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The Temptation of Saint Jerome: How a Renaissance Man Formed Mannerism

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574)¹ is arguably one of the most notable historical figures of the Renaissance. He spent most of his life in Florence, Italy. He is held in incredibly high regard as one of the most influential art historians of all time, as well as the father of the Tuscan Mannerist architecture style. Vasari wrote the famous *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* in 1550 and designed many famous buildings in Florence. However, his paintings are often disregarded or considered to lack quality in comparison to his peers. Vasari fits the definition of both a literal and figurative “Renaissance Man”, but judging by his art, he is more accurately a Mannerist man. Although his paintings are not considered by some to be as important as his writing and architecture, his artworks symbolize the transition between the High Renaissance and Early Mannerist styles of painting. The artist and historian’s thorough research of the greatest talents of his time is an important part of his artistic practice because one must consider what he learned about his craft from researching the masters of European painting. Vasari’s vast knowledge about Renaissance artwork that he gained through his intense study of other artists allowed him to be a key figure in the evolution of Florentine painting styles from the High Renaissance to the beginning of Mannerism, as well as piece together the influences and ways in which the Mannerist style was formed.

¹ Vasari, Giorgio. “The Temptation of Saint Jerome.” *The Art Institute of Chicago*, European Painting and Sculpture, www.artic.edu/artworks/110242/the-temptation-of-saint-jerome.

Florence was in the peak of its cultural glory during Giorgio Vasari's lifetime². The second House of the Medici patronized the arts in the same way Lorenzo the Magnificent had in the "Golden Age" of Florence. In 1537, Cosimo I was instated by the Holy Roman Emperor: Charles V as the Grand Duke of Florence and as such he began many large scale artistic projects alongside his wife: Eleanora of Toledo³. Vasari was heavily involved in Cosimo and Eleanora's biggest endeavors including the building of the Uffizi Gallery, the remodeling of the Palazzo Vecchio, and the remodeling of the Palazzo Pitti. Vasari's success in designing the Uffizi building led to a long partnership between him and Cosimo I. Cosimo's next commission for Vasari was to modernize the Palazzo Vecchio by painting frescoes in some of the public venues inside. Vasari did so, and his massive frescoes depicting Florentine military victories in the Sala dei Cinquecento became famous. These frescoes should have set Vasari apart as a painter to be reckoned with, but today historians are asking to destroy them in search of a possible Leonardo da Vinci sketch that is fabled to lie beneath. Although Vasari as a painter lacks the mytham of Leonardo, he should well make up for it in his genius and skill⁴.

A painting that has seldom been studied but is a fascinating work, is the Temptation of Saint Jerome by Giorgio Vasari. The painting resides at the Art Institute of Chicago in the European Painting and Sculpture wing in a room of religious works from Renaissance Europe. It was painted between 1541 and 1548 in Florence, Italy. The painting depicts Saint Jerome in the

² Lorenzo the Magnificent had passed away a few years prior to the Cinquecento in 1492, and the second era of the House of Medici was ushered in, a year after Vasari's birth, in 1512 with the rule of Lorenzo de Medici's son: Cardinal Giovanni de Medici (Pope Leo X).

³ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, ed. "Cosimo I." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., April 17, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cosimo-I>.

⁴ Cosimo I and Eleanora inhabited the Palazzo Vecchio for a few years before the independently wealthy Eleanora de Toledo purchased an unfinished building across the Arno River called the Palazzo Pitti. She commissioned none other than Vasari to finish the building.

desert experiencing visions of the Crucifixion and Venus, as well as other visuals that will be discussed later on. The painting is unfinished and pencil gridding can be seen underneath thin layers of paint. An unfinished work may be overlooked as incomplete, but so much can be learned about Vasari's artistic technique from this work. Especially when comparing it to Vasari's finished painting of the same title. *The Temptation of Saint Jerome* depicts exactly that: a scene of the saint Jerome, also known as Hieronymus, during his venture into the desert. Jerome, like Vasari, was known for being well read and studious and is often depicted in a study or reading books. Behind Jerome is Venus flanked by three cupids. All three figures cast their gaze on Jerome, as do the two doves above Venus. They look at Jerome but they all appear to be walking away from him, except the cupid shooting an arrow in Jerome's direction. Below the figures are an assortment of items that are so close in color to the background that they almost blend together. Venus holds a magnifying glass in her left arm, and a spilled over torch is visible at her feet⁵.

Three books and an inkwell are scattered around on the ground, and below Jerome's knees is the top half of a lion. It is difficult to see where the ground ends and the lion begins, but the ambiguity could be suggestive of the fact that the lion is but a vision in Jerome's mind and not really there. The same can be said for the very small crucifix that Jerome is staring at. Surreal visions such as these are the perfect subject for a Mannerist work because the style invites and celebrates abnormality. To include something as unrealistic as half of a lion or a miniature Christ would not be so unheard of in a Mannerist painting, but because other aspects of the painting still abide by the rationality of the Renaissance they appear to be strange in the composition. Behind

⁵ Vasari, Giorgio. *The Temptation of Saint Jerome*. 1541, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

the figures, there is a lush background. Because the story of Saint Jerome's temptation takes place in the desert, it can be presumed the scenery of mountains, lakes, and Classical architecture is to be understood as a mirage. Grid marks are visible through the layers of paint, making it obvious this painting is not finished. It could be an abandoned work, or a study for an upcoming commission. Parts of the painting do look more finished than others though. For example Venus' skin and clothing are much more clean and polished than Jerome's body which is painted with thick, sketchy brushstrokes that are much more visible. However the grid marks can be seen even over Venus' seemingly finished skin and clothing, suggesting that it may have been a study opposed to an abandoned work.

The Temptation of Saint Jerome is full of symbolism and iconography, as is common in a religious painting such as this. The visions Vasari depicts have very specific Biblical and artistic meanings. Using a motif to represent religious ideas is a tradition in European painting that dates back to the Medieval period. These motifs were used to help explain Biblical stories to a majority illiterate population and they became known as Saint Symbolism. This tradition carried over to Renaissance painting when artists were attempting to illustrate elaborate concepts or stories in a purely pictorial way. Biblical symbols were widely known and the public would easily recognize something like the doves in the corner of the painting as a pictorial representation of peace. The magnifying glass, books, and inkwell represent the intelligence and literary pursuits that Jerome was known for, and are important for the audience to recognize the subject as Saint Jerome without seeing the title. The lion is a bit more ambiguous as a symbol. Traditionally, lions represent Saint Mark, as each of the Four Evangelists have specific animals

assigned to them. However, lions were also sometimes representative of Medici patronage which would make sense considering how often Vasari worked for Cosimo I and Eleanora de Toledo.

While the story of Saint Jerome would be rather obvious in the painting to Vasari's audience, some motifs are more difficult to understand. Vasari chooses to pair a religious story with classical imagery. Combining the secular with the religious was not uncommon in the Renaissance. However, it became much less common after the rise and subsequent execution of the Catholic extremist preacher: Savonarola condemned secular imagery in art around 50 years before Vasari painted his *Temptation*. Vasari likely depicted Venus in his work to illustrate his knowledge of Antiquity, as well as pay homage to the artistic achievements of ancient Greece and Rome. While common in the Renaissance, the practice of including classical imagery in religious paintings is for the most part a strictly Renaissance ideal. Part of Mannerism was a rejection of the Classically-inspired rationality that dominated the Renaissance, but Mannerist artists still borrowed from Ancient Roman sculptures especially when it came to figures and form. The serpentine shape that was so central to mannerist figures does come from Roman sculpture, specifically the Laocöon. Venus may also be a physical manifestation of temptation. Venus is the goddess of love and beauty, but these attributes could have been translated by Vasari into lust and earthly pleasure that was tempting Jerome, but he conquered, hence why the goddess and cupids are walking away from him.

Two versions of *The Temptation of Saint Jerome*, both painted by Vasari in 1541, exist nearly across the world from one another. The first resides in the Art Institute of Chicago and is considered to be unfinished by the museum. The second is a much more resolved work that has been in the Palatine Gallery of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence since 1829. Vasari includes the same

hallucinations in both works: Venus accompanied by cherubs, a lion, a pair of doves, and a miniature Christ on the crucifix which Saint Jerome fixates his gaze on. Saint Jerome is depicted in the same way in both works as well. Vasari paints the Saint as an old man with a long white beard. He has a muscular frame and dons the same blue toga in both.

The compositional contrast between a more “Renaissance” composition and a more Mannerist one is evident in the spacing and the background features. The compositional layout of figures is generally comparable between the two paintings, however the figures are placed much closer together in the final work, practically eliminating the atmospheric background present in the first draft. The background in the unfinished *Temptation of Saint Jerome* is a vast hillside, with a large body of water, grassy pastures, and an ambiguous white male figure who pours water into the lake. Backgrounds featuring grassy pastures and rolling hills are a common feature of Renaissance portraiture. Vasari also includes hazy clouds in the unfinished version that utilize the sfumato technique which was invented by Leonardo da Vinci, whose biography is featured in *The Lives of the Artists*. In the finished work, the figures are pushed so close together that all that remains of a landscape in the background are a few hills and leaves in the center above Saint Jerome’s head. Cramped compositions are a definitive characteristic of Mannerist painting and many of Vasari’s contemporaries were creating similar compositions such as Pontormo’s *Deposition from the Cross* and Parmigianino’s infamous *Madonna dal Collo Lungo*.

While the figures remain compositionally similar between the two paintings, their depictions are vastly different with the exception of Jerome. Venus is probably the most changed figure. In the unfinished painting, she has a much more Renaissance body, but with strong Mannerist influences. She is elongated, especially in her torso, and has a very muscular, almost

masculine build which is typical of women in early Mannerist paintings. A man most famous for painting women with muscular and manly frames is Michelangelo, and it is very possible he was Vasari's inspiration for the way Venus is depicted in the first *Temptation*. Her face and pose, as well as her body have been changed in the finished version, from an elongated face gazing downward over her left shoulder, to a more frontal pose and a face that looks towards Saint Jerome over her right shoulder. The cherubs that accompany Venus also experience stylistic changes. They are enlarged in the final painting but both the cherubs and Venus' attention remains on Saint Jerome, who appears to pay them no mind despite them being figments of his own imagination. An important characteristic in Mannerism is the exaggeration of the "Figura Serpentinata"⁶. Jerome's body has a strong serpentine pose in both works and an approximate "S" shape can be traced from the slight tilt in his head to the back of his heel. Venus' body however is changed drastically to exaggerate the curve in her body. In the original, only Venus' neck is twisted back to face Jerome while the rest of her body faces the direction she is walking. Vasari totally changes her upper body to achieve a more prominent and less realistically possible "Figura Serpentinata", Having her entire torso twist towards Jerome and her left arm cross her body to hold the cupid on her shoulder⁷.

Vasari's figure drawing process was heavily influenced by his peers and predecessors. He often copied other drawings from the artists he wrote about, which was a common method of learning to draw at the time, but made them in his own style. Vasari copied Renaissance figures but changed them to fit his mannerist aesthetic by depicting them as more elongated, expressive, and dramatic in gesture. Vasari's figures in *The Temptation of Saint Jerome*, especially Venus,

⁶ A curved pose that is utilized to make a figure appear more dynamic. Inspired by the Classical sculpture: Laocoön.

⁷ Vasari, Giorgio. *The Temptation of Saint Jerome*. 1541, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy.

strongly resemble Michelangelo's. If the term Mannerism was coined after the works being painted in the manner of Michelangelo, it would be understandable that Vasari's figures would be similar to his. Vasari was a self-proclaimed lover of Michelangelo as well, he wrote about him in his books "The Lives of the Artists" in which he suggested that Michelangelo was divinely sent as a gift to the arts. Vasari most often worked from other drawings as reference opposed to from live models, and his drawings of choice were usually by Michelangelo or Raphael.⁸ By drawing inspiration from the artists Vasari wrote about, but not directly copying them, the artist and historian evolved Renaissance painting into early Mannerism.

The atmosphere is changed greatly with a change of colors from the original to the final *Temptation*. Whether it is a result of the first painting being unfinished or a deliberate stylistic choice by Vasari, he employs a very pale color palette in his first painting. The pale yellows, greens, and blues compliment the light fleshiness of the figures and create a feeling of morning sun and daylight. A pale palette is also a characteristic of early Mannerism as well as Florentine painting in the Renaissance, used by artists like Pontormo as well as Botticelli. The light yet muddy color palette created a certain flatness and linear rationality that acknowledges painting as a two-dimensional medium. In the second iteration of the *Temptation*, Vasari employs the use of heavy shadows which creates a dramatic effect and a sort of spotlight on the important motifs in the painting. Heavy shadows and rich colors are less common in Mannerism, but were used by Mannerist painters like Bronzino, another favorite artist of Cosimo I and Eleonora.

A subtle but interesting change from the first to the second work is the depiction of Saint Jerome. The two look nearly identical, but the difference between them lies in their faces. In the

⁸ Härb, Florian. "'Dal Vivo' or 'Da Se': Nature versus Art in Vasari's Figure Drawings." *Master Drawings* 43, no. 3 (2005): 326-38. Accessed April 26, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20444414.

earlier draft, Jerome appears weaker. He is, for one thing, smaller in the first, but the Saint's shaggy hair and furrowed brow hint at a feeling of desperation. In the final piece however, Jerome's hair is much cleaner and he gazes at the crucifix in his hand with a look of assurance and hope instead.

Giorgio Vasari is often called a "Renaissance Man" but is not always evaluated as such. Vasari's art, architecture, and scholarship are often separated from one another, but much can be revealed when making connections across disciplines. An unfinished work such as *The Temptation of Saint Jerome* presents the opportunity for a greater understanding of the painting process for Vasari and define him as an important figure in the shift from the High Renaissance to Early Mannerism. Vasari is first and foremost a scholarly man, which is reflective in his artwork. A well rounded presentation of all of Giorgio Vasari's endeavors is crucial to understanding his artwork, just as an analysis of his unfinished work is necessary to understand the way he paints.

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