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Midterm Long Essay: Classical Aesthetics

The classical world's effect on Western Civilization cannot possibly be overstated. From philosophy to government to ethics and ideals, Ancient Greece and Rome shaped the world we know today in innumerable ways. The ancient Greeks in particular were obsessed with the aesthetics of harmony, the golden ratio, and the pursuit of mathematical perfection. Plato took this farther with his idea of The Forms; the idealized and perfect representations of all things that existed on a cosmological level. His ideas of perfection would shape Western Art through today. Aristotle championed a form of naturalism in his ideas of depictions, which were essentially an idealized naturalistic form meant to convey the average or typical form of a thing, be it a species of bird or a type of person. This idea would have far-reaching consequences for the humanist ideals of the Renaissance. It was a time of rebirth, rediscovery, as Italy looked at its Classical past and realized there was something there worth being influenced by.

As stated, the Classical world and particularly the Greeks idealized the harmony found in mathematics. Structures were built and compositions made to highlight perfect symmetry and ratios, especially early on. Statues such as the Doryphoros, Charioteer of Delphi and Kritios Boy all show mathematic perfection even in their naturalism. Polykleitos's Doryphoros is an exceptional example of this, with its perfect ratio of seven heads to the height of the body, the incredible use of Pythagoras's golden ratio in every shape and the mathematically perfect proportions. The statue is even sometimes referred to as The Canon, as its proportions are so

perfect that it can be used as the measurement or canon of Greek sculpture. (Riffert, Module 1, Page 9) This comes back to Plato's ideas of Forms. The Canon is perfect, it's idealized, it's The Form of an athlete. While Plato would have disagreed with this on principle as he disliked art and depictions, it's impossible not to draw a conclusion between the two. The Form of athlete as a concept is incredibly Platonic, showing the ideal mathematical form of something earthly. It is incredibly important to understanding the Renaissance to recognize these ideas of Classical mathematics and ratios as perspective in paintings, one of the defining inventions of the period, cannot be achieved without them. Moreso, the aesthetics of the Renaissance embrace this balance and harmony wholeheartedly, as seen in sculptures such as Michaelangelo's David and buildings such as the Florence Cathedral. The aesthetics of either period could not be achieved without this idea of mathematical harmony.

Humanism and naturalism abound in Classical works. An obsession with math and ratios can lead to static art, but this is not the case at all in the Classical world. Hellenistic era art aimed to capture emotion and the human form while still employing the mathematical forms so important to the Greeks. Aristotle centered his philosophy on the natural world and empirical observation, leading to humanist ideas in the Renaissance. Humanism is a way of thought that originated with the Classical world, attaching importance to humans and their actions, rationale, and needs. Human emotion is recognized and important, human tragedy is similarly treated. Works like Laocoön and his Sons showed high emotion as well as a great degree of naturalism, clearly taken from studying live models. This practice went out of fashion after the fall of Rome but came back into practice in the Renaissance, just as Aristotle and ideas of humanism did. Looking at examples of Hellenistic art we see the need to depict humans as human; Old Market Woman, Sleeping Eros, The Dying Gaul. None of these could be made without direct

observation or Aristotelian philosophy: each of these sculptures looks and feels like a real person. Greeks considered man the measure of all things, and so depicting him accurately was paramount and godly. Subjects in Classical art were humanist too, and many were carried over to the Renaissance. Figures of heroes, common people, stories that show triumph or tragedy, all were ready targets for art in these times. Had the Greeks had the story of David and Goliath we can imagine their art of the triumph of right over wrong.

Classical aesthetics and the Renaissance cannot be separated from each other. To understand the Renaissance one must understand the Classical past. With its focus on mathematics, harmony, humanism and naturalism, Classical art set the stage for the next four thousand years of innovation and aesthetics. Renaissance thinkers and artists took these ideas that had been lost for generations and synthesized them with Christianity into something new but recognizable. What is a statue of David but a Korour sculpture? How is Leonardo's The Last Supper different from a fresco on the walls of a Pompeii mansion except in subject? The parallels are obvious, and to study one without the other is like having half a dictionary to translate a text. Aristotle and Plato would have felt right at home in a discussion with the best minds of the Renaissance, speaking on their ideas of humanism and idealized Forms.

Works Cited

Riffert, David. Classical Aesthetics and the Renaissance. Academy of Art University, 5 February – 25 May 2024, <https://online.academyart.edu/d2l/home/58659>.

The Feast of Herod and *Istoria*

Istoria was a style of painting popular in Italy in the early Renaissance, defined and popularized by Alberti. It was influenced by Aristotelian humanist thinking, which stressed the importance of accurate depictions as well as humanist ideals. *Istoria* was a type of history painting, but more importantly it was a type of storytelling painting. Alberti codified this style of painting, laying down rules for making an *Istoria*. There should be a group of nine or ten figures, all ranging in type, form, movement and attitude. One should address the audience to pull them in. Buildings and scenery were there to pull the eye and set the scene, not overpower. A story must be told, a scene from history conveyed. One point perspective was most often used. In Filippo Lippi's *Feast of Herod* (1452), we observe all these elements. There is a large group of people, the guests at the feast, all engaged in various activities. Some chat, some eat. Upon further examination, the scene is divided into three parts, as we see Salome three different times. First, she enters on the left side of the painting next to Herod, who looks at the audience directly to pull them in. She is carrying an empty platter: foreshadowing what will happen. In the center she dances for Herod, the scene that instigates the beheading of John the Baptist. On the right Salome kneels with the head on her platter in front of her mother, showing that the deed is done. A full story is told, as is the purpose of *Istoria*. In the background one point perspective is clearly used, grounding the scene and providing realism as was the fashion at the time. Lines of the structured walls draw attention to the three parts of the scene and do not detract from it. In

conclusion, Filippo Lippi's ***Feast of Herod*** (1452) is a wonderful work of *Istoria* that exemplifies the style, bringing together Aristotelian thinking and Alberti's codified perfect painting.