphael's famous patrons had a keen interest in artistic representation as a tool in the political fight for power in the City of Rome, a connection that has been well documented.⁴⁷ Hence, there was a need for being identified with divine qualities.

The Renaissance endeavor to recreate what the eye could see certainly added vivacity, and momentum reminding of Plato's observation that "the creatures of painting stand like living beings" (Plato, 275 d).⁴⁸ Through link of resemblance, however, the radiance of ideal beauty of the body provided an ideal space in which the ancient gods came to life again. To find the loggia of Cardinal Bibbiena in the Vatican Palace decorated with scenes from the Apollo myth and the story of Venus on the walls of the *stufetta* (bathroom) likely carried inspirational qualities, yet of a less public nature. With the Greco-Roman gods and goddesses as descendants of Adam and Eve, artistic ventures were able to reclaim physicality in human life. With time, paintings increasingly took over more and more mundane realms. Knowledge of the world had opened an unbound space that was happily occupied by artists as it interested some of their patrons.

According to Genesis 3, the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened, seeing good and evil. For Renaissance artists, seeing and making visible become trusted sources for knowledge. Leonardo's

⁴⁴ Alain Besançon. *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. pp. 177-81.

⁴⁵ According to Panegyric 6.21 and 22 of Constantine Augustus, Constantine was granted a vision of Apollo and proclaimed a god himself. In *Praise of Later Roman Emperor. The Panegyrici Latini*. Trans. and commentary C. E. V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1994. 247-35.

⁴⁶ Malcolm Bull suggesting the association between Apollo and the patrons of Raphael's work outlines some of the very subtle yet powerful political implications of the paintings. *Mirror of the Gods*. 317-22.

⁴⁷ See Mary Hollingsworth. *Patronage in Renaissance Italy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994. 308-15.

⁴⁸ Plato. *Phaedrus*.

anatomical studies as Dürer's careful analysis of the ideal proportions are representative of a dramatic shift, which many Renaissance works hasten to bring about. The mirror image of nature reflected in the painting exploits the might of visual sense perception to convey knowledge, knowledge of the human being in flesh and blood. More importantly, visibility enters a serious although still silent competition for what is believed to be true, a competition that Plato eloquently highlights in the myth of Theuth. As the decoding of resemblances and affinity begins to release the strict bond to the sacred Word, the visibility heightens a search for beauty and harmony in nature, and not to forget, a promise of sensual pleasure for humans. The same search for knowledge yet also leads Dürer, the artist who spent years to find the ideal form for the beautiful body, to admit that the ideal body does not exist in this world. The disjunction between the claim to creating ideal beautiful bodies and the painted reality were never to coincide. The "lively word," remains to be identified, despite the erudite works of great Renaissance artists. The undertaking of new ways of seeing the world, however, had already taken place, the medieval kinship between sign and language already been fractured, therefore, "seeing as" would not be the same any longer. Opened were the spaces of playful visual games for which the ancient mythological dimensions provided new venues to satisfy the human longing, amply finding what is most frequently denied in the world as seen. In other words, searching for revelation in the mirror of nature required the move into a mythic time to allow for the completion of what was not found in the world itself. For the erudite viewer, an adventure into myth surely opened a path into a new world, silently and yet very effectively contending with traditional voices of Christian moralists.⁴⁹ Whether the image offers an elixir or a toxin still remains an open question.

IMAGES

[Fig. 1] Albrecht Dürer. *Adam and Eve*. 1504. Copper engraving. 251 x 194 mm. The *Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 23 July 2009 <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/08/euwc/ho_19.73.1.htm >

[Fig. 2] *The Female Viscera*. c. 1509. Recto: pen and ink, over black chalk and traces of red chalk, with ocher wash, traces of charcoal. 467 x 332 mm) Royal Library. Windsor Castle. 12281 r-v . *The Royal Collection*. 23 July 2009 < <http://is.gd/1c9Vb> >

⁴⁹ Stephen Campbell in his well researched study of the *studiolo* of Isabella d'Este documents the significant role that Greek mythological images play in the re-evaluation and alternative modes of thinking about human nature in contrast to Christian devotional teaching and imagery. *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2004.

[Fig. 3] Leonardo da Vinci. Studies of human skull. 1489. Pen, ink and black chalk on paper, 188 x 134 mm. Royal Library Windsor Castle. *The Royal Collection*. 23 July 2009. <<http://is.gd/1c9X5>>

[Fig. 4] Albrecht Dürer. *Eve*. 1506. Drawing, 278×97 mm. *British Museum*. 07 July 2009 <<http://snipurl.com/kt5h9>>

[Fig. 5] Nackter Mann mit Sonne und Stab (Apollo). 1501. Feder, 285×202 mm. London British Museum (Inv.-Nr.: 5218/183) *British Museum*. 07 July 2009 <<http://snipurl.com/kt6gl>>

[Fig. 6] Raffaello Sanzio. The Parnassus (detail) 1509-10. Fresco. Stanza della Segnatura, Palazzi Pontifici *Vatican Rome*. 23 July 2009 <http://mv.vatican.va/3_EN/pages/x-Schede/SDRs/SDRs_03_04_022.html>

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