Mirror of Art: The Evolution of Humanism Before Modern Western Society

Tingting Lv*

College of Arts, Sichuan University, Chengdu 610207, Sichuan, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract: This study examines how artistic production and ideological change are related in pre-modern Western social formations. It analyzes the characteristics of art in various historical periods to show how art practices shape mainstream ideologies within specific social structures. The focus is on the symbolic codes of ancient artworks and their cultural contexts and how these relate to shifts in ideological paradigms. The paper uses art history, conceptual history, social anthropology, and philosophical hermeneutics to build a theoretical framework for analyzing art and ideology, emphasizing art's role as a material carrier of social consciousness in recording history and promoting conceptual innovation.
Keywords: Ideological transformation; Pre-modern Western society; Sociology of art; Conceptual history research

1. The interweaving of art and humanism

1.1. Art as a carrier of humanism

Art is closely related to historical events. Ancient art reflects society and thoughts. Archaeological discoveries show that artworks reveal social structures and daily life. Primitive art practices usually had utilitarian purposes. For example, cave paintings and painted pottery patterns demonstrated human needs for survival resources. The frog-shaped and fish-shaped patterns embodied primitive reproductive worship. These totem symbols were related to the fertility worship in matriarchal societies, reflecting the ancestors' thoughts on the continuation of the population. The decorative patterns of reproductive worship on pottery indicated that primitive art transcended pragmatism and constructed a spiritual expression system.

1.2. The reflection of humanism in Western art history

Ancient Egyptian civilization is an important source of the development of Western art. Its art forms, including

pyramids, temple reliefs, and tomb art, embody the dual characteristics of eternity and stylized expression. The creation strictly follows sacred geometry and religious norms. The Giza Pyramid Complex and the Sphinx showcase the eternity of pharaonic power and the anthropomorphic characteristics of Egyptian art, embodying strict geometric proportions and symbolic meanings. The Abu Simbel Temple Complex combines political and religious functions. The seated statue of Ramses II strengthens the divinity of the ruler through stylized modeling, reflecting the pursuit of eternal order in ancient Egyptian society. The figures follow specific visual norms.

2. Art and philosophical thoughts in the classical period

2.1. The rise of ancient Greek art and humanism

During the ancient Greek city-state period, art practices and philosophical thoughts formed an intertextual relationship. Plato's "Theory of Ideas" proposed in "The Republic" profoundly influenced the concept of art creation. He believed that the essence of beauty lies in mathematical proportional relationships rather than surface imitation [1–5]. This rationalist aesthetic orientation gave birth to the three major orders of Greek classical architecture: the robust and simple Doric order, the elegant and refined Ionic order, and the magnificent and elaborate Corinthian order, which together constructed the basic paradigm of Western architectural aesthetics.

The Parthenon, a model of the Doric order, with the application of the entasis curve of its columns and the slightly convex base molding, not only reflects the ancient Greeks' profound understanding of visual correction techniques, but also its design and construction techniques, such as the use of marble and fine carving techniques, make it the pinnacle of ancient Greek architectural art. This creative approach that combines mathematical precision and aesthetic perception symbolizes a significant leap from empirical accumulation to theoretical deepening in art practice.

The artistic shift in the Hellenistic period reflected the changes in social trends of thought. With the disintegration of the Alexandrian Empire, the ideological collisions between the Epicurean and Stoic schools gave rise to new artistic themes. Sculpture works such as "The Dying Gaul" broke through the classical idealist paradigm. Through the portrayal of dramatic postures and pained expressions, they deeply reflected the social unrest and spiritual crisis in the Hellenistic world.

2.2. Roman art and the symbol of power

The art system in the Roman Empire period exhibited distinct political representation functions. Monumental buildings such as the Column of Trajan constructed a visual chronicle of imperial power through continuous scenes of spiral narrative reliefs. This creative model that integrates artistic narration and national humanism marked the development and maturity of the pragmatic characteristics of Roman art.

In the field of architecture, the Romans innovatively combined the Greek order system with arch technology, developing a composite style with imperial grandeur [6]. The concrete dome structure (with a diameter of 43.3 meters) of the Pantheon not only represents a breakthrough in engineering technology, but its perfect spherical space is also endowed with the symbolic meaning of "cosmic order". This design concept that unifies material construction and spiritual symbolism has become the most prominent paradigm feature of Roman art [1–5,7,8].

The proposition "Art is the mirror of civilization" put forward by Seneca in "On Benefits" is fully confirmed in the Pompeii murals. The Fourth Style murals combine architectural perspective with mythological narration. Their

visual expression not only inherits the classical charm of Hellenism but also creates a unique Roman decorative art style system. The evolution process of this art form is essentially a material manifestation of the construction of cultural identity in the Roman Empire.

3. Christian art

3.1. The rise and spread of Christian art

The paradigm transformation of Christian art marked an important turning point in the history of Western visual culture. From the promulgation of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD to Christianity becoming the state religion of Rome in 392 AD, religious art completed the transformation from underground catacomb symbols to imperial official art (**Figure 1**). This transformation not only meant a fundamental reshaping of the image expression system but also, at a deeper level, reflected the profound changes in the humanistic spirit of late Roman society. Symbolic images such as ichthys and Agnus Dei in early Christian art were essentially the products of visually encoding Neoplatonic philosophy and New Testament doctrines. The function of such images transformed from being mere aesthetic carriers to media for spreading religious doctrines, thus constructing a unique iconographic theology framework for Christianity.

Figure 1. Milan Cathedral.

The evolution of basilica-style churches demonstrates the architectural transformation of Christian art. Early churches, such as St. Peter's Basilica, enhanced the drama of religious ceremonies through a longitudinal spatial sequence. It features a rectangular plan, a nave-aisle structure, a semicircular apse, and a symbolic lighting system. The Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna showcases a composite structure of a centralized and cruciform plan. Its octagonal layout and dome structure embody the early characteristics of Byzantine architecture, and the interior mosaic art reflects the golden age of Byzantine art.

During the Roman Republic period, art practices showed a realist tendency, which was closely related to the Roman social tradition of ancestor worship [9–13]. Portrait sculptures like "The Roman with the Busts of His Ancestors" precisely replicated facial features through the wax-mold technique, forming the verism style. Works

such as "The Baker and His Wife" in Pompeii demonstrated secular characteristics. In contrast to the idealized modeling of the Hellenistic period, they reflect the expansion of the social function of Roman art in the education of civic virtues.

During the Roman Empire period, art theory was influenced by the Stoic school and cosmopolitan trends. The Ara Pacis, through relief narration, portrayed the emperor as the defender of cosmic order, echoing Seneca's concept of "citizen of the world." Heidegger criticized Roman humanism, believing that it simplified the concept of human nature into a tool for political governance.

3.2. Religious doctrines and social order in medieval art

Medieval art, based on the Bible and canon law, formed an iconographic theology system. Chartres Cathedral showcases the grandeur and refinement of 12th-century art. Its architectural elements symbolize the Virgin Mary and transform the cosmology of scholastic philosophy into a perceptible space. This practice combines Aristotle's theory of formal cause and Pseudo-Dionysius's negative theology. The theory of Hugh of Saint Victor provided the basis for the symbolic system of stained-glass windows.

The evolution of the basilica form demonstrates the spatial politics of Christian architecture. The spatial sequence of the Old St. Peter's Basilica, including the atrium, nave, transept, and apse, is an important symbol of the Catholic Church and can accommodate 50,000 people. This axial space strengthened the collective identity of believers through processional ceremonies. The Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Ravenna introduced a centralized plan, and its radial spatial structure metaphorically represents Christ as the center of the universe.

The construction system of Romanesque architecture embodies the technical integration of the Carolingian Renaissance. Its typical features include the mechanical balance system of barrel vaults and buttresses, the enclosed space formed by thick walls and small windows, and the image system of lintel reliefs and capital carvings. The floor plan of Cluny III Church reflects the reinterpretation of classical architectural proportions in the early Middle Ages.

The breakthrough of Gothic architecture lies in the integration of structural rationalism and chromatic symbolism. The flying buttress system and rose windows of Chartres Cathedral, through the lead-inlay technique, showcase the Bible narrative, echoing the image education theory of St. Bernard. The vertical rhythm of Milan Cathedral embodies the transformation of Thomist Trinitarianism into architectural proportion language.

The spatial paradigm of Byzantine art is based on Neoplatonic optical theory. The giant dome (with a diameter of 31 meters) of the Hagia Sophia, through the halo effect created by 40 ribbed vaults and circular windows, materializes the "divine darkness" described by Pseudo-Dionysius. This unique architectural language, which skillfully combines geometry and mysticism, further evolved into a more complex Greek cross-plan layout and five-dome structure system in St. Mark's Basilica in Venice.

4. Art and humanism in the Renaissance

4.1. The revival of classical culture in Renaissance art

The humanistic turn in Renaissance art was based on the revival of classical philology [13,14]. Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" transformed pagan themes into carriers of Christian allegories through the Neoplatonic image program. The

essence of this "classical rebirth" (rinascità) was a creative misinterpretation of Cicero's rhetoric and Vitruvius's architectural theory by 14th-century intellectuals in Italian city-states. Alberti, in "On Painting," not only systematically expounded on perspective but also reduced the formal language of painting to geometry, theoretically proposing perspective for the first time. This marked an epistemological revolution in the mathematization of the cosmic order, rather than just the application of Euclidean optics.

4.2. The embodiment of humanism in artworks

Humanistic art practices made breakthroughs in the field of portraiture. Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," through the sfumato technique, created a "gradual fading" effect, giving the figure's expression psychological depth. This discovery of individuality dialogues with Petrarch's self-cognition theory expounded in "Secretum." Michelangelo's "David," through anatomical accuracy and heroic proportions (head: body = 1: 8), transformed the ideal aesthetic concept of the Hellenistic period into a monument symbolizing civic virtues.

Raphael's "Madonna in the Chair" marks the secular transformation of Christian images. Its tondo form is derived from the tradition of classical reliefs, and the intimacy shown in the figure modeling is deeply inspired by the image of the Virgin Mary in Dante's "La Vita Nuova". This way of humanizing the divine is essentially the visual counterpart of the "inner piety" advocated by Erasmus in "The Handbook of a Christian Knight". It is worth noting that Vasari's narrative system of the Renaissance, constructed in "Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects," skillfully integrates the theory of artistic progress with the Tuscan dialect literary movement, jointly constructing the humanistic framework of national art.

5. Conclusion

Art creation coexists with the historical context. From Egyptian murals to Renaissance perspective, the evolution of visual forms reflects the transformation of epistemology. Wolfflin proposed the dialectical structure of "Zeitgeist-visual form", and Panofsky revealed the relationship between the symbol system and the worldview. The social function of art reflects the balance between the sacred and the secular. From the pharaoh worship in ancient Egypt to the art market in the Renaissance, the reshaping of the power structure is accompanied by the transformation of functions. Adorno criticized the institutionalization of art, and problems had already emerged in the Medici family's patronage system.

The evolution of art styles responds to "tradition and innovation." The Gothic pointed arch is an improvement of the Romanesque round arch and also a metaphor of scholastic philosophy; the classical revival in the Renaissance is the translation of ancient forms into modern discourses. The awakening of media autonomy in modernist theory can be traced back to Giotto's planar innovation in painting art. This innovation not only influenced the art development in the Renaissance but also provided a theoretical basis for later modernist artists.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Wang M, Dai Q, 2017, The Mathematical Culture in Ancient Roman Architectural Art: Taking Vitruvius' Ten Books on Architecture as an Example. Bulletin of Mathematics, 56(7): 1–5 + 32.

[2] Yu K, 2022, On the Relationship Between Ancient Egyptian and Ancient Greek Art and Its Contemporary Enlightenment: Taking The Kritios Boy as an Example. Art Science and Technology, 35(20): 26–28.

[3] Chen N, 2021, On the Influence of Ancient Greek and Roman Art on Later Generations. Art Evaluation, 2021(4): 172–174.

[4] Ma L, 2019, The Concept of Virtue in Ancient Greek Art. Journal of Renmin University of China, 33(4): 150–157.

[5] Li Y, 2019, On the Early Development of Ancient Greek Portrait Art—The Evolution of the Political Memorial Function of Portraits and the Strengthening of Personality. Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute (Fine Arts & Design), 2019(3): 25–32.

[6] Fu D, 2006, On the Emperor's Will Infiltrated in Ancient Roman Architectural Art. Art Panorama, 2006(9): 29.

[7] Qi R, 2019, A Comparison of the Similarities and Differences Between Ancient Greek and Roman Art. Shanxi Youth, 2019(18): 253.

[8] Zhang X, 2012, An Analysis of Ancient Roman Architectural Art. Art Panorama, 2012(3): 76.

[9] Cheng L, 2022, The Christian Dimension in Western Contemporary Art. Beauty & Times (Late Edition), 2022(3): 7–14.

[10] Li F, 2011, The Vatican Museums: An Artistic Expression of Christian Humanistic Spirit. The World Religious Cultures, 1(4): 85–88.

[11] Shang Q, 2008, The Release of Beauty—On the Secularization of Western European Christian Visual Art in the Late Middle Ages, thesis, Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology.

[12] Xiong K, 2007, On the Positive Role of Christian Culture in the Artistic Achievements of the Renaissance, thesis, Capital Normal University.

[13] Ma Y, 2009, The Changes of the Artistic Image of David Before and After the Renaissance. The World Religious Cultures, 2009(4): 41–46.

[14] Liu J, 2009, The "Comparative Theory" in the Renaissance and the Construction of the Western Modern Art Tradition. Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Social Sciences Edition), 36(4): 130–138.