

The Arts of Florence in context: Stages, Actors and Spectators

Winter 2010

What we will be investigating -

One of the goals of the course is to think about architecture, painting and sculpture in terms of its relationship to the spectator. Like theatre, these arts communicate. Painting and sculpture imitate human activity. Individual figure sculptures are what the Middle Ages and the Renaissance called “simulacrum” or substitutes for personages, whether they be historical, religious or mythical. You will see how the capacity of painted and sculpted figures to interact with the viewer increases from the 14th to the 17th century. Architecture’s special role is to create a backdrop for human activities and to reinforce the messages of religious, domestic and political ceremonies

Religious Settings:

Churches are stages for the performance of the mass and other ceremonies such as baptism. We will see how these settings for liturgy are transformed as religious practices change over the centuries.

Representing Christ, the saints and Bible stories. Stories can be represented in a short-hand, symbolic way by showing, for example, David with the head of Goliath. The spectator fills in the rest of a familiar story. A narrative can also be told in several episodes within one frame. An example would be the story of David in the lower left panel of the East doors of the Baptistery. We say that the various events are conflated together into one scene. Finally, a story can be told in many separate scenes, as is the case of the recounting of the life of St. John the Baptist on the south doors, in the ceiling mosaics of the Baptistery and in the episodes from the life of St. Peter, painted by Masaccio in the Brancacci chapel. Each frame contains a separate scene or act. Read together they produce a cycle or a “play”. Certainly these painted and sculpted stories reflect contemporary religious theatre which was performed in the churches.

In addition to learning to decipher the various plots of biblical stories and saints’ lives you will be investigating a very different world view from the one we share today. Medieval and Renaissance men and women were very preoccupied with life after death and their concern with assuring themselves a place in heaven, as opposed to one in hell, permeated almost every aspect of their lives. How this concern affected art will be an important theme of the course.

Domestic Settings:

The main institution of Italian society has always been, and is still, the family. We will see that the family was more than the modern nuclear unit of parents and children. It included grandparents, unmarried aunts, uncles, cousins and servants arranged in a quite rigid hierarchy with the eldest male at the head as “capo famiglia.” (Every residence in Italy still has a “capo famiglia” listed by the local authorities.) However, the concept of family extended to other aspects of society. Even today the Pope is called the “santo padre” or holy father. You will learn a lot about how people lived in the 15th, 16th and 17th century by looking at the houses they inhabited and the objects they used.

Political Settings:

Finally, in every era politics plays an important role and the period we will be studying is no exception. You will see how the Florentine merchant class established a republican government in the thirteenth century, which was based on an elected parliament and executive body. It was not a true democracy, because the lower classes were not allowed to vote or hold office, but it did spread the power over a large number of families, rather than having it concentrated in a hereditary one-family rule, which was the case in most of the city/states of Italy in the late Middle ages and Early Renaissance. During the fifteenth century this oligarchy was undermined by the astute machinations of one family, the Medici, who managed to gain total control of the city in the 1530s. We will see how art played an important role in their maneuvering for power. Political power is represented not only by the building which houses the government, the Palazzo della Signoria (later called the Palazzo Vecchio), but also by the Piazza in front of it and by various statues and monuments distributed throughout the city.

By the end of March you should have a good understanding of how the Florentines defined themselves in terms of religion, family and politics and how religious, domestic and political rituals affected the building, furnishing and decorating of churches, palaces and public buildings.

How the course works-

Meeting times for class will change from day to day so that you need to look at your syllabus the night before. When possible class will start at 10:00, which will allow you time to read the article assigned for the day. That way it will be fresh in your mind when you arrive in class. You are expected to participate in class discussion by contributing your reactions to the reading and discussing the things we will be seeing. Most classes will be on-site and this means that you need to figure out how to get there in advance, so that you will not be late. Remember that we have fixed appointments for museums and we cannot wait for late arrivals. If you do not enter with the group you will be responsible for paying for your own entrance.

The class usually meets twice a week for approximately 2 ½ hours. On Fri. Feb. 5 there will be a power point presentation in classroom 3, which will serve as an introduction to the Rome trip. It will focus on the frescoes by Michelangelo in the Sistine chapel and those by Raphael in the Vatican *stanze*, which are so crowded and noisy that we cannot talk about them on-site. At the beginning of each class one person will summarize the previous class and tie it into the general themes of the course. Be sure to take some notes on the readings because you will be asked to refer to them on the final exam.

We have tried to distribute the assignments in all three courses over the eight weeks so that you will have time to prepare for each one and have access to the computers. This means that we expect you to hand in papers on the date due.

The papers will be worth 20 % each, class participation 20% (review of previous class, oral report and class discussion) and the final exam 40%.

Readings - all the readings are in the plastic boxes. Please do not mark them and put them back in the order you found them before returning the box at the end. Usually everyone will be reading the same article or chapter from a book, but a few times half of you will read one thing and half another. The index at the front of the box will indicate this by listing two readings with an “or” between the two. You will find one or the other in your box. Most of you will find a copy of Richard Turner’s book The Renaissance in Florence in your box. You will be reading two chapters from this book: “The World Seen Through a Window” and “Home Economics”. A few of you will have photocopies instead of the book but your roommate will have the book, in case you want to read the version with the colored pictures.

Stages for the Medieval Florentine church and state.

Week I

Jan. 7 Thur. 2:00 Meet at the Baptistry

- Read: Evelyn Welch, Art and Society in Italy: 1350-1500, chap. 5 “The Sacred Setting”, Oxford, 1997, pp. 133-165

First weekend- do the worksheet on the walking tour of the political and mercantile center of the city.

Week II

Jan. 12 Tues. 2:00 meet on the steps of the Cathedral (Duomo). We will look at the Campanile, the Duomo, the Loggia del Bigallo and then go to the Opera del Duomo Museum, behind the Duomo

- Read: Evelyn Welch, Art and Society in Italy: 1350-1500, chap. 6 “Sites of Devotion”, Oxford, 1997, pp. 167-207

Jan 14 Thur. 2:00 Meet at Santa Maria Novella. A Dominican church and its monastery

- Read Eve Borsook, The Companion Guide to Florence, pp. 108 -199 on Santa Maria Novella and
- Read Joachim Poeschke, “Santa Maria Novella, The Strozzi chapel, Nardo di Cione, from Italian Frescoes in the Age of Giotto 1280 – 1400, NY /Lon. 2005, pp. 338 -241

Week III

Jan. 19 Tues. 2:00 Meet at Santa Croce

Franciscan church architecture, family chapels and tombs

- Read Andrew Butterfield, “Monument and Memory in Early Renaissance Florence”, Art, Memory and Family in Renaissance Florence, edited by Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin, Cambridge, 2000
- or
- Read Bruce Cole, “Santa Croce: the Bardi and Peruzzi chapel”, from Giotto and Florentine Painting 1280-1375, 1976

Week IV Paintings as backdrops for religious ceremonies.

Jan. 26 Tues 2:30 Meet at the Uffizi (the door for reservations)

Altarpieces – from dossal to polyptych to classical window frame

- Read: Richard Turner, “The world seen through a window”, from The Renaissance in Florence, London, 1997

Domestic and Religious Stages for an Important Florentine Family – the Medici

Jan. 28 Thur. 2:00 Meet at the Medici Palace

The Medici’s palace and their private chapel

- Read: Rab Hatfield, ‘Cosimo de’Medici and the Chapel of his Palace,’ in Francis Ames-Lewis, ed., Cosimo il Vecchio de’Medici, 1389-1464, Essays in Commemoration of the 600th Anniversary of Cosimo de’Medici’s Birth, Oxford., 1992, pp 221ff.

Week V

Feb. 2 Tues. 10:00 Meet at Piazza SS Annunziata and then go to San Marco

Altarpieces, frescoes. – settings for Observant Dominican contemplation

- Read: William Hood, “Fra Angelico at San Marco: Art and Liturgy of Cloistered Life”, Christianity and the Renaissance, eds. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson, Syracuse, 1990, pp. 108-131

Feb. 4 Thur. 10:00 Meet at San Lorenzo

Brunelleschi’s new classical church – a stage for Humanist worship. Medici chapels and tombs.

- Read: John Paoletti, Gary Radke, section on Brunelleschi, Art in Renaissance Italy, London, 1997, pp. 339-354
- and
- Read: Timothy Verdon, “Donatello and the Theater: Stage Space and Projected space in the San Lorenzo Pulpits”, artibus et historiae, 1986
- or
- John T Paoletti, “Donatello’s Bronze doors for the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo”, Artibus et historiae, nr. 21 (XI), 1990, pp. 39-69

Paper I due three frescoes.

Feb. 5 Fri. 2:00 in the classroom. **A Bigger Stage -- Papal Rome**

La Cappella Sistina - the private chapel of the Pope

Raphael's *Stanze* – the Pope's official reception rooms.

- Read: John Paoletti, Gary Radke, "Rome: The Imperial Style under Julius II and the Medici Popes", *Art in Renaissance Italy*, London, 1997, pp. 339-354

Rome trip Feb. 6 -8. Tuesday free for those who want to go to Pompei on their own.

Monuments: St. Peter's, The Sistine Chapel. The Raphael suite of rooms in the Vatican, the Caraffa chapel in Santa Maria sopra Minerva, the church of Sant'Ignazio, The Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi, the Conaro chapel by Bernini in Santa Maria della Vittoria.

Week VI

Feb. 11 Thur. 10:00 Meet at Sta. Trinità - The Bartolini--Salimbeni and the Sassetti chapels, The go to Santa Maria Novella - the Tornabuoni and Strozzi chapels.

- Read: Eve Borsook, catalogue entry on the Sassetti Chapel from *The Mural Painters of Tuscany*, Oxford, 1980
- or
- Eve Borsook, catalogue entry on the Filippo Strozzi chapel in Santa Maria Novella from *The Mural Painters of Tuscany*, Oxford, 1980

Week VII

Feb. 16 Tues. 10:00 Meet at the Uffizi Paintings - backdrops for Domestic Ritual **student reports**
Spallieri, friezes, over-doors, domestic Madonna images, the tondo, the portrait
Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Uccello, Michelangelo, Titian

- Richard Turner, "Home Economics", from *The Renaissance in Florence*, London, 1997 (skip the part on San Marco and start at "The Domestic Environment")

Sculpture - Actors with civic and religious messages

Feb. 18 Thur. 10:00 Meet at the Duomo **student reports**

Sculpture Walk - The Campanile, Orsanmichele, Piazza Signoria

- Sarah Blake McHam "Public Sculpture in Renaissance Florence", from *Looking at Sculpture*, ed. By Sarah Blake McHam, Cambridge, 1998

Week VIII

Feb. 23 Tues. 10:00

Meet at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Via Proconsolo

Several Davids, St., George, the Madonna and Child relief, *Bacchus*, *Perseus*, *Florence over Pisa*, portrait busts.

- Geraldine A. Johnson, "Family Values: Sculpture and the Family in Fifteenth-Century Florence", *Art, Memory and Family in Renaissance Florence*, edited by Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin, Cambridge, 2000
- or
- Bonnie Bennet and David Wilkins, sections on Donatello's David from *Donatello*, Paidon, Mt. Kisco, NY, 1984, pp. 82 – 90 and 218 -219

Feb. 23 Tues. 3:15 meet at the Accademia Museum

Michelangelo's *St. Matthew*, his *David*, the slaves for the Julius II tomb

- Read: Roberta Olsen, chap. 9 "Michelangelo", from *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, London, 1992, pp. 157 - 178

Long Weekend Feb. 25 - 28

Week IX Stages for Grand Ducal Pomp and Circumstance

Mar. 2 Tues. 10:00 Meet at the Palazzo Vecchio

State rooms, ceilings, portraits and emblems

- Read: John Paoletti, Gary Radke, "Florence under Cosimo I (1537-74)", Art in Renaissance Italy, London, 1997, pp. 395-401

Mar. 4 Thur. 10:00 Meet at the Bargello **Michelangelo and his followers**

- Roberta Olsen, chap. 10 "The 16th century and the legacy of Michelangelo", from Italian Renaissance Sculpture, London, 1992, pp. 179- 202, up to the part on Naples.

Paper on Palaces due

Venice Trip

Monuments -- Basilica di San Marco, Santa Maria dei Frari, Ca' Rezzonico.

- Read: Peter D'Epiro and Mary Desmond Pinkowish, "Venice: Rhapsody in stone, water, melody and color", from Sprezzatura: 50 ways Italians shaped the world., New York, 2001.

Week X

Mar. 9 Tues. 10:00 The Triumph over Death

Meet behind San Lorenzo at the entrance to Michelangelo's new Sacristy and the Cappella dei Principi.

- Panofsky, Tomb Sculpture, pp. 90-91 section on The Medici Chapel in San Lorenzo and
- Guidebook on the Cappelle dei Principi

Mar. 11 Thur. 9:30 Meet at the Palazzo Pitti

Ceilings, portraits and collecting

- Read: Burke, Peter, "Conspicuous Consumption in seventeenth-century Italy", The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy, Cambridge, 1987

12:00 You will be able to go on your own to the Museo degli Argenti and the Boboli gardens

Week XI

Mar. 16 Tues. 10:00 Exam There will be a short take-home essay comparing a statue you report on to a few others. In the classroom you will do 4 power point slide comparisons. Each one will consist of 3 to 5 images. You will need to identify the images as well as you can and figure out what connects them. Then compare and discuss. At the end of your answer list the reading or readings, which relate to the images you just wrote about. In order to identify the article or chapter, it will be enough to list the last name of the author and a word or two of the title.